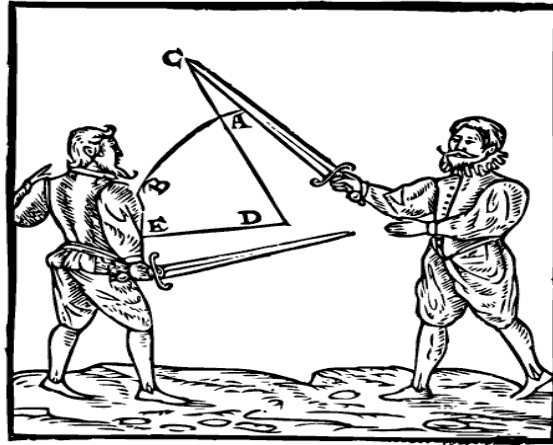


Fighting by the Book of Arithmetic



In the late 1500s the English fighting style taught by the English Masters of Defence was holding fast to an old school tradition of cutting with the side of the weapon (blows). The new-fangled foreign style—particularly the Italian—claimed the “thrust” (the use of the point) to be superior and began developing attacks, parries and footwork based on mathematical principles (complementary moves). The Italian Fight Master Rocco Bonetti once bragged he could “hit anie Englishman with a thrust upon anie button.” Mercutio echoes this statement when mocking Tybalt:

*More than prince of cats, I can tell you. O, he is
the courageous captain of compliments. He fights as
you sing prick-song, keeps time, distance, and
proportion; rests me his minim rest, one, two, and
the third in your bosom: the very butcher of a silk
button, a duellist, a duellist; a gentleman of the
very first house, of the first and second cause:
ah, the immortal passado! the punto reverso! the
hai!*

Along with the *passado*, the *punta reverse* and the *hai*, Mercutio mentions another Italian term the *stoccata*:

*O calm, dishonourable, vile submission;
Alla stoccata carries it away!*

Except for the *hai* (also spelled *hay*, *hey*) the other terms are well documented in period fencing manuals. The *hai* is not. Editors often note this term to be a curse or the sound made when a thrust has hit its target. Yes—but that seems to raise the fighting status of Tybalt rather than continuing the mock. I became very curious about this “*hai*” and discovered what I think to be an explanation more in line with Mercutio’s physical lampoonery and have offered this choice to directors and actors as an option for the scene.

THE HAY!

Mercutio: ...Ah, the immortal pasado, the punto reverso, the Hay.

Benvolio: The what?

**Mercutio: The pox of such antic, lispng, affecting fantasticoes;
These new tuners of accents!**

The New Cambridge Edition explains that since this (the hay) is the earliest citation in OED, it is more than likely a new term to Benvolio so he questions it. The above punctuation (some editions place exclamation points after each term) could allow Benvolio to be questioning all three terms, but most editions support that the question is direct toward the *hay*. Most editions also note that Mercutio is responding with a curse, rather than an answer, i.e.: the plague upon such behavior, the plague take these fantasticoes (the Elizabethan "of" can = on). Even though punctuation may vary, most editions support this "plague upon/plague take" interpretation of the term/terms (and the people and behavior associated with them).

Because Mercutio is usually juggling several levels of word play, perhaps a few more possibilities can be considered. The word pox, for example, was commonly used for venereal disease. Bawdy quibbles have already been introduced in lines 18-24 (Catso and prick-song), so the deadly thrust of the hay could certainly be sexual. This deadly thrust image also carries over to the later line: "Alla stoccata carries it away" (as a side note I should mention that I have used this thrust as the fatal move Tybalt executes on Mercutio). Lines 26-32 continue this allusion: pox, affecting (affected, afflicted,, inflicting, inflicted), good blade, tall man, good whore, afflicted, strange flies (foreign, disease carrying parasites), bones (bons, bone-ache = venereal disease; a reference to the malady of France may be found in Henry V).

Employing the pox theme, allows Mercutio to answer Benvolio's question with the explanation that this foreign behavior and speech is the disease of the fantasticoes - - a disease that we are all exposed to ("Why, is not this a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should be thus afflicted ..."). Playing the plosive sounds of words such as *passado*, *punto*, *pox*, *pardona-meas*, *bones*, *bones* all present wonderful spitting, spewing and pshawing opportunities for Mercutio followed by a full release of breathe (expelling/expiration) on the hay.

The First through Fourth Quartos and the First Folio do not capitalize the terms "passado" or "punto reverso", but they do capitalize the word "Hay" (capitalization usually meant emphasis, but was also used for names of people places, etc.). The First through Fourth Quartos and the first Folio use the Italian for the pasado and the punto reverso, but the Italian "hai" is not used in any edition until 1857 (White). Perhaps Shakespeare used the English spelling intentionally. Why? One definition for the English 'hay' can be found in dance manuals of the period. I have found no source that supports the use of this word-play as a possibility, other than Shakespeare (or whoever) wrote 'hay' and not 'hai' and, according to the Schmidt Lexicon, Shakespeare also used "Hay" (in capitalized form) to mean a dance/dance figure ten years earlier in *Love's Labor's Lost*.

As a dance figure, the hay was traditionally performed by Morris Dancers. These dancers, costumed in ribbons and bells, performed intricate dance figures while twirling handkerchiefs and/or exchanging blows with short wooden sticks or swords. The hay was a serpentine figure and the term was often used to describe dances that would wind around or among people or objects. One dance called the Hay de Guise was in vogue during the late 16th century and the early 17th century.

The physicalization of this dance figure following Mercutio's demonstration of the sword fighting pasado (thrust with a walking step) and the punto reverse (a circular movement) would be a perfect build to transition from fight figure to dance figure. And Mercutio's next line: "the pox of such antic, lispings, affecting fantasticoes" ... would help prod Benvolio's question and make comment on both the convoluted fight patterns being taught in the fencing schools and the affected behavior of those practicing this style.

In *Orchesographie*, Arbeau describes some of the footwork of the Morris Dancer:

Morris dances are performed in duple time. Originally they were executed by striking the feet together, but because the dancers found this too painful they tried striking the heels only while keeping the toes rigid. Others wished to dance them marque talons intermixed. The practise of any of these three methods, especially the one involving tapping the feet, has proven by experience to lead eventually to podagra and other gouty affections, wherefore this dance has fallen into disuse.

The Morris Dance may have fallen into disuse, but not the dance figure known as the hay nor dances such as The Hay Branle. Arbeau attempts to describe the hay to his pupil. It is the complicated instructions and convoluted patterning that, I believe, Mercutio is referencing when he physically escalates from sword play to dance play; from the pasado to the punto reverso to the hay.

Capriol: I do not fully understand what you tell me about this hay.

*Arbeau: You will understand it quite easily thus. Suppose there are three dancers, which is the minimum number there can be, and think of them as represented by the letters **A**, **B** and **C**.*

A B C

*In the first four steps of the hay **A** and **B** change places, passing to their left, then in the second four steps **A** and **C** change places, passing to their right, so they are now placed as you see here:*

B C A

*This done **B** and **C** change places as above, then **B** and **A** do likewise so that in the third four steps of the hay they will be disposed thus: **C A B***

*In the four following steps **C** changes places with **A**, then the said **C** with **B** and thus they find themselves placed as they were in the beginning. **A B C***

Capriol: If perchance there were more than three dancers would they still change places in the manner you have just indicated?

*Arbeau: One might conclude so but you must have regard to what I am about to tell you. Suppose the dancers to be seven in number **A**, **B**, **C**, **D**, **E**, **F** and **G**. When **A** who is first has changed with **B** who is second and when the said **A** has also changed with **B** who is second and when the said **A** has also changed with **C**, who is third, and is about to change with **D** who is fourth, then **B** who is now first must begin to hay and change places with **C** who is now second and so on.*

*Capriol: From what you say, I gather that **C** is now the first and so he must begin his hay by changing with **D** who is now second at the same moment that **B** changes and makes the hay with **E** who is now fourth and so on accordingly.*

