A Note on de Liancour's Plate Illustrating the Five Principles[1]

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In Chapter III of le Sieur de Liancour's 1686 *Le Maitre d'Armes* he presents a plate with five figures, each of which illustrates core principles of his approach.[2] So far as I am aware, no one to date has pointed out that the descriptions and images for figures four and five are reversed. It is a minor point, perhaps, but important when reconstructing Liancour's method. Historical fencers rely heavily on text and plates (when the latter are present), but in this case they may be confused and juxtapose these two core actions.

Introduction

André Wernesson, Le Sieur de Liancour, (fl. 1690) is widely regarded as a pivotal figure in the development of French fencing.[3] Jacopo Gelli referred to him as the most important reformer of French fencing.[4] Maitre Michael Müller-Hewer credits Liancour

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[2] For the French, a pdf copy of the 1686 edition is available at https://www.jeuxdepees.fr/etudes.php?tab=3&id=1658158298-1667917872-1667917930; the Gallica site at the Bibliothèque nationale de France has a copy of the 1692, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k206032t.r=Le%20ma%C3%AEtre%20d%27armes%2C%20ou%20L%27exercice%20de%20l%27esp%C3%A9e%20seule%20dans%20sa%20perfection?rk=21459;2.

[3] For more information, see Séphora Deboeuf, "L'Art des armes à travers les siècles et ses traités d'escrime (XVI^{e}-XVX^{e}) dont les différentes éditions du traité de Lafaugere," Master's Thesis, Universite de Lyon, 2018 (hereafter Deboeuf); Serge Vaucelle, "L'éducation corporelle des aristocrats français l'âge classique: la place des traités didactiques,"in John McClelland, and Brian Merrilees, *Sport and Culture in Early Modern Europe/Le Sports dans la Civilisation de l'Europe Pré-Moderne*, Center for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, Victoria College, University of Toronto, 209, 249-267.

[4] Jacopo Gelli, *Bibliografia generale della scherma con note critiche, biografiche e storiche. Testo italiano e francese*, Firenze, IT: Tipografia Editrice de L. Niccolai, 1890, 393-396; 394.

not only with the first text to clarify the tenets and features of the French School, but also as representing a final break with Italian traditions.[5] Where many have been quick to praise his approach, others, like Egerton Castle, did not believe he contributed much that was unique or novel. In truth, like Charles Besnard before him, Liancour threw out what he considered outdated ideas and theories, and while he did not simplify things, he might be said to have streamlined them.

Liancour was born in 1646, the son of the elder André Wernersson, a butcher in the French court. Family connections and his father's money no doubt helped Liancour land the important position of fencing master to the page school of the Petite Écuries at Versailles. In addition to his father, the half-brother of Liancour's father, Jean Vernesson de Sourville, was made provost of the hall in 1687. Family connections notwithstanding, Liancour received his position at the Petite Écuries, in part, thanks to his predecessor Denis Benneton de Lisle, fencing master both to Miss de Montpensier (1752) and the Petite Écuries (1785), the latter of which he gave to Liancour. In this role, he trained the sons of the aristocracy; it is also likely that his position earned him the title of lord of Liancour.[6]

Liancour also taught at the Academy of François du Gard de Longpré from 1631 to 1702, as well as for Jean Bernardy's academy on the Rue de l'Egout, Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Liancour is listed in Henri Daressy's *Archives of the Masters of Paris* (1888), a

[5] See https://jeuxdepees.fr/etudes.php?tab=3&id=1658158298-1667917872-1667917930; for Maitre Müller-Hewer, see https://michaelmullerhewer.academia.edu/

[6] I am indebted to Maxime Chouinard for sending me this useful link with biographical information; see https://gw.geneanet.org/capreolus?lang=fr&n=wernesson+de+liancourt&p=andre

somewhat disorganized collection of various documents relating to the Corporation of the Masters of Paris (founded in 1567 under Charles IX).[7] We know from Liancour himself that he studied under a master named Renard who had taught in Paris for sixty years.

Liancour's treatise, which he wrote early in his tenure as a master, is academic and well-organized. Technical matters dominate the first part of the book; his pedagogical ideas the second part. Liancour credited his own master with what he presented, and in a few sections takes issue with other, well-known masters of the time. One suspects, for example, that Liancour in speaking against rolling the back foot on the lunge may be referencing de la Touche (1670). In Chapter 4 Liancour remarks that he knows of these faults "*comme j'ay vu des Figures dans des Livres precedens*" ("as I have seen in Figures in previous Books").[8]

Castle remarks that Liancour's reputation was such that many later works, both in French and English, were influenced by his text, but cites no examples.[9] To name one such example, Le Sieur Martin's *Le Maitre d'armes ou l'abrege de l'exercice de l'epee*, 1737,

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[7] Henri Daressy, *Archives des Maitres d'Armes de Paris*, Paris: Maison Quantin, 1888, 108; https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k743602.texteImage; Chris Slee produced an English edition, *Archives of the Masters of Arms of Paris*, LongEdge Press, 2018, 74. The academy of the masters enjoyed control over the creation and regulation of fencing masters in France. Founded by Charles IX, it was patronized by successive kinds from Henry III to Louis XIII. Under Louix XIV, the academy received letters patent and a coat of arms. Anyone who wished to become a master, had to spend at least six years as a provost working for an academy master. When ready to test, three other masters oversaw a public trial, and if the candidate succeeded, they then had the backing and support of the academy.

[8] Liancour, 10. If one examines the deeper lunges of de La Touche in his *Les vrays Principes de l'Espée seule* one will see several of the "faults" Liancour found with this version of the lunge.

[9] See Egerton Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fencing From the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.2003 (originally published in London, George Bell and Sons, 1885), especially Ch. 10.

borrowed Liancour's first diagram of the circle parry.[10] It is also tempting to see Liancour's influence in the inclusion of examining "foreign" guards—he covers Italian, German, and Spanish fencers, a feature of later texts such as those by Girard and Angelo. For brevity I cite only these examples—wiser heads than mine have covered this well.[11]

The Anglophone world has yet to realize the importance of Liancour; in this they are late to the game. A survey of works in French on fencing reveals a different picture. Hervé Drévillon, one of the contributors to the goldmine of information that is *Croiser le fer*, has this to say of de Liancour:

> *En 1686, sous la plume d'André Wernesson, sieur de Liancourt, l'escrime française se définit véritablement comme un art de parade autour de laquelle s'organise tout l'échange. Théoricien d'un véritable classicisme de l'escrime, Liancourt fixe les traits les plus caractéristiques de l'escrimeur français.*[12]
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> In 1686, by the pen of Andre Wernesson, lord de Liancourt, French fencing truly defined itself as an art of parrying around which all exchanges were organized. A theoretician of true classicism of fencing, Liancourt established the most characteristic traits of the French fencer.

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[10] See Le Sieur Martin's *Le Maitre d'armes ou l'abrege de l'exercice de l'epee*, 1737, Ch. XIII. There is pdf available through http://ensiludium.free.fr/Le_Conservatoire.htm . Compare to plate on page 63 in Liancour. See also Deboeuf, 39-40.

[11] See Deboeuf, especially 37ff; 59.

[12] Hervé Drévillon, "La société des escrimeurs," in *Croiser le fer: violence et culture de l'épée dans la France modern (XVI^e^-XVIII^e^ siècle)*, Seysell, FR: Champ Vallon, 2002, 76. See also the excellent discussion 174-175; 207-209; Deboeuf, 50.

This is high praise—Drévillon credits de Liancour with establishing *the* features of French fencing. Other masters, naturally, deserve credit as well, not least of which are Charles Besnard and de la Touche, but it is fair perhaps to point to Liancour, as Drévillon does here, as having fixed the idea of fencing as the art of parrying.

Until the 2000s, unless one read French and had access to a good dictionary, one could not mine this excellent text. Two translations in English exist and while they are useful, both also have issues.[13] That by Elise Darchis, from 2007, is solid but suffered what I believe to be problems in either saving or transferring a computer file (more below). The edition that M.P. Lynch put out in 2022 is useful, but is often loose in translation, a prime example being his use of "SNAFU" as a verb.[14] While I have used both translations, I have felt compelled to read them alongside the French, often translating the latter myself. I am by no means expert in the French language, and only read effectively works pertaining to fencing or history.[15]

This text is a key work in the development of the "French School" and as with any work, important or not, we should endeavor to represent it and any translation as faithfully as we can. The two English editions have done their best, and in fact, have

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[13] See Elise Darchis, Oxford, England, 2007, which resides on the Linacre School of Defense site, https://sirwilliamhope.org/Library/Liancour/index.html; M.P. Lynch, *The Master of Arms: Liancour's 1686 Illustrated Treatise on Single-Sword Combat*, Las Vegas, NV: SP, 2022.

[14] Lynch, *The Master of Arms*, 110. The sense is clear, in American English anyway, but a direct translation seems more fitting to me, e.g. *Mais l'on peut ester trompé par des feintes, ou par des demy-coups, & estant surpris, cette parade de cercle enveloppera tous ces coupes qui pourroient vous ester poussez, & même sera parade tous les desseins de vostre ennemy*. The last clause, Lynch's "snafu," reads "and will even allow you to defeat all the designs of your enemy."

[15] Many of us in pre-modern European studies had to be familiar with a variety of languages and thus studied them, formally or informally, in graduate school. My comprehension exceeds my ability to translate, and so my translations are tentative where I supply them. I am open to correction from those whose command of French are superior to my own.

faithfully carried over a mistake in the original text, one that could adversely affect one's interpretation and use of this seminal work.

Examination

It will help to lay out each step in order as presented in the text, along with the plate (7 in the 1686; 8 in the 1692), as this will best set up discussion of the final two images. What these five principles cover are first, basic movement, and second, the guard position. Near the end of his treatise in "Ordre Methodique," Liancour stresses the importance of perfecting these actions with correct technique and through diligent practice:

> *La seconde chose que le Matire doit observer, est de faire d'abord pratiquer à son Ecolier tous les divers mouvemens dont j'ay parlé; * & de les luy faire repeter du moins pendant les premiers quinze jours, pour luy donner une forte teinture de ces principes, & cette liberté qui est si necessaire à la perfection des Armes* (69).

The asterisk refers to a note in the margin demarcating the specific chapters where the master covers this, namely Chapters II and III. Darchis translates this thus:

> The second thing that the Master must observe, is first to have the Student practise all the various movements I have talked about,* and to make him repeat them at least for the first fifteen days, to influence him strongly with these principles, and this liberty which is so necessary to perfection in the Weapons (29).

This second rule is preceded only by Liancour's recommendation for the *fleuret* or foil that master and student should use (71-72; Darchis 29). As his second rule of six that a

true master must know (71; 29), he presents the five principles as the foundation of study.

Returning to the plate, the first figure is seen in what we might call "the draw," that is body effaced, right shoulder forward, left hand on the scabbard, right ready to draw the weapon, and front foot and face towards the opponent. Liancour refers to this first image as how one is to put "sword in the hand:"

> *Cette Planche contient cinq Figures, dont la premiere represente la premiere action que l'on doit faire pour mettre l'Epée à la main. Elle est tournée de cette manière, en éfaçant le corps, tournant un peu le pied droit & la hanche, regardant de demy-face son enemy, tenant de la main gauche le fourreau, & de la droite la poignée, posant le poulce auprés de la garde & du côté du plat de l'Epée, asin d'estre aussin-tôt prest à la tirer* (7; 3).

Darchis translates this as

> The plate contains five images, the first of which represents the action that has to be made to put the Sword in the hand. It is turned in this manner, withdrawing the body, slightly turning the right foot and the hip, looking at one's opponent in a near profile, holding the scabbard with the left hand and the handle of the right hand, putting the thumb near the hilt, <u>bearing it high in a position to give a hit on the head if need be</u> (3).

Darchis' translation, I suspect, suffered a glitch and melded the next sentence (the underlined section) into this first one when writing in Word or creating the pdf. It is also possible that the translator may have missed the <u>last clause</u> of the first line, but

given that both sentences are truncated I suspect this is a computer issue. Lynch provides this last clause in their translation (16). My own translation is a little different:

> This plate contains five figures, the first of which represents the first action one makes to put the sword in hand. It is made in this manner, by effacing the body, turning the right foot and hip a little, looking at the enemy half-face, holding the scabbard in the left hand, and the handle/grip in the right, putting the thumb near the hilt and on the flat side of the Sword in order to be ready to draw it immediately.

There is a sense of urgency to this description—Liancour suggests a first movement that one might even adopt if surprised.

This significance for the first figure is that it is a preliminary ready stance. It makes sense—turning the body weapon-side first, hand to weapon, feet prepared to move, all make it that much easier to go into guard. The second figure, importantly, adds additional insurance to this ready stance by adding the first species of footwork, a cross-step back with the lead foot:

> *Elle est dans toute sa force pour lâcher le pied droit derriere le gauche, comme il paroist dans la seconde Figure, qui aprésavoir tiré l'Epée du fourreau, l'élève en forme de parade d'estramaçon, pour estramaçonner en case de besoin; car en voulant tirer l'Epée, l'on peut ester trop prés de son ennemy* (7).
>
> Then make a great movement which leaves the right foot behind the left as is seen in the second figure. Having drawn the sword from the sheath, we raise it as for a broadsword [*estramacon*] parry, ready to deal a blow with the edge in

case of need, for in wanting to draw the sword one may be too close to the enemy (Lynch, 16).[16]

The pass back with the lead foot and the drawing of the sword into a head-parry happen simultaneously.[17] The justification for this is that such a parry might cast aside any blow coming at one *as* one steps into guard. Further support for this supposition is the fact that Liancour remarks that one might be too close to the enemy to draw easily, so a step back provides space while at the same time blocking anything as one does so. Inherently, this action speaks more to a self-defense situation than salle fencing. Unlike many treatises, Liancour does not preface this section with an explanation of the salute, something we might expect were he referring only to salle play.[18]

With the third figure we see what Liancour called his "ordinary guard" (*la garde ordinaire*). The left/rear foot is about two shoe-lengths (*deux semelles*) behind the right:

La troisiéme Figure en cette Planche, est la garde ordinaire. Il faut mettre le pied gauche dans l'espace de deux semelles ou environ, derriere le droit, comme on voit la situation, de

[16] As Maxime Chouinard pointed out, *Elle est dans toute sa force* is literally "it is in full strength"—his suggestion for translation is "it is then in the strongest position to send the right foot behind the left one."
[17] Students of smallsword will recognize the *espadon* parry from works such as Girard. Maxime Chouinard greatly aided me in interpreting this parry. It recalls sabre manuals and perhaps especially Joseph Charlemont's work on la canne. This parry has the hand more forward, the point oriented backward, a position that makes great sense as it is more or less just as one draws the sword, only higher. Liancour remarks that other masters might have one use first or other guards/parries, but that he thinks this one is the best.
[18] We know that Liancour had both salle fencing and self-defense in mind, as he more than once makes a distinction between them. One stand-out example is Liancour's comments about counterattacks. He advises one not to tempt them in actual combat, but that they are fine for the salle. See Ch. VI. See also Deboeuf, 54-55. See especially Serge Vaucelle, "Jeu de combat & jeu de salle: mutations des jeux martiaux et naissance de l'éthique sportive dans l'escrime française," in Frédéric Heuser, et al, eds., *Éthique, sports de combats & arts martiaux*, PUT1 Capitole, Toulouse, 2013, 4.

laquelle vous commencerez un grand pas pour aller à vostre ennemy, comme l'on peut remarquer dans cette quatriéme Figure (8).

The third figure in this plate, is in the ordinary guard. Place the left foot in the space of two shoe-soles or thereabouts, behind the right, as you see fit, from which you will make a large step to go towards your enemy, as you see in this fourth Figure.

From this brief description Liancour then immediately shifts to describe his fourth figure. If we examine the plate (see below) we will note that the positioning of Figure 4 suggests nothing about movement. It is much like the third figure, the ordinary guard, and may be the same. With images one cannot be sure of accuracy, but in this case it is clear that in comparing the fourth and fifth figures, only the latter suggests movement.[19]

[19] We similar depictions in a number of treatises, including but not limited to J.F. Girard's *Traité des Armes*, 1740, p. 28, plate 14, where he discusses gaining measure, and on p. 30, plate 15, where he discusses breaking measure (one might add that similar steps are used in his salute, plates 2-4); in Le Perche, *L'Exercice des Armes*, 1750, sections 4 and 5 and depicted in the plate just before section 4; and in Juan Nicolas Perinat's *Arte de Esgrimir Floret y Sable*, 1758, plate 2, where he discusses approaching and retreating from the enemy, 2.

Further proof that the description of the fourth figure belongs with the fifth image is that Liancour expands upon and explains the steps involved to make the pass, the very action Figure 5 appears to be making:

> *Elle avance le pied gauche devant le droit, élevant & portant son Epée, en avançant la main la premiere, au devant de soy, en tournant la main de Quarte, éfaçant fort le côté gauche, roidissant les deux jambes, sur tout sans les ployer, crainte de perdre ses forces, parceque le corps estant à plomb sur la jambe de devant, quand mesme vous seriez surpris en marchant à grand pas, vous seriez en état de vous deffendre, de même que si vous estiez en garde. Mais ceux qui auront un peu de connoissance des Armes, ne le feront pas dans la mesure; car en avançant l'autre pied, vous vous trouveriez trop prés de vostre ennemy* (8).

The English reads as follows:

> Then advance the left foot in front of the right, elevating and pointing your sword, advancing the hand out first, in front of you, as you turn the hand to fourth, strongly effacing your left side, extending[20] both legs, most of all not bending them for fear of losing power, because the body being balanced on the front leg, even when/if you are surprised while lunging, you will be in a state to defend yourself just as if you were in guard. Those who have a little knowledge of Arms will not do it in the measure, because by advancing the other foot you will find yourself too close to the enemy.

In like vein, the description of Figure 5 matches better what we see in Figure 4. Liancour is brief in this explanation, but it is clear that he has the fourth image in mind: *La Figure cinquiéme represente la garde que l'on doit tenir d'ordinaire pour attaquer & pour se deffendre.* (9). "The fifth figure represents the guard that one must usually maintain to attack and defend oneself."

Conclusion

For students of historical fencing, it may be useful to write out each of Liancour's Five Principles in proper order, and place the images in the correct sequence (see below). However, so long as they are aware that the text and images do not correspond one-hundred percent, and realize that the descriptions of Figures 4 and 5 need to be switched, they will be less likely to fall into error. The example here also reminds us that as good as a master may have been, sometimes mistakes made their way into the

[20] *Roidir* is an older spelling of *raidir*, "to stiffen; make stiff." In this context we might supply "stretching" or "straightening" the leg; in combination with his warning not to have the legs too bent, the idea is an easy cross-step.

text and slipped past editors (if they had them), and thus we must be that much more careful and diligent in our reading and interpretations.

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The Five Principles in Correct Order:

First

Second

Third

Fourth

Fifth