CHAPTER 8

Problems of Interpretation and Application in Fight Book Studies

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He which is not much practiced and exercised therein, ought not to make profession of this Art; for he shall find himself to be utterly deceived.

Maestro Giacomo Di Grassi, 1570

1 Perspective and Process

In the exploration and study of the corpus of literature called the “Fight Books”, we are involved in a problematic recovery process. Reviving the physical exercise and pedagogical knowledge of these “combatives” (i.e., close combat training and techniques) presents a considerable though not insurmountable challenge. Addressing these issues critically is not without difficulty. The central purpose of this paper is to consider problematic areas affecting Fight Book study from the perspective of their general content as martial arts teachings. In doing so we may defer to the words of Francois Dancie from the first chapter of his 1623, L’Espee De Combat, in that, “a profession like this one which is all in the sword and wounds, should not be treated with delicacy, neither with

1 Di Grassi, His True Art of Defense, p. 106.
2 There has been a lack of useful prior work on problems of interpretation and application largely for the very reasons examined in this paper. In my opinion, there are no significant published works addressing in a practical way the issues which I’ve encountered and observed over the past 36 years. This is especially true with regard to recognizing reoccurring patterns of adversarial movement within the Fight Books and its associated combat iconography. (Clements, “Form From Function”, p. 42). For this reason, the perspective and conceptualization described here originate with and are a largely product of my own experience; the combination of my observations, efforts and personal study from a particular vantage point as a professional researcher-practitioner. The context for this focus has been on training mechanisms associated with earnest self-defense in relation to recorded instances of violent injury and death. Section 5 of this paper addresses this aspect.
soft words and other titillations of the ears…” This subject is in its infancy in terms of scholarship as well as mastery of its physical application. Recent efforts have been a revelation; releasing submerged wisdom while resurrecting forgotten truths about indigenous Western European self-defense knowledge dormant for generations. While substantial discoveries have been made, because of the very nature of martial arts many factors will continue to inhibit conclusive knowledge. Whatever physical training regimen we construct, employing whatever drills and exercises we discern, will be derived from what is, by default, an ongoing reconstructive investigation. In turn, whatever conclusions we develop from this process will be colored to one degree or another by what we know and think we know. It is therefore essential that students of the Fight Books acknowledge inherent problems while remaining conscious of their effects.

As the Fight Books served pragmatic self-defense needs they often read in terms of “what can happen in combat” more often than “what to do in class” to prepare for it. We must therefore learn how to practice these teachings at nearly the same time we figure out just what the teachings are. What modern practitioners are in effect doing is trying to raise our understanding by, as it were, matching practicum with principia. In this regard, it is important to remember that this revolves around two simultaneous things: first, trying to reconstruct extinct combative methods from literary and iconographic sources, and second, to create a modern means of practicing application of them through some form of training program or exercise curriculum. Both of these activities are synergistic. They inform and augment one another, though the latter by necessity cannot be implemented without material from the former, and yet, to conduct the former—interpret the original teachings as close-combat instruction—requires some prerequisite structure for understanding their martial arts content. In simplest form, it demands that knowledge of historical arms and armor be joined with substantive appreciation for the physicality

3 Dacie, L’Espee De Combat, p. 4.

4 It should not be necessary to stipulate that the corpus of Fight Book teachings largely, though not entirely, constitute Arts of Defence (i.e., “self-defense” methods) in that they essentially existed out of the need to convey skills for physical protection, even when said skills function recreationally, whether in part or whole, of a larger contemporary body of combat knowledge. It can be acknowledged that today an interdisciplinary effort is a necessity for the student-practitioner. Whether as recreational combatant, anthropologist, or experimental archaeologist, they ideally take on roles associated with historian and philologist as much as martial artist. In the case of the later, we may certainly permit the broadest definition.