

# The Secrets of the Single Sword

*Henri de Saint Didier, 1573*

*Translated by [Chris Slee](mailto:chris@sleech.info)<sup>1</sup>, 2013*

Introduction.....	2
Preface.....	2
The Text.....	2
Translation.....	2
The Secrets of the Single Sword.....	4
Drawing the Sword.....	4

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# Introduction

## Preface

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This is a translation of the section of the text concerning the correct way to draw the sword in order to stance a fight. Please direct any comments and questions on either the translation or the fencing techniques described to me on the email address above or at my blog<sup>2</sup>.

## The Text

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There are a number of copies of the text but only two are publicly available. The first is the copy in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (BNF) available through [Google Books](#)<sup>3</sup>. The second is located in the Library of the city of Blois and is available through the [Bibliotheque Virtuelles Humanistes](#)<sup>4</sup> (BVH).

The translation is based on the [transcription of the BVH copy](#)<sup>5</sup> made in 2010 by Olivier Depuis for [l'Association pour la Recherche et le Développement des Arts Martiaux Historiques Européens](#)<sup>6</sup>. All amendments to the text made in the transcription have been assumed and are not noted here.

## Translation

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I must say first off that I am not a professional translator. I could not be considered fluent in French but I'm told by native speakers that I do read it and write it quite well. I have a DELF B1 certification and a passion for Renaissance literature. I say this only so that the reader will not be lured into thinking that my translation is in any way authoritative. However, it is, I believe, the best English translation of this portion of Saint Didier's book available at the present time.

I am also an historical fencer specialising in the sidesword techniques of the late sixteenth century, the very weapon used in Saint Didier's text. I believe that this practical experience has given me insights into the text that would not be available to other translators.

As for the text itself, Saint Didier's prose has all the signs of a man trying to emulate those better educated than him. This is not an improbable interpretation since he claims himself to be both minor gentry and a professional soldier of 25 years' service. His phrasing is often impossible to figure out because he tends to nest subordinate clauses many levels deep to the extent that it becomes difficult to determine which subject a particular verb refers to.

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2 <http://sleech.info>

3 <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=mh0WAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Henry+de+Saint+Didier>

4 <http://www.bvh.univ-tours.fr/Consult/index.asp?numfiche=259>

5 [http://ardamhe.free.fr/biblio/Saint\\_Didier\\_Transcription\\_1.1.pdf](http://ardamhe.free.fr/biblio/Saint_Didier_Transcription_1.1.pdf)

6 <http://ardamhe.free.fr/>

Unfortunately, the worse offending passages are the same ones in which he seems to be stating his main points. Because of this, the translation is in some place not as strict as I would have liked and some juggling of word order has been called for.

Here is the list of technical terms and how I have rendered them in the translation:

- *plan* outline or instructions
- *tenue* comportment or posture
- [\*desmarcher\*](#)<sup>7</sup> in larger terms it means to halt but in terms of this manuscript it mean to step or to set down one's foot
- [\*desgainement\*](#)<sup>8</sup> drawing the sword from the scabbard as discussed in the first entry here
- [\*se planter\*](#)<sup>9</sup> place, establish or situation oneself in front of someone or something

I've translated the literal French "putting the sword to the fist" as "drawing the sword".

The only significant alteration I have made is dropping in translation the profusion of "said," "above-mentioned," "here-above said", etc, from the text. They are intrusive and add nothing to either the meaning of the text or to show Saint Didier's writing style

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7 <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos//pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=desmarcher>

8 <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=Gaine>

9 <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=Planter>

# The Secrets of the Single Sword

## Drawing the Sword

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*It follows hereafter how one should position oneself for drawing the sword, both in times of peace and in times of war, with the steps, guards, draws and postures required by this art, very necessary for those who want to work with arms.*

Here, four footprints are put and placed below the feet of the Lieutenant and Provost. One is noted with the number 1, another with 2, another with 3 and another with 4 in the manner of a quadrangle. They serve the Lieutenant and Provost, and all others, showing how one should perform properly and dexterously all steps, draws, guards and postures under arms.

1 2  
4 3

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*The stance and general instruction on performing the first step for the first, second and third draws, which it is necessary to know, both for the attacking Lieutenant and for the defending Provost, and all others who love arms, carrying a sword at their sides.*



*Here follows the declaration of this posture and instruction for the Lieutenant.*

And in order to perform this it is necessary that the Lieutenant stand with feet together, placed thus, holding the left foot in a footprint noted nearby with the number one, and the right foot in the other footprint, noted closely with the number two, holding the right hand

on the hilt of his sword and the left hand on the scabbard of the sword, showing by this that he wants to demonstrate to the Provost how he should stand hereafter: as is shown above in the illustration of the Lieutenant noted behind his hat with the number one.

*The end of that which must be done at present by the Lieutenant.*

*The declaration of the instruction and posture of the Provost.*

In order to do this, it is required that the Provost stand feet together, holding the left foot in the footprint noted above with the number one, and the right foot in another footprint noted with the number two, holding the right hand on the hilt of the sword, and the left hand on the scabbard showing that he is ready to do that which is necessary for this first stance as has shown to him by the Lieutenant - that is the first, second and third draws, as is shown above in the illustration and figure with the number two.

*Thus, the end and declaration of the first instruction for the Provost.*

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*The guard for performing and executing the first stance, the first and second draws, for the Lieutenant and Provost.*



And in order for this Lieutenant to perform the first draw, he needs to stand with feet together as is shown above in the first illustration noted with the number one and, being there, it is necessary that he throw the right foot behind onto the footprint noted in the illustration above with the number three, which is for the first stance. And in the same tempo, put the sword in the fist, for the first draw, carrying the hilt of the sword as high as the right shoulder, situating the point of the sword directly at the left breast (counting 1)<sup>10</sup>, holding the left hand immediately before the face, as is shown above in the illustration of the Lieutenant, noted with the number three behind his neck.

*Thus the end of the first draw for the Lieutenant.*

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<sup>10</sup> Saint Didier appears to be setting the tempo of the exercise by beats or counts. This becomes more evident in the discussion of the more complex third draw.

*Here follows the second draw for the Lieutenant.*

For the second draw for the Lieutenant, it is necessary that he be thus placed with feet together, as is shown in the first illustration noted with the number one. And in order to execute the second draw, he needs and it is necessary that he hold the right foot a little nearby in the air<sup>11</sup>, returning it to the footprint which is numbered two, carrying the hilt of the sword, drawing it as high as the shoulder, situating it, as above, (counting 1). And in that instant pass the sword above the head, well extending the arm, pausing the hilt of the sword as high as the right shoulder, situating the point of the sword at the left breast of the Provost, as is noted in the illustration with the number three.

*The end of the second draw for the Lieutenant.*

*Here below is declared the first and second draws for the Provost, in order to know well how to draw the sword, as shown to him by the Lieutenant.*

And in order to do it, it is necessary that the Provost remember how he was placed above in his first instruction, noted with the number two, which is with feet together and, standing so, it is necessary that the Provost, in order to do the first draw, throw the right foot that he had on the footprint noted with the number two behind onto the footprint noted with the number three, which is the enough<sup>12</sup> for the first draw, and at the same instant to draw the sword in the fist, carrying the hilt of the sword as high as and a little higher than the right shoulder, situating the point of the sword, being in this high guard, directly at the left eye, holding his left hand directly before his left breast in order to turn away<sup>13</sup> the point of the Lieutenant's sword (by circumstance he may want to advance it further) as is shown above in the illustration noted with the number four.

*Thus the end of the first draw for the Provost.*

*Here follows the second draw for this Provost.*

And in order to execute properly the second draw, it is necessary that the Provost stand with feet together as is shown in the illustration noted with the number two and, being there, it is necessary that the Provost throw his right foot out of the footprint where it was, which is noted with the number two, placing it a close by in making the second draw, which is that it is necessary to carry the hilt of the sword in medium guard and the point directly at the left breast. And in order to execute this third [*read: second?*] draw, it is necessary to pass the sword above the head, extending strongly the arm which holds it, and carry the hilt of the sword as high and a little higher than the right shoulder, situating at the same time the point of the sword directly at the left eye of the Lieutenant and holding the left hand directly before his left breast as is said above in the first draw and shown in the illustration noted with the number four behind the back.

*The end of the first and second draw for the Provost.*

After having shown above, being the first instruction, for performing the first and second draws for the Lieutenant and Provost, it remains to show the third draw, of which one will see hereafter the guard and posture necessary in order to execute and perform it.

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11 *un peu a quarter en l'air*

12 The text says *aussi* but I can't make the word make sense in this context.. *Assez* sounds similar and fits with the tone and meaning I believe Saint Didier wants to convey.

13 *détourner*

*The guard and posture for starting to perform the third draw for the demonstrating Lieutenant to the Provost defender.*



This third draw for the Lieutenant is made with feet together, as was said and shown above in the general instruction, holding the left foot on the footprint noted below with the number 1 and the right foot in the footprint which is noted 2, and in order to begin this third draw, it is necessary that the Lieutenant remove the right foot from the footprint which is noted 2, and carry it before [himself] in the air, making the first draw, to see (?) in its place above, (counting 1) and holding still the foot in the air, turning the hilt of the sword, the top of the hand down and the finger[nail]<sup>14</sup> up, situating the point of the sword directly at the belly, holding the left hand behind, as is shown above in the illustration noted with the number five behind the hat.

*The end of the start of the third draw for the Lieutenant.*

The third draw for the Provost, it starts and is made with the feet together, as is shown above in the instruction for the Provost, noted with the number two, holding the left foot in the footprint noted nearby with the number one, and the right foot in another footprint which is noted two, and in order to start and perform the third draw it is necessary that the Provost put the right foot, which is on the footprint noted two, close by in the air. And doing the first draw that has done<sup>15</sup> the Provost above (counting 1). And in order to complete<sup>16</sup> this draw it is necessary to turn the sword hand finger[nail]<sup>s</sup> up (counting 2), situating the point of the sword directly at the face<sup>17</sup>, holding the left hand, as is shown above in the illustration and figure noted with the number six behind the bonnet.

*Thus the end of the start of the third draw for the Provost.*

<sup>14</sup> Saint Didier uses the word *ongles*. I'm unsure whether he means literally the fingernails or this is a form of common metonymy. In either case, the meaning is unchanged.

<sup>15</sup> *qu'a faict*

<sup>16</sup> *parachever*

<sup>17</sup> *la veuë*

*The end of the third draw for the Lieutenant and the Provost, which thus depicts and completes it. It remains to declare here below their [the draws] properties and meanings.*



To properly complete with grace the third draw for this Lieutenant, it is necessary to be like the instruction above depicted, in which he holds the right foot before [him] in the air, having made the first and second draw, noted with the number five. It is needed that the Lieutenant, to complete this draw, place the right foot which is in the air on the footprint which is noted in this illustration with the number three, turning again<sup>18</sup> the hilt of the sword with the top of the hand up, as did the Lieutenant where is noted [in illustration] number three because the illustrator has made an error in this one here. But this Lieutenant here holds properly his left hand nonetheless - below the elbow of his sword arm as is shown in his illustration noted with the number seven.

*The end of the completion of the third draw for the Lieutenant.*

And for the completion of the third draw for the Provost, it is necessary that he comes to feint using the same instruction above, noted five in number on the preceding Provost, who<sup>19</sup> holds the right foot in the air, holding the hilt of the sword with the top of the hand up. For the completion of this third draw, it is necessary that the next Provost<sup>20</sup> throw his right foot behind [him] that he had in the air, as was said above, and place it on the footprint noted in the illustration with the number three, turning the hand which holds the sword with finger[nail]s down, situating the point of the sword directly at the face, or the left eye which is better, holding the left hand directly before his shoulder, as is shown above in his illustration noted with the number eight.

*Thus the end and completion of the third draw for the Provost.*

<sup>18</sup> *retournant*

<sup>19</sup> Original has *lequel* (of which)

<sup>20</sup> The term *next* here means this Provost, as opposed to *previous* meaning the one illustrated earlier