

The Secrets of the Single Sword

Henri de Saint Didier, 1573

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Introduction

Preface

This is a translation of the section of the text concerning stepping and proper footwork. 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 blog².

The Text

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](#)³. The second is located in the Library of the city of Blois and is available through the [Bibliotheque Virtuelles Humanistes](#)⁴ (BVH).

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

Translation

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. Unfortunately, the worst offending passages are the same ones in which he seems to be

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

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

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.

This section is, in my opinion, a confused mess. It shows that either Henri de Saint Didier is writing to emulate a high literary style or, being a Provençal, simply lacks fluency in court French.

The only significant alteration I have made is dropping in translation the profusion of “the said,” “the above-mentioned,” “the 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.

The Secrets of the Single Sword

Jeu de Paulme and Swordsmanship

Hereafter follows a treatise composed by the author which compares⁷ tennis with swordsmanship, with the points and reasons here below explained.

A treatise on the practise of and certain points required to know about the game of tennis⁸.

Here follows a treatise on the practice of and certain points required to know about the game of tennis for all those who love it, composed by the author, considering that it requires the same stance and understanding, the same strikes as swordsmanship⁹, as will be shown here in this treatise, written¹⁰ by the author because of the affinity and sympathy they have together, both for counselling and instructing¹¹ the unlearned and those who do not understand the terms of this exercise and not for the learned and skilful.

The author, having considered that tennis and swordsmanship are very close first cousins, as was said above, and whoever well knows how to play tennis easily can learn to throw sword strikes and their oppositions. But the one, which is swordsmanship, merits more than the other, because it preserves the health and honour of those who fear to lose them. Someone could ask why swordsmanship and tennis are first cousins? The author responds to this and says that the same strikes that one throws in swordplay in order to vanquish his enemy in times of peace or of war, are the same strikes one can use to vanquish his competitor¹² when he wants to compete¹³ for winning himself money or glory¹⁴ which are:

1. *Maindroit*
2. *Renvers*
3. Thrust

Well is it true that one of these strikes should be removed, which is the thrust, and only two will remain, which are:

1. *Maindroit*
2. *Renvers*

The reason why I remove the thrust is, considering the racket has no point, thus one cannot know how to thrust.

While it is true that sometimes one makes a strike and beat-away with the racket when the ball¹⁵ comes straight at the face or above, which is that one turns away the ball, and the beat-away with the racket when it comes from above or to the face, holding it directly in front,

7 lit: is about

8 *jeu de paulme*

9 *armes* - referring to the practice of weapons as a coherent body of knowledge

10 lit: made

11 *bailler advertisement & instruction*

12 *sa partie adverse*

13 lit: make some match

14 *quelque banquet* - lit: a seat at the table

15 *eteuf*

not deviating to either the right side or the left side. Although in this game of tennis there are only two shots, the *maindroit* and *renvers*, they enumerates themselves into four items, high and low, such as *maindroit* low and *maindroit* high, *renvers* low and *renvers* high. Thus one must know how to throw them very dexterously and gracefully since they perform here as well as they do as in swordsmanship. And knowing how to dexterously throw (weapons) one should observe what our ancestors said "tennis players (they say) that because of the rebound abandon the volley, will never be considered good players, that is to say everyone should take here good counsel, which is that when one takes the volley, one should never wait for the bounce. The reason for this is that the rebound may happen in several ways but never in the volley, ever, if one is practised, and that is sure.

The occurrence which can happen in the volley is to beat it (the ball) away with the wood of the racket. This is not an accident but a fault committed by him who hits with the wood and not the inside of the racket on the ball. In this case, I want to counsel those who are not yet sure of the rebound, who practice the volley yet shouldn't, and those who fail at it. And if necessary, one has again recourse to the rebound and although those who can, should always take the volley and not the rebound.

Hereafter will be explained the points which are fundamental to this game and the practice of tennis, which should be well observed.

The first requirement for one who wants to attack another and to compete for high stakes¹⁶, is taking shoes with lead soles or heavy weights and carrying them for two or three hours before commencing his match. This time passed, he comes to leave the heavy soles and content himself with his shoes, when he conducts himself in light shoes that may be well to his advantage¹⁷ and, in doing this, as such, will find himself better disposed and more dexterous than those that did not do it, practice [experience] being the master of all arts.

The second requirement in this game is to ask first for the rackets and to choose the best and which is light and comfortable in the hand. And it is the same in swordsmanship which requires a light sword and heavy dagger, as in tennis one should have a light racket and heavy ball, neither too heavy nor too light because all things which are too heavy or too light are worth nothing.

The third point that is required and should be well regarded that whenever one is in a game of tennis having another racket with which we want to help and say to the opposing party, "let's toss the racket in order to see who will be inside or outside¹⁸ and then will say "toss yours", if he give you the liberty, throw the worst and not the good one and because that will be hereafter explained, and if he would throw his, let him throw it because in throwing it the sinews¹⁹ (of the sword) weaken themselves, in weakening itself it damages itself inasmuch as the sinews stretch themselves and by thus it cannot be used here as well as it was before, one could say, "one will demand another of them", response, to that possible could not find it so well in the hand than that which had been found before than not wanted to guard against because well often a racket is not winning the match as a good sword is also the win that on conquers his enemy.

Fourth item, having well observed all that was said, it remains to know on which stance he should hold himself in order to well execute the art of tennis and in order to serve well the

16 *faire partie de consequence*

17 *a son point*

18 Positions on the tennis court?

19 *les cordes*

ball on the tiles²⁰ and to give as difficult a game as we can throughout the match²¹. I say that in order to practice it well all these strikes being enumerated and in order to serve well, he should hold himself on the left foot for the first time and then always making of it the pirouette on it (the left foot), looking for the ball on whichever side it will go. Anyone can say I do not know where the ball will go and cannot judge it. It should be considered that when anyone judges the ball where it will be thrown by their opponent²², keeping it in view and by judging where he wants to throw it, it is very good. But I will give one which will be better and the obvious reason. This judgement is often deceptive because by sight, one cannot judge surely that which the will²³ wants to do and execute, which is directing and throwing the ball. I say that in order to well judge the ball, where the opponent could throw it, he should not look at the face because he (the opponent) will deceive you with it. But look well at the ball which has will have served and never lose it from sight. Because the ball, which is external to the will²⁴ is directed and managed without falsehood²⁵ by the interior and will of your opponent and although being well sure of your hand, without fault (you) will conquer your opponent easily and not looking at the face because, looking at it, you will think that he throws to you the ball at the opposite (side?) of his look and his interior will be otherwise and although thus looking at the face of your opponent you could be deceived and looking at the ball you never will be. And this is the argument that I said in arms which should look at the point of the sword and not the face of the man.

I have not put these reasons for those who understand them but to the contrary for those who do not understand them.

I have wanted to talk of tennis by what the worthy, who is one of the good players of it, has been to see me only two or three times and having learned two or three strikes, he increased his score²⁶ to nearly fifteen. This worthy throws forehands and backhands with very good grace. Thus tennis and swordsmanship, as said, have a great affinity.

The end

20 A reference to Royal Tennis in which bouncing the ball off the walls was permitted?

21 *donner mauvais jeu le plus qu'on pourra tout le long du jeu*

22 *leur partie adverse*

23 lit: *interior*

24 lit: *l'exterior*

25 *sans fallace*

26 *adresse*

To The Reader

Dear reader

The author knows that swordsmanship and the law are two very necessary virtues with which to acquire²⁷ the friendship of kings, princes, lords and even ladies. In this cause, the author has preferred to choose of them the art and practice of arms than the law. Not that he has abandoned everything, but exercising in them for 30 years and after long days, God has given him the grace which he has dedicated and actually presented this treatise, to one of the grandest Christian monarchs who may be under heaven. And by his commandment has fought with his highness in arms and with Monseigneur Duke de Guise and others of his court, of which the author has praised and praises god, who has made this boon that he has had the luck and favour which Sire has given him of printing it and putting it into the light for the solace and contentment of his nobleness and public good. There may be several others who would slander and warn against the author, by reason of his treatise and other little speeches that he has made on the exercise and game of tennis. The author has not treated of that which was said, for those who are skilled and tested, and who listen to the true terms which are required in both practices - but well for those who do not listen - that is to say, swordsmanship and tennis.

In this cause, the author asks readers, neither wanting to take it in good faith²⁸ and justify it, not looking to the language and the letter of the text²⁹, rather in time that it may involve, because such as will speak against it and want to insult him that does not know of it and knowing not how to do otherwise and having seen and having spoken with the author who could discourse with you reasonably and show by examples the contents of the treatise, which the nay-sayers³⁰ (if anyone so finds himself) could find themselves in the content, know them and stop speaking of it and actually will not do it. But addressing themselves to the author who could render the contents by reason of his speech. This treatise was printed³¹ on 4 June 1573.

27 *à faire acquérir*

28 *en bonne parte*

29 *à la lettre & escorce d'icelle*

30 *contredisans*

31 *a esté achevé d'imprimer*

Royal Privilege

Charles, by the grace of god, King of France. To our friends and loyal subjects³², those holding our courts of Parliament, Bailiffs, Seneschals, Provosts and their Lieutenants and to all our justices and officers and to each of them, as appropriate³³, greetings and affection. Our dear and well loved Henry de Saint Didier, esquire, gentleman of Provence, has given us to understand that he has composed certain books, which he has dedicated to us, on the the manner of using arms, including the single sword, sword and dagger, sword and cape, sword and rondelle, sword and targe, sword and buckler, two-handed sword, two swords, and dagger alone, written with art, order and practice, with the means to defend oneself and attack at the same time, with the strikes one can throw, whether attacking or defending. Very useful and notable for the guidance of the young, these and similarly all those that he will write about feats of arms, (which) he willingly would like to print and bring into the light. However, being something that he can only make with great cost and expense, he fears that after having outlaid³⁴ the costs, any printers or booksellers or others will greatly disadvantage and injure him [lit: do not make it to his great detriment and injury] (by) re-printing it, if he has not our permission and special privilege. To this end, we having been humbly begged and beseeched³⁵, wanting (to give) him on this power of our letter these necessities. We, in this cause, desire, being that it will be possible, to treat favourably all persons of good knowledge in the training and advancement of things useful and profitable to the public. So that everyone may more willingly apply themselves³⁶ to do the same, we have permitted and granted it to Saint Didier. We permit and grant by these present (words), which could and may be to him open to do by such printing as will seem good to him, the books here above mentioned, and all of them which may be by him composed on the same subject. And so that he or those of the printers who would charge him to do this, having means to recompense the cost of them which he should incur for this end, we have inhibited and forbade. We inhibit and forbid all other booksellers and printers in this our kingdom, lands and domains under obedience to us that during the time and term of ten years following, from the day and date that these books were printed, it will neither print nor make to be printed, neither big nor small or in any other form as may be, nor sell the above-mentioned books which have been printed by others and not by him or those who have been charged by Saint Didier on penalty of fixed fine³⁷ and of confiscation and loss of all the books. So we want and command you, we charge and impose by these letters, and to each of you in his own right³⁸, as appropriate³⁹, that according to and following our permissions to grant and desire, to make and cause to be made⁴⁰ express interdictions and protections from us on the above-mentioned penalties and others which you will seek to impose on all printers and booksellers situated in your districts and jurisdictions that hereafter they - any of them - other than those who will be charged and expressly commissioned by Saint Didier in order to print or cause to be printed or expose them for

32 *feaux*

33 *si comme à luy appartiendra*

34 *avoir esposé*

35 *requirer?*

36 *s'esvertue*

37 *peine arbitraire*

38 *en droit soy*

39 lit: as like will belong to him

40 *faites faire*

sale during the period of ten years these above-mentioned books and if after making the injunctions you find any contravening these proceed against them both by sentencing with the said penalties as well as those you seek to be done according to the circumstances of the case, such is our pleasure and because of the content of these letters they apply in several and diverse places. We desire that to put a "we have seen"⁴¹ these made under the royal seal, or verified by one of our notaries and secretaries, made to be adjusted like to this original letter then put, in brief or abstract, the content of these letters at the start of the books, they may be held in order that all booksellers, printers and all other to whom it pertains be notified.

Given in Paris on the 23rd day of January in the year of grace 1573 and third of our reign, thus signed by the king and sealed on a simple tail of yellow wax.

41 The text has the Latin "*vidimus*" - a legal formula for a true and certified copy