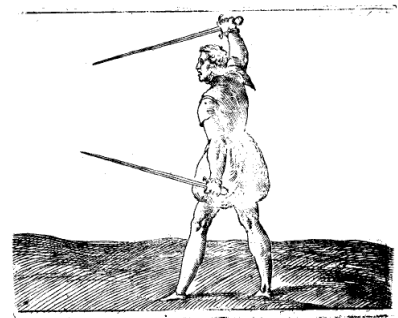


Stage Combat on the Elizabethan Stage



Stage Directions:

Surely one of the most disappointing aspects of reading or studying Shakespeare's plays remains those pesky incomplete stage directions. Shakespeare, for instance, provided surprisingly few. While directors make choices, sometimes counter to our expectations or wishes, editors add helpful emendations in order to assist the reader better to understand the action, bracketing the directions in order to distinguish them from those of the dramatist.¹ However helpful they appear, one has but to pay close attention to the text in order to understand when and where these actions occur, given that Elizabethan stage directions appear internally within the text, so that the poetry not only expresses a mood, an instant emotion, a setting, or a scenic portrait of what we should see, but served to inform players as to what to do, where to stand, or when to enter or exit, in order to perform or to understand all the previous.



Apparently, stage rehearsals and preparations became rushed affairs in order to get the "product," never confused with "art," to reach the paying public as quickly as possible. In the repertory system, considered plays were usually read at the tavern or other locals at night, new, accepted works rehearsed during the mornings, and current plays performed in the afternoons. And, we should add to this that companies had at least three plays "on the boards" for performance during the week.

All of the above, with internal stage directions or those frustratingly brief *written* indications, matter more than most of us realize. Equally as frustrating, in many of Shakespeare's plays—and most especially the tragedies—appears in the direction "they fight," a brief indication of where "something" appears, but we know not what. For directors and those who appreciate Shakespeare even while reading, we imagine more than the tentative thrusts of wooden or cheap metal swords of two or more actors "representing" a fight scene. In Shakespeare's day, even though poets represented large masses of armies by a few players, individual fights became the stuff of conversation long after the performance ended. Just as we imagine the apprentices, penny-public, or even gentles leaving the playhouse recollecting those lines of poetry, mulling select phrases over again and again, re-speaking and savoring ripe phrases with their sack and wine in pubs, so too the fights they witnessed would often bring them back to the playhouse as they yielded their pennies for an afternoon's entertainment.

Crowd Appreciation:

Even more than the poetry, fights held special attraction for the common crowds, because the audience not only recollected but *anticipated* this stage combat. Consider the importance of Hamlet's contest with Laertes, as it reveals

much about the two combatants and how Hamlet will reconcile his divided loyalties as either a flagellum dei, a “Scourge of God” (a damned soul destined and used to bring justice into the world by God), or as a “Minister of God” (one appointed, saved, and an indicator of the hand of God’s ever-present justice prior to the Judgment). For Hamlet, he may represent one, the other, or both—wondering how he’s part of God’s plan to reconcile injustices—but in what capacity? In other words, can the death of the innocent yet foolish Polonius figure into a plan for Hamlet’s obedience to God, or does Hamlet’s murder of the counselor, coupled with Laertes “right” to revenge, reveal Hamlet’s lost condition? Oddly enough, such a complexity finally gives his mind peace, as he speaks of Providence and God’s hand in all prior to the “contest.”²

With such importance placed upon the scene, we must acknowledge that the combat remains preeminent: so, with such magnitude, *how* did they fight? *What* did they do, *how* would it appear, and *how long* did it take? With unfortunate directional brevity, we have only “they fight.” So now consider that Shakespeare realizes how important this contest remains to his action, yet the time for such consideration remains all too short: show it as the high point of the work: on the road, in the playhouse, or at Court—but get the money, get them talking, and move on to the next crowd-pleaser.

A Love For Violence:

Within the city, the courtyard area of St. Paul’s served for public executions, such as that of Father Garnet (who took the alias Mr. Farmer), the infamous “equivocator” of the Porter’s speech concerning hell; here, years earlier, Londoners had celebrated the defeat of the Spanish armada sent against them, and here they rejoiced at the death of traitors. Public executions became holiday events, travelers on London Bridge passed rotting heads, and felons or offenders to the Crown bore marks of branding, cropped ears, noses, or worse. By all accounts and by any standard, the age represented one of brutality, spectacle, and an appreciate for both.

Everyone seemed to love fencing and fighting, from the queen to the lowly apprentice. With the right to own and bear arms long established in England, from the early 12th century, folks were *required* to own a weapon according to their position and station in life. Certain kinds of arms remained prohibited, and because London had no standing police force, officials forbade large congregations, except for church and sanctioned events. The record of apprentices going well beyond the bounds of civility and social norms bears this out, with one “outbreak” taking as long as months to bring under control. After attending a play, they destroyed the playhouse and its properties, only to branch out beyond the City, growing wilder and bolder in significant numbers. When finally put down, most faced the most extreme of executions, which decimated the ranks of soon-to-be-skilled workers and craftsmen.

How were the fights choreographed? No descriptions exist. In very little time, fights would have to be staged in addition to the other stage action. Perhaps prizefights were interspersed in plays as breaks in the action, or preceded or followed the plays. Stage fights probably looked like dramatized prize fights. More than 20 Masters of Fence were teaching in London in Shakespeare’s day. Richard Burbage

(lead tragedian in Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlains'/Kings' Men) may have invited his Master to come into the theatre to help stage the fights on stage, but no evidence exists to support any of these conjectures. It may be safer to assume that the actors choreographed the fights they were involved in, using what they had learned from Masters.

On the stage, a logical sequence of violent actions that tell a clear story is necessary. The image of the fight is everything—it must be poetized so as not to appear humorous. All fighting looks humorous if it were not for the serious intent. Each character would fight in a particular fashion: combative skills, character, mood, reason, etc., must enter in. What are the limitations and the skills of those involved? Of the space? Maximum effect with the minimum of effort is essential.

Fighters must go for the vulnerable areas of the opponent and the element of surprise is essential. One must take advantage of space—backing one against a pillar or door, for example, or going for height, such as a table or chair. No one fought on a straight line, but would work for the weak side of the opponent.

To gain an advantage over an opponent, one would consider time or tempo (each movement has an increment of time), space, and the physique of the opponent.

A stock number of moves were probably drawn upon by Burbage, which were then changed by perspective. Sound—groaning, etc.—is equally important for creating an illusion.

Mathematical computations based on size and the lengths of one's body were diagrammed on the floor by the Spanish for their salons. Five feet was the common length for a rapier.

Passing and blocking actions would often purposely grab the hand or wrist of the opponent, which would then cause the other to move closer and do the same; thus they would disarm one another and switch weapons.

Defense was most often moving forward in parrying and attacking--*not* by retreating. Creating a posture was called a "ward": an opening posture prior to the fight.

"*Punta reverso*" is a thrust from the left side (as mentioned in Romeo and Juliet). A "*Fleche*" (which means "arrow") is a running attack.

In Hamlet, the combatants would undoubtedly aim between neck and waist, which would be proper etiquette in a match; but as it continues they go for legs, which would indicate the increased intensity of the fight and its nastiness.

Moves of the fencer:

1) *Parry one* (coming out of the scabbard to block)

2) *Parry two* (to the outside right)

3) *Parry three* (above right)

One could strike with the dagger or the pummel; anything counts as a "hit." In Hamlet, however, the private duel rules are for points and the dagger doesn't count as a "point"—only the rapier (check the character Osric for the rules of the match)

By 1623, the nobility dropped the dagger and used on a single weapon in a match.

In staged fighting, the sound should come *after* the technique, never *on* for proper effect.