

A User's Guide to the Schermo of Angelo Viggiani

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Lo Schermo (roughly, “The Method of Fencing”) is a peculiar piece of work. Looking at it in the broadest terms, it is a very long text of relatively little substance. Considered within its historical context, however, elements thereof may well have been as revolutionary as Viggiani made it out to be. Lo Schermo was almost certainly written in or shortly before 1551; it therefore arguably predates Agrippa’s Trattato di Scientia d’Arme, and if nothing else, may take some credit for novelty in stridently espousing the supremacy of the thrust.

The details of Angelo Viggiani’s fencing training and teaching career remain unclear to me. The second dedication of his book, written by his brother Battista, states that he “served long under the Imperial banner”, although in what capacity is not clear. Egerton Castle asserts that Viggiani’s “school flourished in Venice between 1555 and 1563” (Schools and Masters of Fence p. 76 n. 1). Yet Sydney Anglo provides convincing evidence that Viggiani died in 1552 (The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe p. 332 n. 19), casting serious doubt on the validity of Castle’s claim. While Jacopo Gelli refers to Viggiani as Achille Marozzo’s “allievo” (follower or pupil) and calls Joachim Meyer his “condiscipolo” (schoolmate) (l’Arte dell’Armi in Italia, p. 98), he does not cite evidence for these assertions (if they are to be taken literally). It may as well be significant that the literary persona Rodomonte, whom Viggiani employs as the conduit by which his teaching is revealed, says on page 60: “I, who am not a Master of a school...” Nonetheless, it is clear that Viggiani is conversant with the terminology and at least some techniques used by his fellow Bolognese contemporaries.

As an effective or comprehensive system of combat, “lo schermo” is rather lacking in details. I would suggest that it is an abysmal place to begin learning the art of swordplay, but that does not at all seem to have been the author’s goal. Rather, a few innovations are made upon the “common school” (one is tempted, with reason, to equate this with the Bardi school) that Viggiani occasionally derides, while giving lip service to the Masters thereof. From a technical standpoint, the core of the Schermo consists of a parry with a *riverso* (regarded as a universal parry) alternating with an attack with the “*punta sopra mano*”, essentially an *imbrocata* executed on a lunge from *prima*. These probably seem antiquated and/or trivial or to the modern fencer. Nonetheless, this short paper will attempt to suck the marrow from the unwieldy skeleton of the text, and focus on what may be learned of the rudimentary combat system of Viggiani, on his novel contributions to the literature of fencing, and on what insights are to be gained from *minutiae* seemingly incidental to the heart of his Schermo.

Viggiani begins with a lengthy discussion of the nature of the sword he advocates, which he refers to specifically as a *spada da filo* (“edged sword”, also referred to in modern use as the sidesword). The dimensions are not specified, but he is adamant that the entire length be sharpened on both sides. Note however that the illustrations clearly depict fingering of the *ricasso*. Curiously, he never describes a false edge cut, and says that the false edge is called false because it is of little importance. He does let drop that the false edge at the *forte* is useful at the half sword, but does not elaborate. The hilt is specified to be of a complex type for hand protection.

Viggiani then talks about blows at length. He unequivocally holds the thrust to be superior to the cut, for a variety of reasons. It induces more fear, is better against armor, requires less strength, and wounds into the depth of the body, which is harder to clean and cure.

Turning to cuts, he clearly prefers rovesci (i.e. riversi) to mandritti. Part of his argument is couched in justifications of the nobility of the right over the left, and of the mortal susceptibility of the nobler parts of the body. The clearest explanation he gives, however, is simply that crossbody cuts have more power, because they travel further before hitting during the windup. He says that these are good defensive blows, because, for one thing, you can sever your enemy's right hand with a rovescio, and that is an excellent defense.

He then brings up his first major innovation, which is nomenclatural. He had spent a great deal of time earlier discussing his nomenclature for cuts and thrusts, which is not so novel as to concern us. His terms for guards, however, are quite unlike those of his predecessors. While he says that there is an infinity of possible guards, there are, in essence, only seven "most perfect" guards in his system (one cannot help noting that, ironically, four of these seven he terms "imperfect"). He is at pains to demonstrate that he knows the names used by the Masters for guards (wild boar iron door, et al) but he describes them as fanciful and sets out to describe a systematic nomenclature.

Briefly, each guard has three (in one case, two) components. A guard is 1) offensive ("offensiva") if the sword is on the right side of the body, defensive ("difensiva") if on the left; 2) perfect ("perfetta") if it allows a thrust, imperfect ("imperfetta") if not; 3) high ("alta") if the entire sword is up, and if not, then it is narrow ("stretta") if the point faces ahead towards the enemy, or wide ("larga") if the point faces down and away from the enemy. The order in which he places these categories is inconsistent (e.g. he might say "high offensive imperfect" one time, and "high imperfect offensive" another, to refer to the same guard). Unfortunately, while it is easy to associate a given name with its guard, the system winds up being fairly unwieldy due to the length of the names—one develops an appreciation for Agrippa's simple numbering system.

Next he discusses general tactics, in terms and phrasing that are occasionally reminiscent of Silver's Governors, Times, and so on.

Viggiani describes three "advantages". Each is an advantage or disadvantage both from the standpoint of the agent and the patient. For example, I have the advantage when I do something right, and also when you do something wrong.

The first advantage is of the guard (also called "of the sword"). Part of this is that it is an advantage to be settled in a guard (as opposed to disordered); this theme is returned to later in terms of preference of being agent or patient. More specifically, you have the advantage when your sword point is aimed at your opponent (to admit delivery of a thrust); from the enemy's standpoint it is when the adversary's point is not aimed at you. If the enemy does not allow you to gain the advantage of the guard, you are to gain it by wearying him by pressing him with multiple feints and half-blows until he is disordered and your point is aimed at him. If he does

the same to you, you are to retreat one or two steps, varying your guard as you do so to provide invitations which will distract him so that you may gain the advantage of the guard.

The second advantage is of striking, which is basically an argument of range. You have this advantage when you can strike with a half step, or at most a full step (it is somewhat odd that he does not mention the *gran passo* or “big step” here.) The explanation is one of tempo, and similar to Silver’s explanation of the “number of feet”, i.e. if you have to take more than one step, you are taking too long to hit, and you will fail. From the enemy’s standpoint, he is similarly at a disadvantage when he tries to hit you from out of measure, which discommodates him, allowing you to hit him as he is discommodated, or in *mezzo tempo* as he elevates his sword.

The third advantage is that of stepping. From the enemy’s standpoint, he is at a disadvantage when he lifts his foot in order to step. This is similar to the later rapier school’s admonitions regarding striking when an enemy is committed to a tempo. From your own standpoint, you have advantage the moment your foot hits the ground at the end of a step, because you are closer (and may have thereby gained the advantage of striking), and have more power in your cut (“as much closer as you are with your feet, you will have that much more force in your blows, and in your self defense”). The explanation as to why there is more power at the end of a step is curious. To the modern reader, it seems that the contrary may be true, namely that if the agent is too close, he strikes with the *forte*, or at least proximal to the center of percussion. One would expect the explanation that the footfall adds the power of the body to that of the arm, but if that is what Viggiani means, he is not clear. That aside, there is herein evidence for the theme of “unity of hand and foot” in the attack, which is explicit later in the *punta sopra mano*.

Within this discussion of advantages, Viggiani states that as you attack, your sight is to be directed to two places at once; one is your target, and the other is the point of your enemy’s sword. The reason for looking at your target is obvious; he insists that you watch the point of your enemy’s sword so that you can abandon your attack in favor of self-defense if need be, and wait for a better time in which to strike.

Given the emphasis on composure of guard, sense of measure, and striking into the enemy’s disorder, it is consistent that Viggiani says that all else being equal, it is better to wait for the enemy than to go to meet him. To have the advantages is what is key, but “it appears that when both the one and the other could have advantage, that the lesser advantage would always be to whom would go to encounter his enemy; and that when the both could be of disadvantage, the lesser disadvantage would always be to that one who waits for the adversary”.

Next Viggiani explicates the meaning of tempo. This is, like most of the text, laden with sophisticated baggage (so much so that he brings in Bocadiferro, the Iron Mouthed philosopher, to weigh in on the topic). To express it in simplest terms, tempo is time, and a tempo is a time, or unit of time. Thus an action, which requires a time for its execution, is also called a tempo. An action is the space between two rests, and a rest is the space between two actions. A strike is an action. The rest between two strikes is a guard. That is to say, that between any two strikes, one rests in a guard. Each strike, upon its completion, results in a given guard; likewise, each guard, upon its cessation, favors the issuing of particular strikes. This is analogous to the fact that any action begets potentialities, and from a potentiality issues an action.

Given that a tempo in fencing is therefore a blow, half a blow is (that is to say, requires) half a tempo. To Viggiani, then, a “mezo tempo” is a half blow (e.g. a mezo mandritto tondo), a cut which only goes half the distance of a full blow (a “colpo intiero”). The majority of blows between skilled fighters are half blows, in mezo tempo: “he who wishes to strike deceives his companion in the fashion that when the adversary is about to make a blow, he must enter with dexterity and speed, and strike in the middle of the blow of the adversary, with his half blow; hence we can say, that the majority of times the strike will be in *mezo tempo* with a half blow.”

Finally Viggiani begins to describe the seven guards of his Schermo. Notably, all of these are formed with the right leg forward. Footwork, other than during an attack, is not specified. We may assume that the feet never cross (i.e. that a simple advance or retreat is employed) but this is conjecture. Presenting these is problematic, because they each engender one or another guard, and so presenting them sequentially is not really representative of their interrelations; for this, see the summary diagram at the end of this paper.

The first guard is “difensiva imperfetta”, in which the sword is about to be drawn:



First guard: “difensiva imperfetta” (defensive imperfect)

This guard engenders a rovescio ascendente (i.e. a montante) by drawing the sword, which serves as both attack and parry. The rovescio ascendente finishes in the second guard or the third guard, depending upon whether one finishes it with the hand in first or third position. If in first position, we have the second guard, “alta offensiva perfetta”; if in third position, we have the third guard, “alta offensiva imperfetta”.



Second guard: “alta offensiva perfetta” (high offensive perfect)

This guard, *alta offensiva perfetta*, permits the “*punta sopra mano*”, or overhand thrust, either "complete" or "half". At the outset the point is to be aimed at the eye, so as to demoralize the opponent, and because in execution, the point lowers so as to actually strike the breast. The *punta sopra mano* is preferred over feinting with a *fendente*, which is less demoralizing, as an enemy's left arm can supposedly protect against such a blow (although how is not clarified).

The *punta sopra mano* may well be considered the heart of the *Scherma*. An overhand thrust is not in and of itself unusual; the distinguishing characteristic of the *punta sopra mano* is the footwork, which is a form of lunge. The description of the full *punta sopra mano* is as follows:

"Reset yourself in *guardia alta offensiva, perfetta*, and fix all of your weight firmly on your left foot, body elevated, so that the right one may be more agile, and likewise all your right leg, in order to be able to pass forward, and come toward me...and take the big step, and make your right shoulder drive your arm as far forward as you can, and with your sword hand direct the aim of your point at my breast without making any turn of your hand, until it comes forward as far as it can come, and then, turn there the true edge of the sword toward the left side, and from here you descend finally to the ground, and it is necessary that you make a half turn with your body at the same time that the blow is traveling, so that your right shoulder is somewhat lower than your left, and that it faces my chest; and the right foot trailing behind somewhat, bring yourself to rest again in good stride, and settle your feet, which are on the diagonal, and bend your knees a bit, and cause your sword hand to be located halfway between your knees, and your left arm to lower from high to low during that tempo in which the point will travel, and it will go back and by the outside with the left leg somewhat extended."

The hand and foot are to move in unison; the left hand goes back, the right hand goes forward, and the big step ("*gran passo*") is made all at once. Upon completion, the right foot is to be pulled back slightly, and drawing a line on the ground with your sword, you end up in the fourth guard, "*larga difensiva imperfetta*".

The "*mezo punta sopra mano*" (i.e., half *punta sopra mano*) is much the same, except that you do not drive the hand and point all the way down, but rather stop with your sword hand inside the right knee, and point aimed at your enemy's chest (apparently rotating your hand into third position). This places you into the fifth guard, "*stretta difensiva perfetta*".



Third guard: "alta offensiva imperfetta" (high offensive imperfect)

Returning to the third guard, *alta offensiva imperfetta*, which is also generated from the first guard, (although it is less favorable than the second guard) we find that it engenders a "mandritto discendente", (i.e. a *fendente*) either full or half. The *fendente* is said to be less favorable than the *punta sopra mano* because the bones of the head and shoulder are thick, and sometimes armored. The full *fendente* finishes, as did the full *punta sopra mano*, in the fourth guard, "*larga difensiva imperfetta*". The half *fendente*, wherein the point of the sword stops half way down, finishes, like the half *punta sopra mano*, in the fifth guard, "*stretta difensiva perfetta*".



Fourth guard: "larga difensiva imperfetta" (wide defensive imperfect)

The fourth guard, *larga difensiva imperfetta*, is arrived at from the full *punta sopra mano* (from second guard) or the full *fendente* (from third guard). From this position you have a few options. The first is to perform a *rovescio sgualibrato*; to do so, you must first roll the tip of your sword to the rear, then you cut and finish with your hand outside your right leg. The completion of this *sgualibrato* places you into the sixth guard ("*larga offensiva imperfetta*"). The second option is to execute a *mezo rovescio sgualibrato*, much the same except that you finish with your hand forward and outside your right knee but no lower, and with your point aimed at your enemy's chest; this places you into the seventh guard ("*stretta offensiva perfetta*"). The final option is to bring your sword up by your left shoulder, and throw a *rovescio "almost tondo"* which can be an

attack, but is also touted by Viggiani as a sort of universal parry. The completion of this cut places you back into second guard, *alta offensiva perfetta*.



Fifth guard: “stretta difensiva perfetta” (narrow defensive perfect)

The fifth guard, *stretta difensiva perfetta* (note that the hand is inside the right knee), is arrived at from the *mezo punta sopramano* (from second guard) or the *mezo fendente* (from third guard). From here you can throw a *mezo rovescio tondo*, or a *punta rovescia ascendente* (a rising *punta riversa*, similar to a *stoccata*). The *tondo* is said to place you into second guard; Viggiani does not elaborate upon the *punta rovescia*. Alternately, from fifth guard you can do the full or *mezo rovescio sguaembrato* described immediately above under fourth guard, with the same ending positions.



Sixth guard: “larga offensiva imperfetta” (wide offensive imperfect)

The sixth guard, *larga offensiva imperfetta*, is arrived at from the full *rovescio sguaembrato* which was thrown from either fourth or fifth guard. It has no other use, apparently, than to allow you to easily reset into second guard, *alta offensiva perfetta*.



Seventh guard: “*stretta offensiva perfetta*” (narrow offensive perfect)

The seventh guard, *stretta offensiva perfetta*, is arrived at from the *mezo rovescio sgualebrato* which was thrown from either fourth or fifth guard. Although it appears perfectly serviceable, Viggiani recommends, as with sixth guard, only to raise your hand and reset into second guard, *alta offensiva perfetta*.

These comprise Viggiani’s seven “most perfect guards”. Having outlined these relations, though, he explains how the seven can really be reduced to only two which are most useful. These are second, *alta offensiva perfetta*, and fourth, *larga difensiva imperfetta*. As he says,

“I tell you that this is my *schermo*, composed of the most perfect offense, and of the most perfect guards that there are, namely the *guardia alta, offensiva, perfetta*, and the *punta sopra mano, offensiva, perfettissima*. There you have also the *rovescio tondo*, a good defensive blow, and the *guardia difensiva larga*.”

Thus the true Schermo is to use only these two guards in alternate fashion, as follows.

From *alta offensiva perfetta*, you throw the full *punta sopra mano*, the most perfect blow. This finishes in *larga difensiva imperfetta*. From here, as described above, you can bring your sword up by your left shoulder, and throw a *rovescio* “almost tondo” which will supposedly beat any blow toward your right side, as a universal parry. Having done so, you finish back in second, allowing another *punta sopra mano*. Repeat as necessary. The footwork is not delineated.

Viggiani is explicit that *alta offensiva perfetta* is to be assumed for both defense and offense, and yet that the taller combatant has the advantage using the Schermo. The shorter combatant must never throw the first blow if he hopes to succeed. And if two combatants are of the same height, then they could strike each other simultaneously. Viggiani does not explain how to overcome this problem, but we may speculate that, lacking a height advantage, one should attempt to gain the advantages as described previously, or somehow parry with the *rovescio tondo* (even though the starting position is *alta offensiva perfetta*).

There is more to Lo Schermo, although not much of practical interest. Viggiani devotes a short section to explaining why “the common *schermo* that all the Masters teach, and the greatest part of combatants use” of parrying a *fendente* with a *mandritto ascendente* (possibly referring to the *guardia di testa*?) is not good, chiefly in that it leaves one vulnerable to a number of feints to the head which are followed by cuts to the arm or leg, or by a *punta sopra mano*. Rather, the best

parry, not surprisingly, is to do a rovescio tondo, striking your opponent's debole, and that thereby you may even break his sword. From there, you may, of course, follow with a punta sopramano.

In summary, the much vaunted Schermo in its ultimate form is a simple alternation between Viggiani's favorite attack (the punta sopramano) and his favorite defensive maneuver (the rovescio almost tondo). It is curious (if not embarrassing) to see that nearly sixty years later, a conspicuously similar combination is found on the last page of Capo Ferro's Gran Simulacro, wherein he advocates defending against every sort of blow with a parry of a riverso, and striking always with an imbrocata, thereby alternating between first and fourth hand positions.

Lo Schermo does contain some information of practical applicability to the modern recreator of western sword arts, such as the means of gaining advantage through position and dynamics. The emphasis on the thrust, and the proto-lunge represented by the punta sopramano, may also be seen as historically interesting precursors to the developed rapier style that followed it. However, at its heart, the Schermo of Angelo Viggiani may be regarded as an exemplary, although not unique, testimony to the enduring allure of a supposedly ultimate offense, and of a universal parry.

Figure 1: The Seven Guards of Angelo Viggiani, Showing their Connections

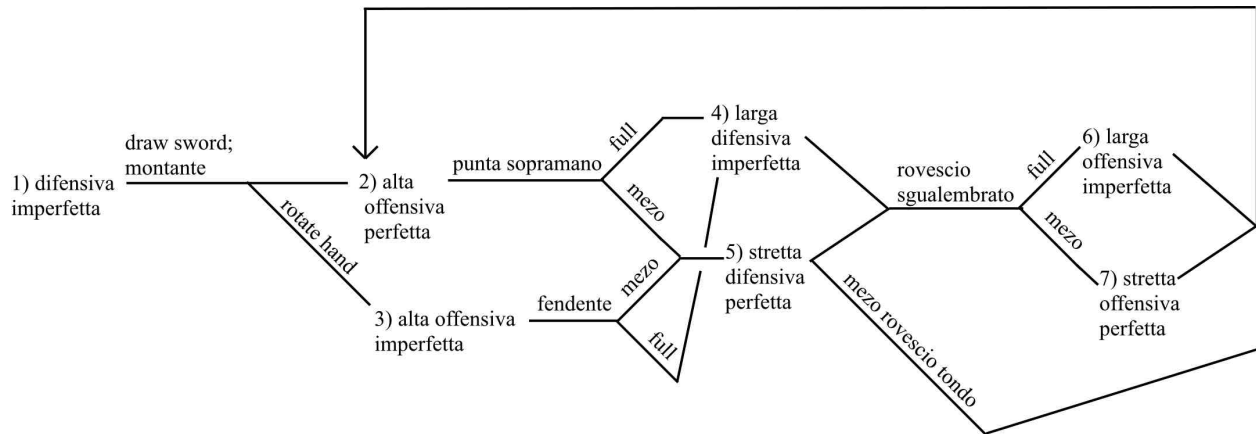


Figure 2: The Schermo of Angelo Viggiani

