

Swordplay

by George Dillon

As a swordsman myself, I have a particular interest in Shakespeare/De Vere's knowledge of swordsmanship, and in the last couple of days while browsing the web I have stumbled across something which may be of wider interest and should at the very least lead to the revision of an entry in the *OED*!

It all concerns the etymology of the word 'fencing'. Received wisdom has it that the word 'fence' was originally a shortening of the Middle English 'defens', that came from an Italian word, *defensio*, in origin a Latin word. Every source I could find on the web (e.g. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fencing>) states that the first known use of 'fence' in reference to English swordsmanship is in William Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*: 'Alas sir, I cannot fence.' (Ref: Harper, Douglas (2001), Online Etymology Dictionary: <http://www.etymonline.com/>)

That reference tells us:

FENCE:

"fight with swords," 1598, first recorded in *Merry Wives of Windsor*; from the noun in this sense (1533), see fence (n.). Fencing is from 1581. In spite of the re-enactment in 1285 of the Assize of Arms of 1181, fencing was regarded as unlawful in England. The keeping of fencing schools was forbidden in the City of London, "as fools who delight in mischief do learn to fence with buckler, and thereby are encouraged in their follies." (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=fence&searchmode=none>)

Wikipedia gives the conventional date of *Merry Wives* as 1597: '*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comedy by William Shakespeare, first published in 1602, though believed to have been written prior to 1597'. My edition of *OED* cites *Much Ado* (1599) as a Shakespearean source for the verb 'Fence' and *Pericles* (1608) for 'Fencing'.

'Fencing' is the gerund of the verb 'to fence' (as any student with just a little Latin could affirm) and so, while the verb may be derived from the noun, it is curious that the implication of the existence of the gerund is ignored and that Shakespeare is credited all across the web for coining the term of the basis of his use of the verb 'fence' in *Merry Wives*, given that the term 'fencing' is at the same time acknowledged to predate that play by at least 16 years.

However, while the *OED* gives Mulcaster's 'Positions', 1581, as the earliest source referring to 'Fencing', the history of Edward de Vere reveals earlier uses of the words 'fencer' and 'fencing' (both derived from the verb 'to fence') as well as another

interesting historical 'first'.

While these discoveries may not directly have any bearing on the authorship debate they are worth noting and give a tantalising glimpse of what could be found out if Oxford were studied with even a tenth of the attention which has been squandered on the merchant of Stratford!

Circa 29 December 1580, Henry Howard wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth in which he uses the word 'fencer' (another part of speech which implies the pre-existence of the verb 'to fence').

But in dede it is the practise of a fencer to directe his blowes to that parte chefly which hauinge once bene hurte before is weaker and lesse able to beare out a venewe. The course which I haue ronne hath bene to look vpon your maiesty with <a> single eye and to deserue the mending and repaying of my fortune by the comfote of your fauor.

However, here's the exciting bit...

The poem 'The Paine of Pleasure' (which both Mark Anderson and Sarah Smith credit to Edward de Vere) was certainly published in a collection by the same title on October 17, 1580 but probably appeared two years earlier. A book called *The Paine of Pleasure* is in a Stationer's Registry entry for September 9, 1578 although of this edition only the title page survives. The long poem contains a discourse of some 72 lines on 'Fencing, The eleventh pleasure' with much word-play involving fencing terms e.g.:

By Fencing grows our terms of the Bravado,
Our foins and thrusts, the deadly stab and all:
Which some more finely call a Stabbado,
And some a blow, a cleanly wipe can call.
And some a rake, that crosseth both the shins,
Now with such stuff this joyful sport begins.

Without a doubt, this reference should lead to a correction of *OED*, since the word 'Fencing' clearly pre-dates 1581.

The third reference is less etymologically compelling, since the word 'Fence' is here used as a compound noun, however the incident giving rise to it does have some significant bearing on my general theme. De Vere is infamous for an episode in his youth which resulted in the death of a servant. *Monstrous Adversary* tells us that Cecil's diary later recorded:

Thomas Bryncknell, an under Cook, was hurt by the Erle of Oxford at Cecill-houss whereof he dyed, and by Verdict

found felo de se, with running upon a Poynt of a Fence Sword of the said Erle.

In his article 'Legs, Wounds, and Standing Fights in Historical Fencing' J. Clements comments 'this is [also] the earliest reference to the rapier in England, and apparently being taught to a young noble by a common tailor' (<http://www.thearma.org/essays/Leg-Wounds.htm>)

Again, while stressing that this line of investigation is an off-shoot from the authorship question rather than a contributory to it, it is worth comparing de Vere's affinity with the rapier with Shakespeare's references to it in his plays.

De Vere was famed for his prowess in duelling and was clearly trained in the use of the rapier from a very early stage in its introduction to England. The art of the rapier was (then as now) at its most developed in Italy and it is probable that, after killing the under cook, de Vere improved on his skills during his later travels in that country.

The term 'rapier' does not refer to just any old fencing sword but denotes a specific weapon, recently introduced into England (from Italy) during de Vere's youth, and of a particular deadliness - due to the triangular cross section of the blade a wound with a rapier was less likely to heal than a wound made with an ordinary foil - and it was in part due to the fatalities caused by rapiers that duelling was banned during Elizabeth's reign.

The word 'rapier' appears in thirteen of Shakespeare's plays - it occurs four times in *Merry Wives* and three times in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labours Lost*. It appears most often (five times) in *Hamlet*, where Laertes' choice of rapier and dagger for his duel with Hamlet is said to be indicative of his murderous intent. There are also two curiously anachronistic uses of 'rapier' in *Titus Andronicus*.

As a swordsman myself, since directing and playing *Hamlet* in 1995 my intuition has been that whoever wrote Shakespeare's plays had a first-hand knowledge of swordsmanship and most probably had studied fencing to a level required of someone whose very life (and not just his theatrical career) might depend on his skill.

The Sussex Rapier School - which today studies and practices the rapier as a true martial art (as opposed to a sport) - has on its website the following list of Fencing terms as used by Shakespeare:

Answer - retaliation

Battle - army

Bilbo - a spanish blade of peculiar excellence

Bill - a bill-hook - a weapon

Bodkin - dagger - long pin for the hair

Brush - rude assault

Burget - a kind of helmet

Cavalero - a cavalier/gentleman

Curtal-axe - cutlass

Defence - art of defence

Foin - thrust

Fox - a cant (slang) word for a sword

Hay - a thrust in fencing

Halberd - battle-axe fastened to a long pole

Half Sword - within half the length of a sword

Hardiment - defiance, brave deeds

Hox - hamstring

Iron - clad in armour

Lot - a prize

Meet - match

Opposition - combat

Pantaloon - the Italian

Partisan - pike

Pay - to beat, to hit

Sallet - helmet

Swinge-bucklers - rakes/rioters

Utterance - a phrase in combat

Vambrace - armour for the arm

Venew - a bout in fencing

Venies - hits in fencing

Yerk - to jerk, to thrust with a quick motion

(<http://www.hadesign.co.uk/SRS/html/shake.htm>)

Now all of the above are just amateur musings - some of my assertions may prove incorrect when I go back to the sources I recall them from - and as with all of Shakespeare's knowledge it is near impossible to prove that a) what he expressed in words he must have acquired through practical first hand experience and not through the words of others (although the use of specific terms in unexpected settings can be reasonably thought to suggest more than just a passing familiarity with the subject) and b) that access to such experience was exclusive to someone of de Vere's circumstances and beyond the likes of Shaksper.

But I think there is a fruitful line of inquiry to be pursued here. G.D.

