CHAPTER 17

Development, Diffusion and Reception of the “Buckler Play”: A Case Study of a Fighting Art in the Making

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1 A Living Tradition

1.1 Origins
This work will deal with “fencing with a buckler” or, more precisely, with the documents that provide access to what was the “buckler play”. It is important first of all, however, to recognise that the distinction between Schulfechten (training combat) and Ernstfechten (serious combat), is simply that the intentions and circumstances change the finality of the engagement. Technically the manner of fighting does not change. We will simply note that the word “play” has since ancient times carried a double meaning of “fighting technique” and “recreation”. We need only remember the name of the gladiatorial schools, the ludi, or the clessa of the Irish Cúchulainn. Thus, in what following we shall use the term “buckler play” in the wide sense of “fencing with a buckler,” irrespective of the context, whether as leisure or a more serious intent. This triple aspect (recreational, pedagogic, serious) is reflected in a verse of Perceforest (ca. 1330): “The knights, quite unarmoured, played buckler with each other to grow more skilful and to learn some new tricks.”

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1 The title of this first part is borrowed from that of the book edited by Pierre Lardet, La tradition vive. Mélanges d’histoire des textes en l’honneur de Louis Holtz, Turnhout, 2003 (Bibliologia, 20).

2 The oldest testimony in French appears in the Chronique by Godefroy, written between 1314 and 1316 (v. 7606): “Du jeu de bouclier ot retrete” (Buchon, Chronique métrique de Godefroy, p. 278). According to Mehl, Les jeux, pp. 63–64, his sources (mainly letters of remission) refer to an exclusively recreational practice, as already expressed by Du Cange, “Bouclarius” 1, col. 720b: “Frequens in iis registris occurrit mentio ludicræ pugnæ, quam le jeu du bouclier vocabant “frequently mentioned in said registers [sc. Annales] is a recreational form of fighting they called the buckler play.”

3 Cf. Boffa, Les manuels, p. 34.

4 Perceforest V, f. 6: Les chevaliers tous desarmez jouoyent aux escuz, les uns aux autres, pour estre plus duitz, et pour aucun tour nouvel apprendre. […]
and the teachings of the Masters of the Buckler Play solely to the recreational aspect of the practice would constitute a hermeneutic misunderstanding.⁵

The history begins with the first Fighting Book or Fighting Handbook:⁶ the Leeds, Royal Armouries ms I.33⁷ and deploys primarily in the south of Germany.⁸ Describing the martial context in which I.33 was born would surpass by far the scope of the present case study; however, we should not forego a presentation, if only a brief one.

The question of origins is always the most difficult issue as it delves deeply into complex substrata.⁹ The Leeds manuscript is the first preserved evidence, but the birth of the genre may have taken place earlier with other handbooks

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⁵ See Cinato/Surprenant, “Luitger” and Cinato/Surprenant, “L’escrime à la bocle”, cf. our difference of opinion with Forgeng, The Illuminated Fightbook, pp. 19–20 and n. 59. Although his is a dated interpretation, we can read the few lines that Siméon dedicated to buckler play in La France pendant la guerre de cent ans, p. 124: Le jeu chevaleresque du “bouclier” ou des “bloquelets” était devenu à la mode depuis que, pendant l’heureuse période qui précéda la guerre de Cent Ans, les riches bourgeois des villes avaient voulu figurer eux aussi dans des tournois et se livrer aux mêmes divertissements que les nobles; et des rangs de la bourgeoisie ce jeu n’avait pas tardé à se répandre, comme il arrive d’ordinaire, dans la masse du peuple. Du reste, le jeu du bouclier pouvait être considéré comme une sorte de préparation à la vie militaire, l’ordonnance de 1369 n’avait aucune raison de l’interdire [“The chivalrous play of the ‘buckler’ or of the “bloquelets” had become fashionable since, during the happy period preceding the Hundred Years War, the rich bourgeois from the cities had also wished to participate in the tourneys and to engage in the same forms of entertainment as the nobility; and, from the ranks of the bourgeoisie, that play spread quickly, as tends to happen, to the common people. Moreover, the buckler play could be considered a sort of preparation for military life; there being no reason for the ordinance of 1369 to prohibit it.”].

⁶ See the introduction to this volume as well as Boffa, Les manuels, pp. 23–24. My heartfelt thanks to Matthews Galas for his precious and so generously shared knowledge, and to Olivier Dupuis and Yann Kervan, who kindly shared their lectures with me; further to Olivier Gourdon for our joint iconographic research, as well as Stéphane Augris. This work is indebted to each of them, as well as to André Surprenant. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the editors, Daniel Jaquet, Timothy Dawson and Karin Verelst, who greatly contributed to this study with their suggestions.

⁷ Anonymous, Liber de Arte Dimicatoria (see notes in the appendix). This manuscript shall henceforth be referred to by means of its familiar Royal Armouries catalogue designation of I.33.

⁸ The geographical framework of the present study is justified by the provenance of the different manuscript testimonies; cf. Boffa, Les manuels, pp. 43–45. A comparative study dealing with the Italian handbooks remains to be done.

⁹ See Boffa, Les manuels, pp. 37–39, that does not mention the Irish epic sources.