

Spada e Cappa: Cape Technique of the Italian Masters (1531-1653)

I) *History of use (where, when, why)*

Formal instruction in the combative use of the cape, or cloak, appears to be a predominantly Italian phenomenon, if we regard as indicative its proportional representation among surviving fencing texts. In the surviving Italian literature, techniques thereof are first described in Antonio Manciolino's *Opera Nova*, from 1531 (or possibly slightly earlier, as this may not be the first edition). Manciolino only describes using it to beat away cuts. In Achille Marozzo's work of 1536, which discusses the use of the cape with either dagger or sword (**Figure 1**), the cape is used to beat away both cuts and thrusts. It is included along other auxiliary arms (such as buckler, shield, dagger, and so on) in the majority of Italian fencing texts through the mid-17th century.

It may probably be safely assumed that "sword and cape" was not generally regarded as a preferred combination, but rather that it was better than sword alone (lacking a buckler, dagger, etc.). Giacomo di Grassi in 1570 asserts that the use thereof was first discovered by chance, it being commonly worn, and then rendered into Art; nonetheless, the cloak is not of the True Art (although he instructs on its use at great length). An additional factor favoring its technical development may be that in parts of Italy, the carrying of the dagger was apparently illegal. This is a motivation provided by both Salvatore Fabris (1606) and Francesco Alfieri (1653) for understanding the use of the cape.

The cape was also taught outside Italy. A manuscript in Perpignan dating to 1509 attests that Spanish students were required to learn the sword and cape to achieve the rank of "lanista". Moreover, Heinrich Gunterrodt (1579) claims that the sword and cape was favored by the Spanish. However, in Spain the cape seems to have fallen out of favor as the school of La Verdadera Destreza developed through the century. The Spanish maestros Jeronimo de Carranza (1569) and Luis Pacheco de Narvaez (1600) briefly mention the use of the cape, although with relatively little description of technique; both masters state that the dagger is the superior weapon. A century later, Manuel Cruzado y Peralta (1702) presents counters, drawn from Pacheco de Narvaez's texts, to certain cape techniques. However these counters are given so that the reader can deal with said techniques if employed by the "vulgo", that is, the unskilled or foreign fencer; the use of the cape is not advocated by Cruzado. Outside Spain, the German fechtmeister Joachim Meyer (1570) also devotes two pages to perfunctory instruction in the cape in combination with the sword. (**Figure 2**)

It is clear that the cape was used in formal combat even where documentation of formal instruction is lacking. In England, the *Sloane Manuscript 2530* (records of the London Masters of Defence) records a challenge including rapier and cloak played before the king, almost certainly Edward VI (reigned 1547-1553). However, I know of no English text describing the technique of cape usage prior to the 18th century. In Portugal, numerous duels with the sword and cape in the 16th and 17th century are attested to by Sousa Viterbo (1899).

In addition, abundant evidence exists of the use of a cape on the left arm being used in a fight, in a variety of other countries and throughout the centuries, quite probably in an *ad hoc* fashion. These preceding citations are, however, the main examples that I have found suggesting the use and/or instruction of combative cape in a formal setting. Thus, the practice should be considered neither unusual, nor uniquely Italian. It is, however, a commonplace in Italian fencing texts in the period addressed, and it is this literature that provides us the greatest theoretical and practical detail thereof.

Finally, it is worth noting that the cloak continued to be regarded as a valid auxiliary arm even as late as 1763, when its use (as well as that of the lantern) was described as a companion to the small sword by Domenico Angelo.

II) *The nature of the cape itself (structure, substance, weight)*

"They have clokes... some of cloth, silk, velvet, taffetie, and such like... Some short, scarcely reaching to the girdlestead, or waist, some to the knee, and othersome traylinge upon the ground (almost) liker gownes, than clokes. These clokes must be garded, laced, and thorowly faced: and sometimes so lyned, as the inner side standeth almost in as much as the outside: some have sleeves, othersome have none, some have hoodes to pull over the head,

some have none, some are hanged with points and tassels of gold, silver, or silk, some without all this.” -- Phillip Stubbes, The Anatomie of Abuses, 1583.

The quote above (admittedly, referring to English cloaks) should serve to convey several points. The first is that the cloak, or cape, was in no way standardized. Investigating several visual sources, of period portraiture, tapestries, and illustrations from fencing manuals; extant museum pieces; and photographs and patterns of period pieces reveals both an enormous variety of construction, and a few generalities.

The cape could be a half, three quarter, or full circle (or oval). Collars seem to have been quite common, and sleeves were not unknown. It was usually at least waist-length, and could, as the quote above states, be full-length. Antonio Quintino (1614), who discusses combat with cape gives the advice: “Therefore to whom would go armed at night, it behooves him to be careful... Take care as well to grip your cape well, and in such a way as to not tangle it around your feet.” Mid-thigh seems to have been most common. It was therefore, as fencing manuals show and describe, generally of ample area.

As for closures, it was sometimes tied, or had a sliding clasp, or a standing buttoned collar. In some sources, such as the Valois tapestries, it is shown simply jauntily draped over the left shoulder. It is tempting to speculate that, at least when in the street and expecting trouble, one would “grip the cape well” or otherwise have it untied, should one have need to remove it in a hurry. At any rate, no source that I have read discusses releasing any fastenings in transferring the cape from off the shoulder onto the arm.

As for material, the capes described by Janet Arnold are often velvet, lined with linen or satin, with embroidery common (again, in accord with the quote from Stubbes), although there must have been many plainer ones used by commoners, which have not survived. Fur, heavy trim, and fringe are all known. It must be recalled that in the time period in question, Europe was experiencing a “Little Ice Age” with temperatures lower than is current, and that capes could have to serve effectively as the winter jackets of their day. They were, therefore, often of significant weight, a fact backed up by the mention in period fencing manuals of the fatigue of the arm incurred by holding them outstretched.

There is no evidence that I know of for the inclusion of weights, chain, ropes, or any other item in the hem of a cape to turn it into a “fighting cape”. Simply put, there was no need, nor would there be any desire, for extra weight, as that of the cape itself would suffice.

III) *Theory of function (how can it resist a blade)*

The authors who best describe why a cape can stop a blow are di Grassi and Fabris. Their explanations, in summary, follow.

A) di Grassi

“Air strengthens it.” The cape doesn’t withstand cuts if something rigid (like an arm or leg) is behind it, but it does if air is behind it. We would explain this by saying that the slight yielding of the cape distributes force throughout it. Ergo, di Grassi recommends parrying only low cuts (the flank and lower) with the hanging portion so as not to get your arm cut, and to stand right leg forward, so as to prevent your left leg from getting cut. Thrusts, however, can be beaten with either the hanging cloak or the hand protected by the cloak.

B) Fabris

If you block a cut with the cape arm, the cape may be cut, and the arm wounded, even if you wind the entire cape around your arm (which would expose your lower body, anyway). The lower body can be defended with the cape alone because it yields to impact, has length, and has width. All three are vital. Length without width doesn’t defend, because width makes it strong. This is because one parries with the edge of the cape, not the face (ergo width of cape translates to depth of material resisting a blade). The yielding part needs to be aided by the motion of the feet and body in order to make the defense secure against cuts as well as thrusts.

IV) *Winding (taking the cape from the shoulders to the arm)*

There are some minor differences among the methods of winding the cape about the left arm espoused by different authors. Universally, the recommendation by text and/or illustration is to wind the cape to the outside, i.e. to rotate the left hand in a counter-clockwise direction, so that the dangling end of the cape is outside the forearm. Most authors recommend winding no more than twice, in part to leave enough length hanging, and in part to leave the cape free in case you choose to throw it. Some recommend winding to cover up to the middle of the forearm, but most recommend covering the arm as far as the elbow-- this protects the hand and forearm to some degree from cuts incurred from incidental contact with the edge (as when parrying a thrust, or displacing the blade). There are also specialized manners of winding to be used when intending to throw the cape, or when one must wind it in a particular hurry. Additionally, Agrippa's winding, and one of Docciolini's represent the unusual and interesting approach of combining the cape with the dagger in the same hand. Docciolini describes his winding with the greatest clarity. A passage from his description, and brief summaries of the methods of winding given by seven other authors follow (in chronological order of publication), including the process of removing the cape from its initial position (i.e. worn as a garment).

A) Manciolino-- Let it fall from your right shoulder as far as the middle of your left arm. Wind your left hand to the outside, coiling the draped cape over your arm. Adopt a stance with the sword outside your right knee.

B) Agrippa-- Extend your right arm so that the cape falls off of the shoulder, and draw the sword and dagger, going into terza. Then use the dagger hand to grab the outer face of the collar so that the cape falls to the outside. Lean your body back and a little to the left and extend your left arm, rotating the dagger hand to the outside, far enough from your thigh so as not to stab yourself. Wind the cape almost completely about the forearm. In this way it protects the arm, head and leg (perhaps by using the arm as a shield). In order to make an opening by beating with the cloak, unwind it somewhat. "And this embrace I hold to be better than to have the dagger alone or the cape alone, because some would sooner have the dagger than the cape, others the cape than the dagger, regarding each of these as good by themselves alone; therefore it reasonably must be better to have them both." **(Figure 3)**

C) di Grassi-- If you can, hold it at the collar and wind it one or two times to the elbow. If you do not have the time to grab it by the collar, take it by the edge, let it fall from the shoulders, and wind it once or twice, being mindful that it hangs lower this way. **(Figure 4)**

D) Docciolini—"The first way is done like this: having your cape on, in whatever way it may be, the right hem might be either under your left arm or over your right shoulder. Alternately, it may be stretched down so that you will not have to make it fall from atop your shoulder or under your arm. Well then, be it in whatever fashion, if it is in one of the first two manners, you'll have to make it fall toward your right side. At the same time put your left hand up toward your left shoulder, and grasp the cape so that your fingers go toward your left shoulder, and grasp the cape so that your fingers go toward the inner face of the cape, and toward your chest, as if they had to pierce the said cape. And your thumb will go on the outside, and grasping the cape, you will bunch it up with your hand, and at the same time perform an action upon the cape with your right shoulder to make it fall from the rear of your flank onto said arm, and in this falling you will keep your left arm distant from your body, and then you will give your arm a bit of a turn, sending said arm toward the rear of your flank, because thereby you will end up winding it about yourself with great facility and dexterity and with more speed than in any other way whatsoever, and with less danger of hindering yourself. But in this method, you will be unable to lay your hand upon your dagger. However your hand will be well covered by your cape, and at the same time you will put your hand to your sword with ease. The second way, with the accompaniment of the dagger, will be this: letting the cape go will differ from the previous ways only in the grasping of the cape, because in this way of grasping it, you will do so the opposite of how it was done before. Namely, your thumb will go on the inside, where the fingers had been before, while the fingers will be on the outside, where the thumb had been before. So, performing the same action with your shoulder, you will wind it about your arm, and in this way your hand will remain free to be placed upon your dagger at any time that the opportunity occurs for you to do so. And at the same time you will place your hand upon your sword."

E) Fabris-- No description of removing the cape from the shoulder. Hold it with the arm extended, wrapped about the forearm as far as the elbow, with most of it hanging. If you intend to throw it, do not wrap it more than twice, and if you intend to throw it without entirely releasing it, hold the lower edge. **(Figure 5)**

F) Capo Ferro-- Let it fall off the right shoulder to the middle of the left arm, wrap the hand through to the outside, enveloping the arm to the elbow. **(Figure 6)**

G) Quintino-- If you do not intend to throw it, let it all fall over your left shoulder, then drop it over your left arm and make an embrace. If you intend to throw it, wrap it no more than twice, or alternately take it in a bundle apt for throwing. **(Figure 7)**

H) Alfieri-- Let it fall onto and somewhat behind your left shoulder, and with your thumb facing forward, wind it about the arm, leaving it hanging and spreading out. **(Figure 8)**

V) *Practical application (combative tactics / techniques)*

Fabris gives a number of general pieces of advice regarding the use of the cloak, which are worth presenting here:

- 1) He advises that in many cases one defends with the sword, while aiding the defense with the cape, especially against cuts to the head. As stated above, the cape can parry lower body blows by itself.
- 2) One parries with the edge of the cape that hangs from the hand, not with the face of the cape, because the face can be easily penetrated, but the edge will yield just a little before it displaces the enemy's point. Therefore hold the cape with the edge, not the face, toward the enemy.
- 3) Hold the arm extended so as to parry at a distance. Hold your hand high, level with the head (just low enough so as not to impede your line of sight). This also helps prevent tripping. However, be sure that you have wound it enough that you won't trip even if your hand lowers from fatigue.
- 4) Keep your hand near your sword point. This keeps your body better covered, and protects your cape hand. In case of fatigue, bring your hand near your sword hilt so that your enemy can't come between your hands.
- 5) Note that disengaging over is better than under so that you don't hit your own cloak. This is not an issue if disengaging to the enemy's inside in order to attack.

Before turning to specific techniques, I feel obligated to state clearly a simple fact regarding the use of the cape. Modern practice of choreographers and reenactors notwithstanding, there is little to no evidence that the cape was used to beat a sword away by snapping, flaring, or twirling it. Quite simply, manuals almost uniformly describe parrying with the cape pendant from the arm (or with the cape-covered arm or hand, vs. a thrust). The only case I have found which could even possibly be interpreted as a twirling action is that of Agrippa, who describes unwinding the cape from the arm in order to beat a blade away; but it is also clear that unwinding is necessary to avail oneself of a draping portion, given his starting position, i.e. fully wound about the forearm. Like the alleged "fighting cloak", the "bullfighting" school of cape parrying is best regarded as a modern misconception.

The techniques that follow are almost entirely taken from period manuals. The sole exception is of attacks to the low left, i.e. at the cape-covered area. Apparently that was considered to be such a poor choice of target, or merely the responses are so obvious, that period authors didn't spend much time addressing the possibility. Therefore I have felt at my liberty to list a few likely defenses. Note that the descriptions below taken from period sources are, in some cases, one of several actions described in the given citation, and, especially for those from Fabris, may be somewhat simplified.

A) Response versus thrusts

Beat away the sword using either the cape-covered hand, or the hanging forward edge of the cape. Make contact at the *debole*, about one *palmo* (10 inches) from the point.

Some, like di Grassi, advise only parrying low thrusts (from the flank downwards) with the cape; others, like Fabris, say you can parry any thrust with the cape.

A general tip from Fabris: In attacks to the head, raise the hand by bending at the elbow; do not move the shoulder. Thus your forearm aids in the defense by coming into vertical, and you retain a line of sight to the enemy's sword hand.

1) Futility of attacking low to the left (thrust to left flank)

Both start in low terza; patient parries by moving cape slightly to left, using the hanging edge:

- a) with lunge to right and stoccata in terza to chest
- b) with intagliata and stoccata in quarta to chest (better opposition of cape to forte)
- c) with inquantata and thrust in quarta to face.

2) Versus high outside, two hand parry (separated hands) and replacement

(from di Grassi defence at High ward)

Patient in Low ward, agent attacks to outside in high prima. Patient passes forward and parries with his sword in terza and simultaneously puts his cape hand against agent's forte. Then patient draws his sword back but leaves his cape in place, and delivers a stoccata with a second pass forward. Using the cape alone is "less certain".

3) Versus high outside (high to the right), with cross body cape parry to the left (**Figure 9**)

(from Capo Ferro plate 37)

Both begin in quarta on the inside (with angulation, i.e. aim at right shoulder). Patient has gained agent's sword. Patient keeps his cape slightly under his forte (chevron of defense). Agent disengages to attack to right side of chest from outside; patient counterdisengages and parries up and to the left with his cape (circle under enemy's debole), and counterattacks in terza to the head.

4) Vs. high inside, (high to the right), with cross body cape parry to the right (**Figure 10**)

(from Fabris plate 103)

Both begin in terza on the outside. As agent begins to gain the sword, patient disengages below in terza. Agent uses this tempo to attack between patient's arms in quarta to head, while lowering his own cape to protect his lower body. Patient parries with cape to his own right by raising his cape hand but lowering his elbow, so as to avoid blinding himself. Simultaneously, patient counterattacks by disengaging with an angulated terza (or 2nd in 3rd) so as to avoid agent's cape, and strike him in the throat over his cape.

5) Vs. high inside (high to the left) (**Figure 11**)

(from Fabris plate 102)

Both in terza. Patient lowers his cape hand as an invitation. Agent lunges with a seconda, simultaneously using his own cape to try to displace patient's sword to the outside. Patient parries high to the outside with cape by raising his hand, and evades agent's cape by going from terza into quarta, thereby hitting him high on the right (in the armpit or chest).

6) Vs. low inside, (low to the right) (**Figure 12**)

(from Fabris plate 104)

Both in low terza. Patient moves his own sword point slightly to the outside as an invitation. Agent attacks in low terza between patient's weapons, moving his right side forward (into profile) thus disuniting his own weapons. Patient parries with the cape hand low and to the right, stepping forward with his right foot, and counterattacks between agent's weapons in 2nd in 3rd to agent's armpit.

7) Left leg forward stance; vs. any attack, emphasis on high to right (**Figure 13**)

(from Fabris plate 100)

Stance is very low, with left leg forward. Cape hand is at head level. Hand is in low, withdrawn, terza, with point angled up, so media/debole rests on left hand (it is thus "fortified").

If agent attacks left, cape parry left. If he attacks between, cape parry right. If to the low outside, parry with forte. Only reasonable target is over the sword, to the head; if so, parry with the sword, with the left hand supporting the debole (i.e. two handed parry, tutta coperta) and immediately riposte in terza.

"This is in summary the best guard of all others of the sword and cape." According to Fabris, the left leg forward is better with cape than any other weapon, because the cape hangs and covers the whole left side.

B) Response versus cuts

Remember always to parry a cut with the hanging section, never with your arm, nor with a section that has something behind it (like your leg). “Air strengthens it”.

Di Grassi’s “advertisements” apply: step into a cut, so as to parry at the forte, where there is less velocity.

1) Versus a riverso

(from di Grassi defence at High ward)

Agent in any ward, patient in Low ward. Agent throws a riverso; patient steps in with left foot and meets the blow with the hanging part of the cape as close to the forte as possible, then steps forward with right foot and delivers a stoccata.

2) Versus a mandritto (**Figure 14**)

(from Fabris plate 106)

Agent is in seconda. Patient gains the sword on the outside in terza with his cape accompanying. Agent throws a mandritto to the head. Patient parries in a cross with his sword (likely in quarta) and the hanging part of his cape (“in croce, tutta coperta”). Patient then (in a second tempo) steps forward with his left foot, keeping his cape against agent’s blade (thereby driving it to the outside) and striking him in seconda over agent’s cape, to the chest.

C) Being agent: Making an opening

1) Lunge with hands together (**Figure 15**)

(from Alfieri, Chapter / figure 34; page 157)

Agent strings in quarta or mista (3rd in 4th), with cape hand united with blade. “Launching with speed and with tempo”, he strikes with a long stoccata, pushing the enemy’s blade to the left with his cape hand as he lunges and strikes the throat.

2) Closing the enemy’s blade between your weapons

(from di Grassi hurt at Low ward)

Agent is in Low ward, on patient’s inside. “If you are sure not to entangle yourself”, step forward with your left foot and close the enemy’s sword between your sword and your cloak, and thrust.

D) Inganni: deceits and tricks

1) Throw from arm or shoulder, to the enemy’s head in order to blind him (**Figure 16**)

A counter to this from Cruzado: upon seeing the enemy beginning to throw the cape, step circularly to the right, push the cape aside using the left hand, and counterattack with a thrust to the face.

2) Throw to the enemy’s sword to immobilize it (Alfieri shown; also works against a halberd according to Quintino) (**Figure 17**)

Another counter from Cruzado: follow the cape’s downward movement by lowering your sword, and then pull it back and to one side to free it, in order to strike.

3) Either of the above without releasing the cape (Marozzo, also detailed and illustrated in Fabris) (**Figure 18**)

4) Can throw the cape with the sword or carry it to his face as the case may be (described by di Grassi, Fabris and Quintino) and attack him at your leisure in a second tempo. Seems rather inefficient use of tempo.

5) If you don’t have a weapon, either a) blind the enemy with your cape, and grapple; or b) grab both sides of his cloak near his neck in one hand, and yank him forward while you strike him in the face with your other hand, and thereby you may nearly break his neck (di Grassi).

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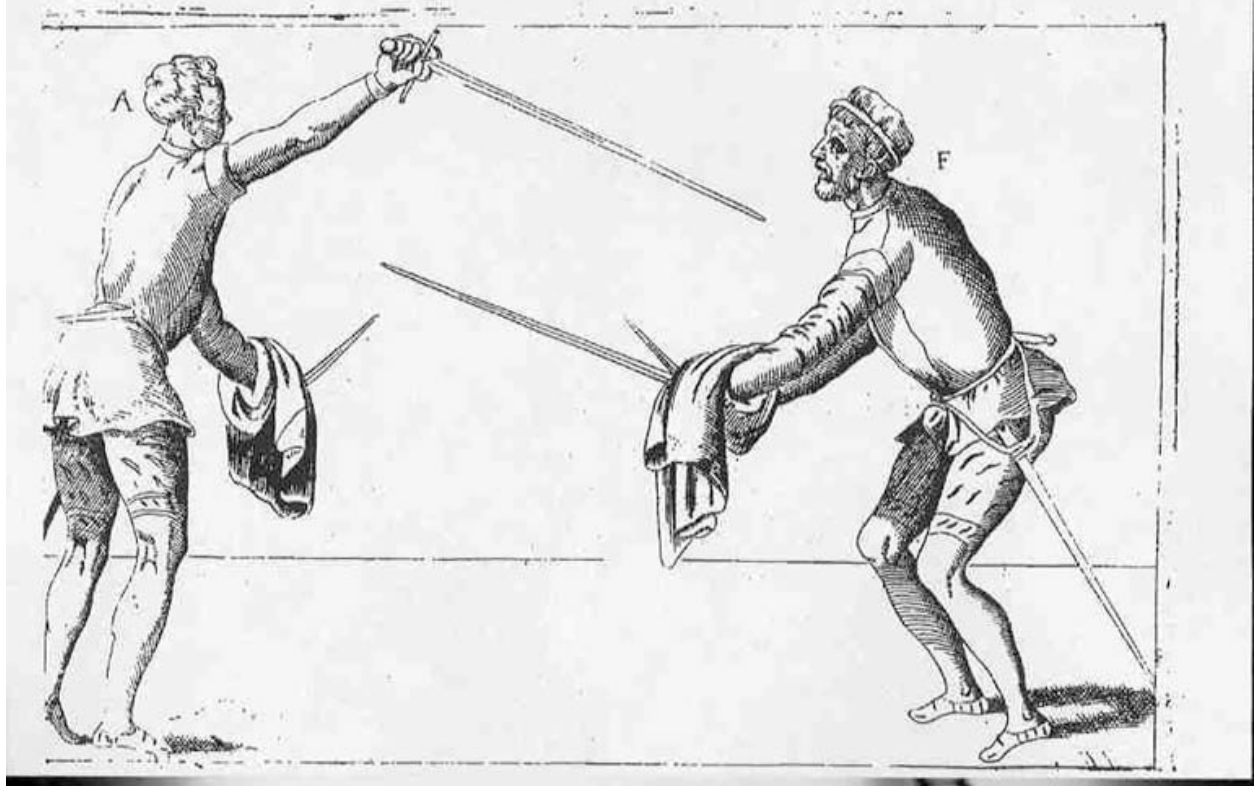
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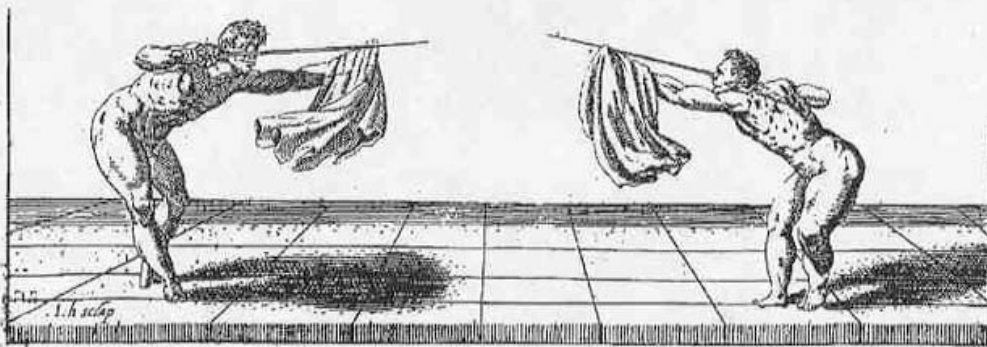




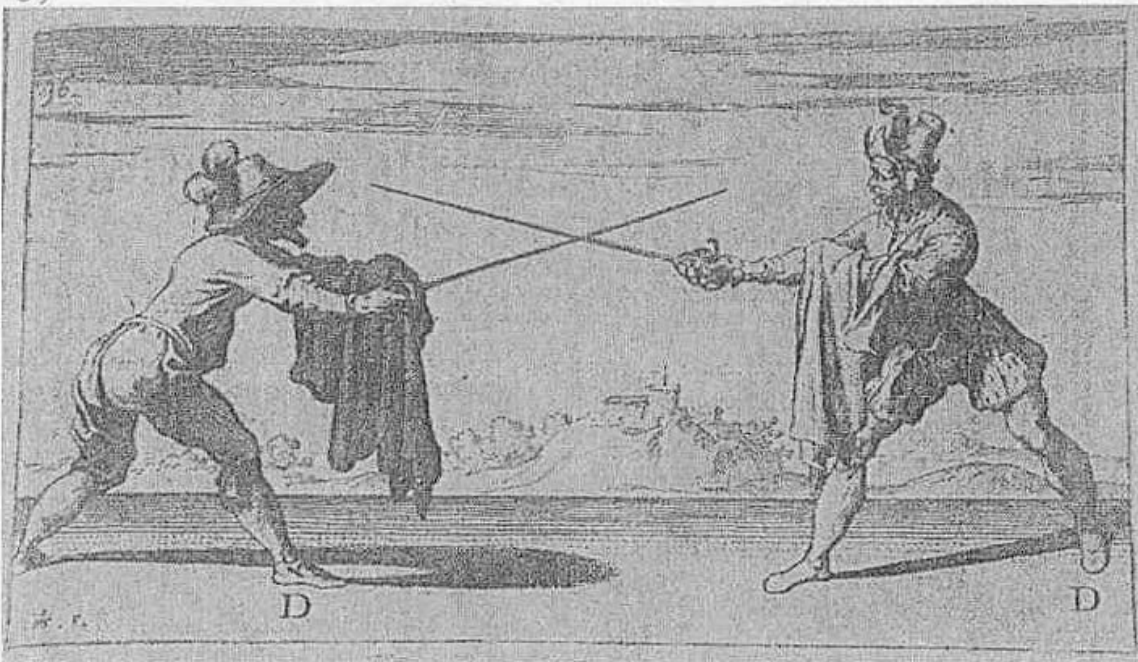
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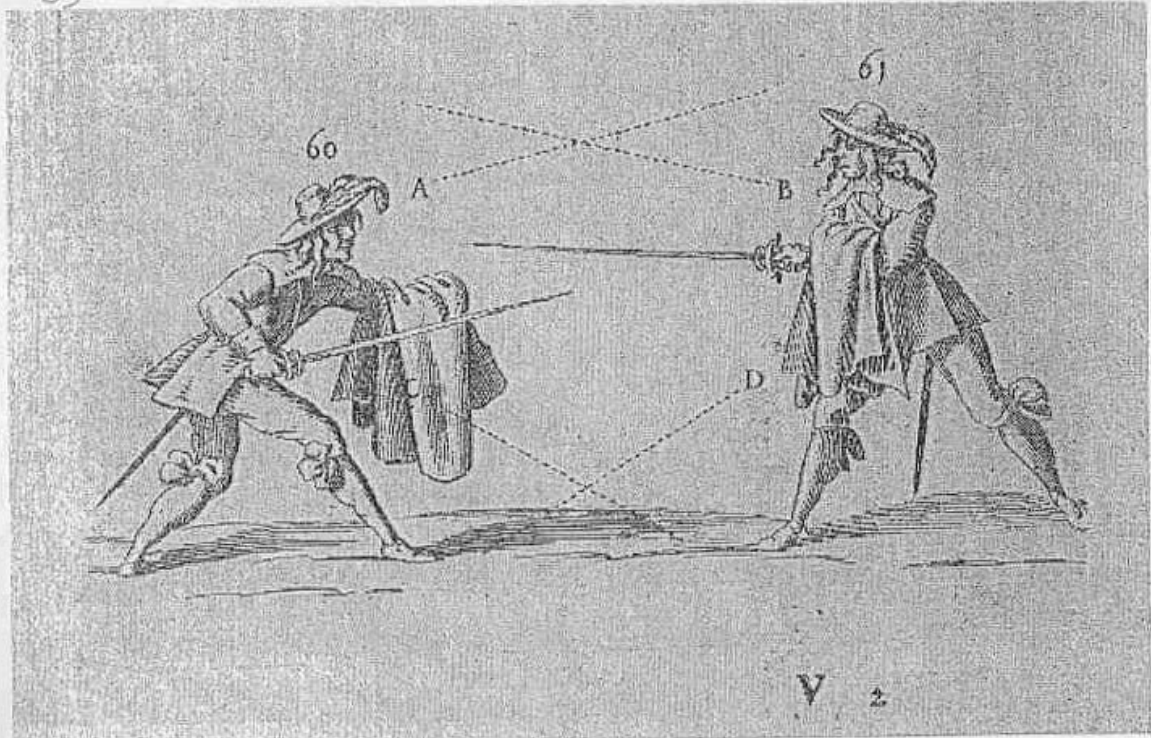
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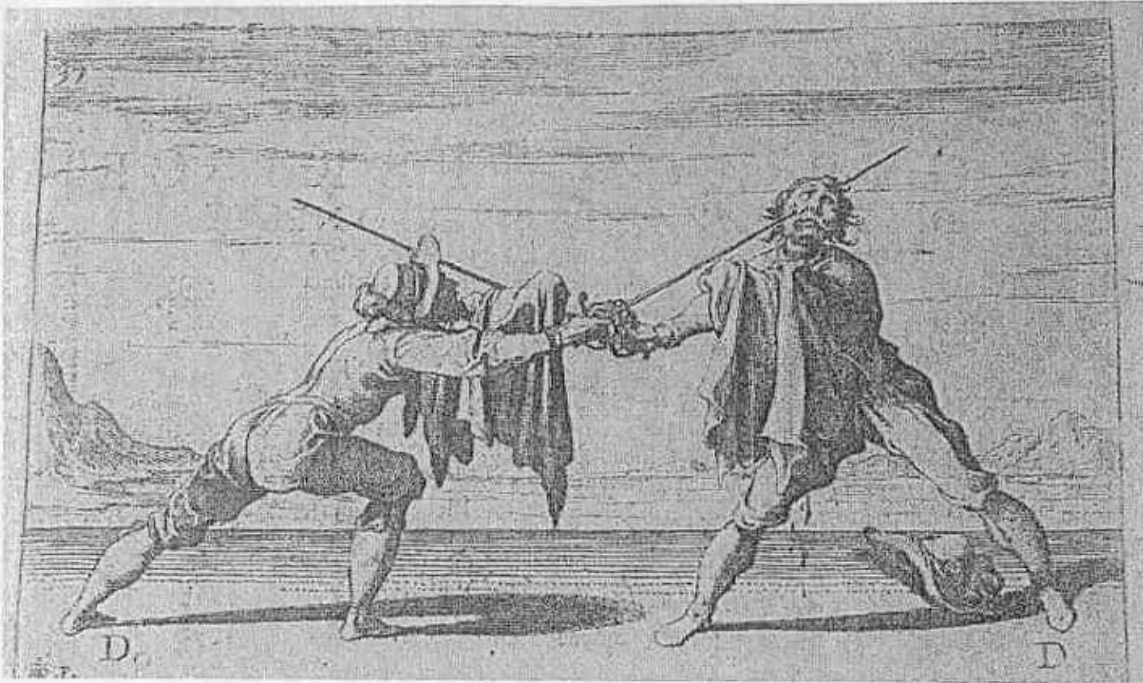
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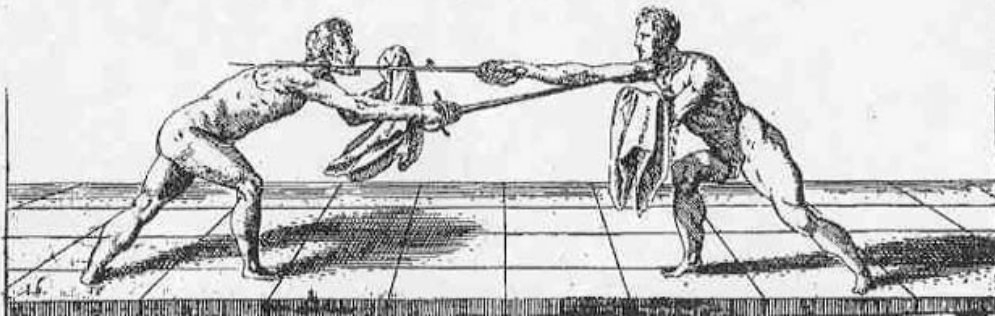
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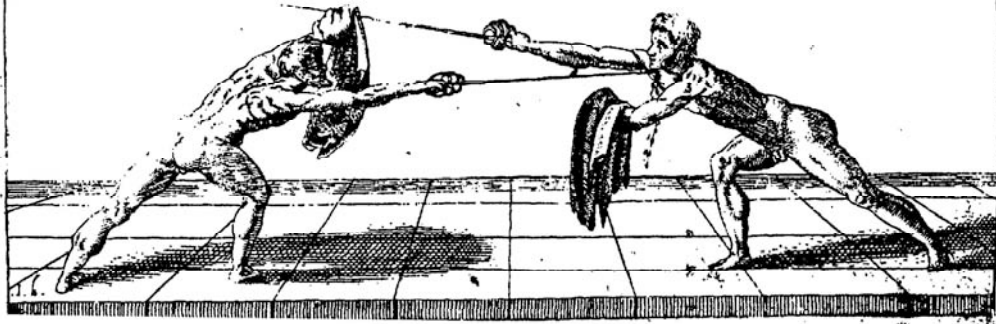


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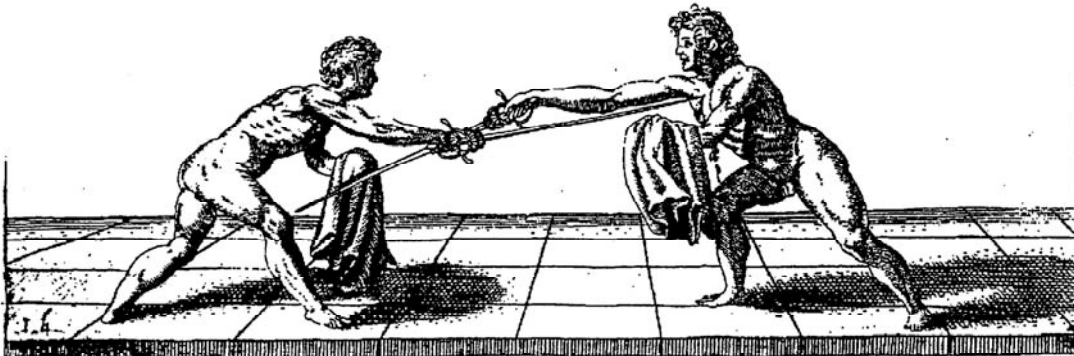
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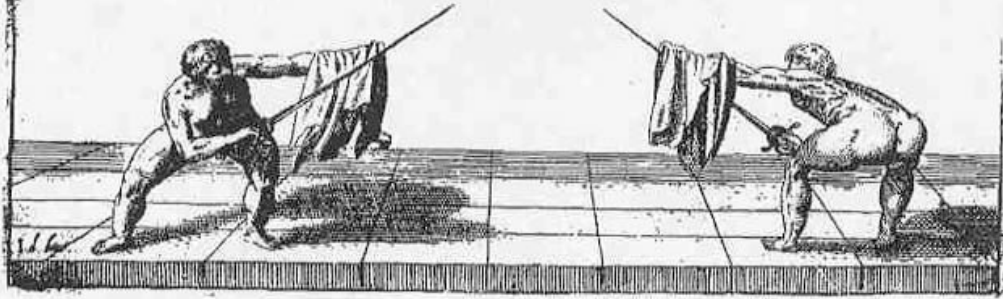


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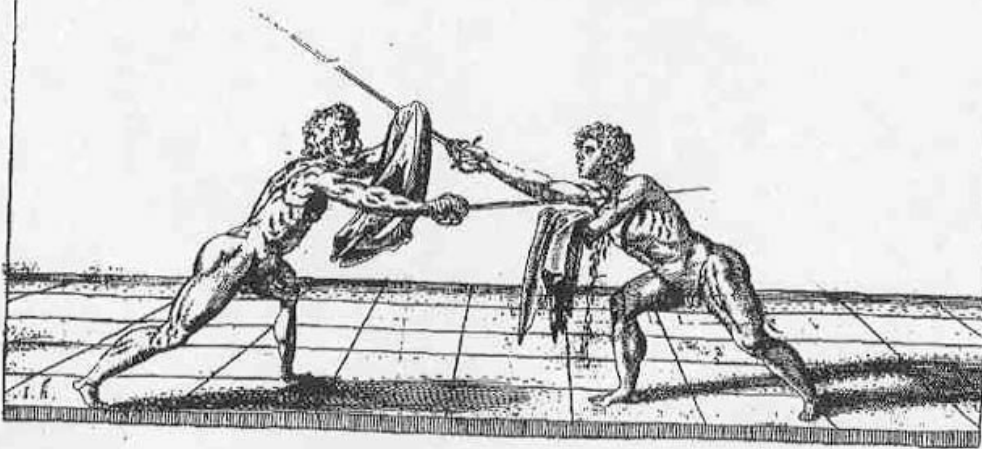


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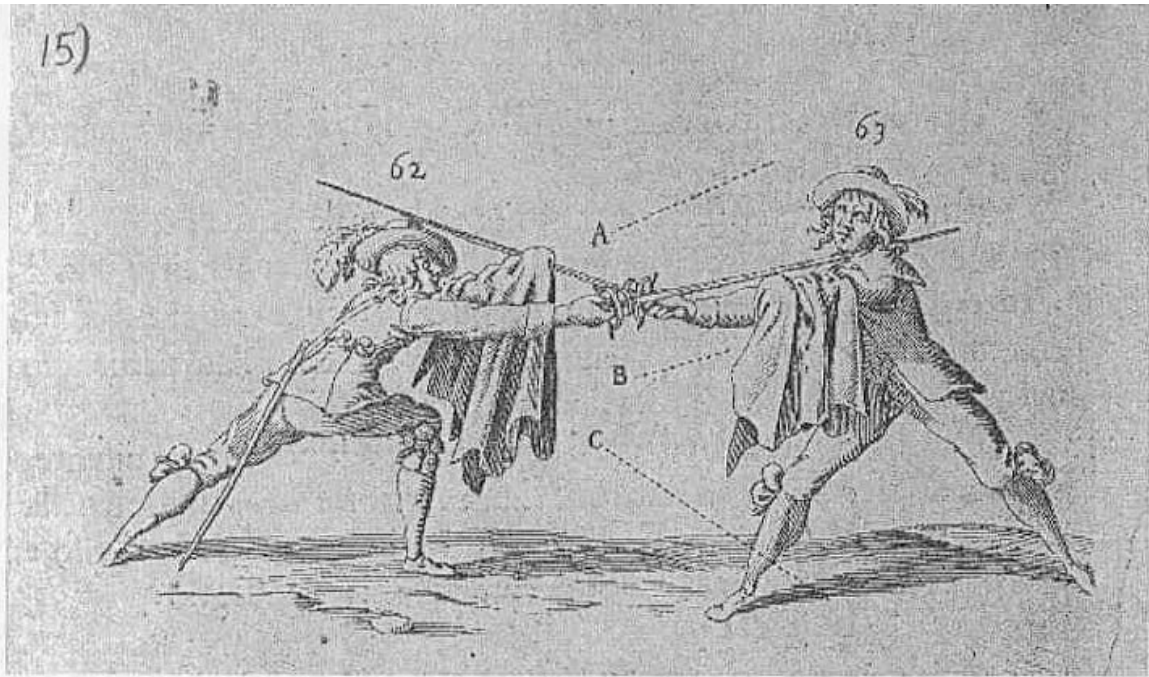


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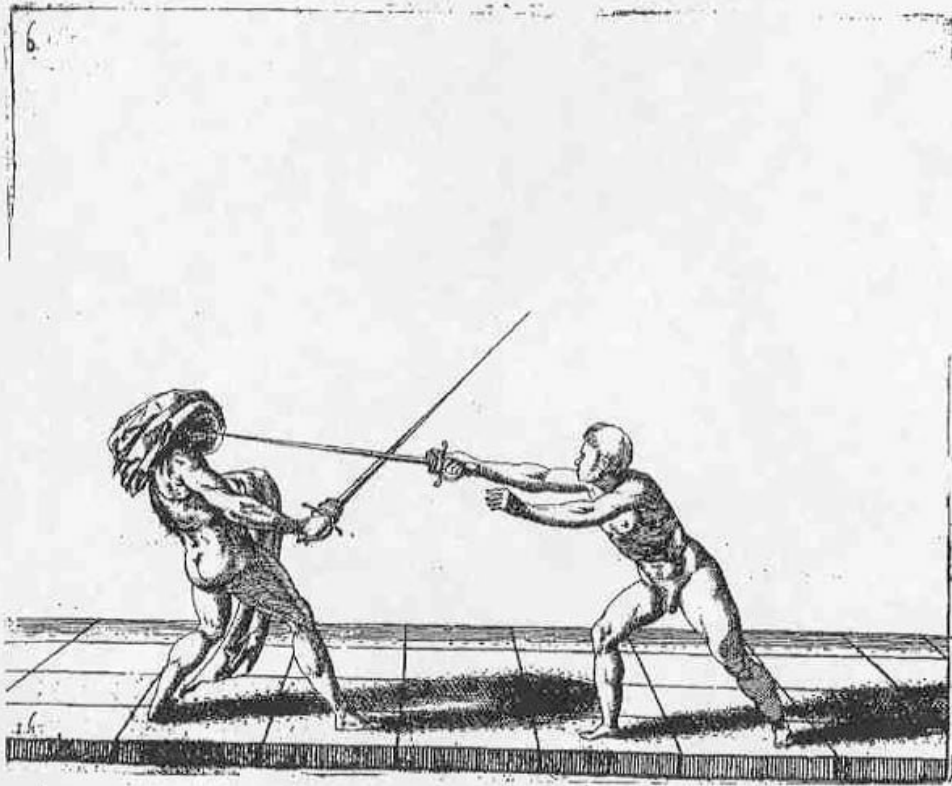
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