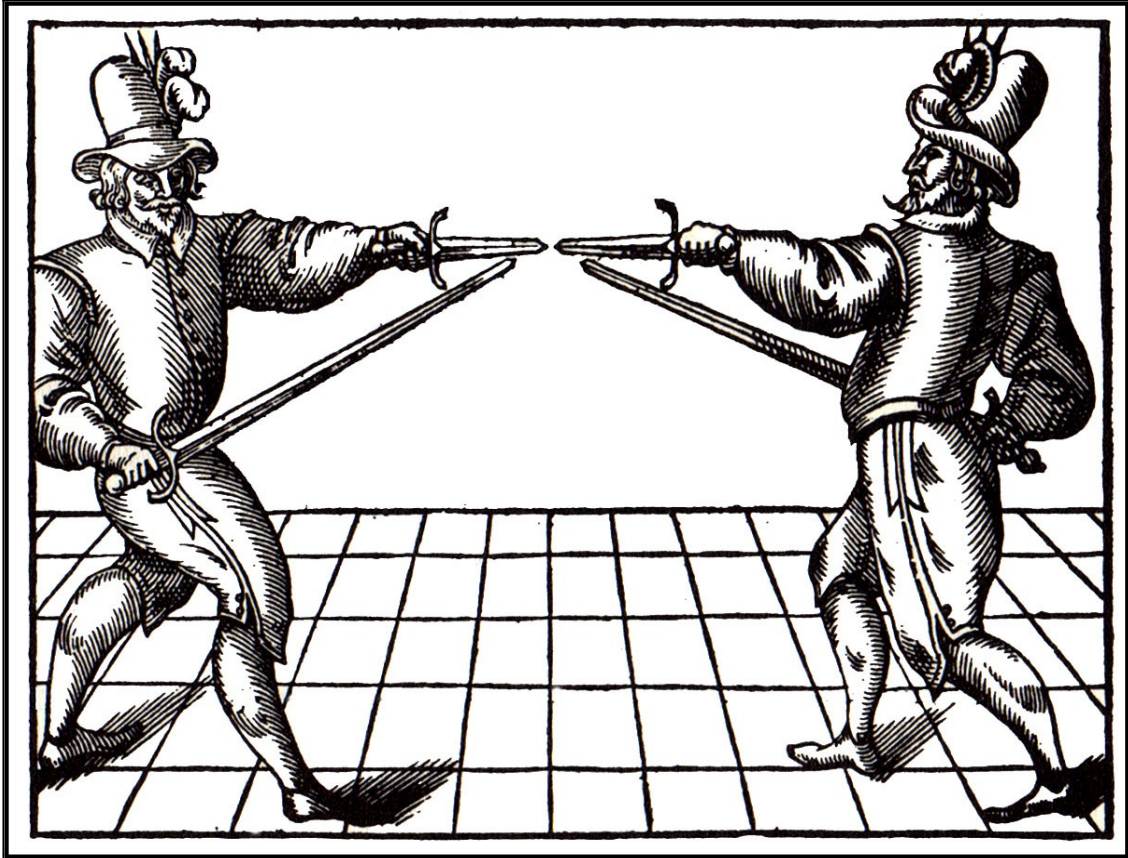


STRANGER 929

An attempt at a brief biography of Vincentio Saviolo

Chris Chatfield



EARLY YEARS
THE SOLDIER
MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGN
TRAVELS, COMPANIONS & CAMPAIGNS
ENGLAND
“HIS PRACTISE”
LOVE & DEATH
LITERARY REFERENCES
JERONIMO
A CURIOUS FOOTNOTE

Vincentio Saviolo, by his own account, was born in the northern Italian city of Padua. Famous for its university (the second oldest in Italy, after Bologna, and founded in 1222 by students and teachers who had fled from thence) Padua had, after a long struggle to maintain its independence, become annexed to the rising power of the Venetian Republic in 1405. The Saviolo/Saviola/Saviolla family were a long established clan from the region belonging to the gentlemanly caste known as *Armageri* (those entitled to bear heraldic arms). In the 1700s an academy was opened in the city for the sons of the Paduan noble families, where they could learn the gentlemanly pursuits of riding, dancing and, among other activities, fencing. During the years of the seventeenth century the Saviolo family was still to be found represented there.

EARLY YEARS

As yet, no date of birth has been confirmed for Saviolo but a reasonable guess would be sometime between the 1540s and 1550s. The age into which he was born was a belligerent and aggressive one. As a satellite of the Venetian Republic, the sons of Padua were expected to take an active part in the defence and expansion of the Empire. Venice had many enemies and, apart from their traditional rivalries with other Italian states, there was the constant threat of war with France, the Hapsburg powers and the ever-present menace of the Ottoman Turks.

War and personal violence were an accepted and necessary part of everyday life, as was skill in arms.

“I remember that I being a youth, a freend of mine sonne to a Trumpet that was in pay under the Capitaines of the signorie of Venice, was with a certaine cosin of his set upon by eleven other young men that were their enemies, which his mother perceiving, took a Partisan in her hands, and defended her sonne and cosin, and sorely wounding five of their enemies made the rest to flye.”

The city of Padua was well known for its fencing schools. In an age of perpetual conflict the men from this area of Italy were noted for their swordsmanship. Apart from Saviolo, Alfieri and Salvador Fabris are among the city's other famous sword masters. Fabris (1544-1618), Saviolo's contemporary, shares some similarity in his use of footwork (though, it could be argued, the form and function of their respective styles is greatly different). Both travelled widely; Fabris from court to court, whilst Saviolo seems to have campaigned across the continent as a soldier and/or part of a military retinue. Over time, both developed their own respective and distinctive systems, but perhaps an idiosyncrasy of the training of their youth remained. Possibly a defining feature of the “Paduan School” of fence was, in part, their particular use of footwork.

“...I have learned from the most rare and renowned professors that have bin of this Art in my time...’ The young Saviolo seems to have delighted in the study of arms: „Since my childhoode I have seene verie many masters the which have taken great paines in teaching me...”

Who these masters were we have no way of knowing but, whoever they were, they instilled in Vincentio a lifelong passion for the study and practice of the art of arms. The only master of Fence that Saviolo gives name to in “His Practise” is that of *Maestro Angelo of Alezza*, who held his school in Padua, the city of Saviolo's birth. Saviolo recounts the tragic tale of how Angelo raises a nephew from infancy and teaches him his trade, only for

the ungrateful wretch to run off and set up his own school, filching at the same time all the students that he can from his uncle and thereby, in effect, stealing from him his livelihood. The nephew is confronted by one of Angelo's remaining loyal students, "*a gentleman who was his scholler and loved him entirely*", and in the ensuing argument the nephew is run through and slain. Saviolo comments:

"And if all unthankfull and treacherous men were so served after the same sorte, I thinke there would not be found so many, and truly of all vices I take this unthankfullnesse to be one of the greatest that is incident to man."

Of course, Saviolo was a master of Fence himself and one of the greatest (and probably most common) problems for men of this profession was for a prize student, thinking that they have learnt more than enough, to set up on their own and thereby steal away part of an already small market. Perhaps Saviolo had been a student of Master Angelo, or perhaps he was simply recounting a famous incident. Whichever, the life of a fencing master was inevitably fraught with peril.

Whether or not it relates to the same incident, in 1573 an English agent working in Venice reported back to his superiors that: "*In Padua one Tappa, a famous master of fence, has been slain by a Frenchman.*"¹

As the son of a gentlemanly family there would most certainly have been military obligations to fulfil and it would seem most probable for the youthful Saviolo to have served in the military of the Venetian Republic. The alternative is that, for whatever reason or reasons, he set out on his own and, as many a young man had done before him, went a-soldiering. The one clear lead that we have is that by the late 1570s he was to be found in the service of the army of the Holy Roman Empire. The only military commander under whom Saviolo categorically states that he served with is one Earle Rimondo of Torre, "*... with whome I have served in warres when he was Coronell of certaine companies of the Emperours in Croatia, against the Turkes, at which time the Christians had as famous a victorie*".

Raymondo VI Della Torre (1546?-1623) was a staunch servant of the Holy Roman Empire. Examining his career, we see that he was made Captain of Gorizia in 1565, Counsellor of the Duke of Styria and Carinthia in 1569, created Reichgraf (Imperial Count) in 1572, and was the Empire's ambassador to Venice during 1593 and 1594 and to Rome in 1598. The composer Giovanni Croce dedicated his book of choir motets to Della Torre in 1594, either for the annual commemoration of the battle of Lepanto (1571) or to celebrate the Hapsburg victory at the battle of Sisak (1593). Della Torre's first marriage (an incident that Saviolo recounts in his second book) was to Ludovika Hofer, daughter and heiress of Mattheaus Hofer von Hoenfels, Lord of Duino Castle (which he left to his daughters on his death in 1587), Ranzaino, Castagnavizza and Raunizza. Della Torre assumed the surname "Thurn-Hoffer und Valsassina Novella" soon after. On the death of Ludovika, he married (with papal dispensation) her sister, Maria Clara. Saviolo's anecdote tells of the story of Raimondo's betrothal to his first wife, though perhaps he knew the outcome of the tale for he recounts: "*Lord Mathew, (who had two verie excellent proper gentlewomen to his daughters)...*"

1. Collection of State Papers: Venice

THE SOLDIER

It would seem that over time Saviolo learnt his chosen profession well. In 1591 John Florio gave the following description of Vincentio: “*Yes hee hath good skill in everie kinde of weapon, hee shootes well in a peece, he shootes well in great ordinance, and besides he is a verie excellent good souldier.*”

The nations of Europe, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, were in a near constant state of conflict. Anyone wishing to sell their sword on the field of war would not be short of opportunities. Florio’s observation indicates that Saviolo had admirably met the challenge of acquiring the skills that were essential for the advancement of the professional soldier of the sixteenth century.

But where exactly did he learn his trade?

THE MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGN (1570-71)

In 1570 Pope Pius V formed a “Holy League” of Christian states (comprising of forces from Spain, Venice, the Papal State, Genoa, various other Italian States and the Knights of Malta) to halt the expansion and aggressions of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean. Whether Saviolo participated in this particular struggle we cannot say one way or the other, but what is clearly evident is that he shows a deep familiarity with individual actions and an in-depth knowledge of the commanders, captains and soldiers who made their names during this particular conflict. A high proportion of the anecdotes recounted in “His Practise” deal with the characters and engagements of the Holy League.

The campaign reached a climax with the Battle of Lepanto on the 7th October 1571. The conflict was the last great galley battle and one of the most famous and bloody engagements of the sixteenth century. The Christian fleet, under the command of the brilliant (and tragically romantic) Don John of Austria, confronted and defeated the might of the Ottoman navy – though soon after the battle the Ottomans were to remark to a Venetian ambassador concerning their respective losses at Cyprus and Lepanto that “*In wrestling Cyprus from you we have cut off an arm. In defeating our fleet you have shaved our beard. An arm once cut off will not grow again, but a shorn beard grows back all the better for the razor.*”²

Saviolo references Don John, the Holy League and its commanders – including the famous condottieri Ascanio della Cornia, the League’s Field Master General, who was released from prison by the Pope especially for the occasion, despite being held on charges of murder, rape and the “*use of torture*”. Saviolo also displays a knowledge of the Ottoman commanders Ulich Ali Pasha [Allibasa] and Kara Khodja [Carracossa] and of the weapons used by the Turks. While it is possible that this knowledge might have been read or even picked up in conversation with those who had been there, it is not inconceivable that at least some of it was first-hand experience. Interestingly, even though the army was most definitely multinational in its make-up, Saviolo refers to the conflict as the “*Venetian’s war with the Turks*”.

2. “Empires of the Sea.” Roger Crowley. 2013.

TRAVELS, COMPANIONS & CAMPAIGNS

By his own account, Saviolo was widely travelled. And if we cannot know his exact progress then perhaps we can begin to know him by the company that he kept and the places that he visited. The following first-hand anecdotes taken from "His Practise" offer a rare and fascinating glimpse into the lives of Saviolo and men of his ilk.

"I have seen and noted in diverse partes of mine own countrie and in other parts of the world, great quarrels springing from small causes, and many men slayne uppon light occasions. Amongst other things I remember that in Liessena a citie of Sclavonia, it was once my chance to see a sodaine quarrel and slaughter uppon very small cause between two Italian captaines of great familiaritie and acquaintance. There was in the companie a foolish boy belonging unto one of the Captaines, who going carefully forward, & approching neere unto the other captaine, began to touch the hilts of his sword, whereupon the Captaine lent the boy a little blow to teach him better maners : The other Captaine (the boies master) taking this reprehension of his boy in worse parte than there was cause, after some wordes multiplyed began to drawe his sword, the other Captaine in like sort betaking himselfe to his rapier did with a thrust run him quite through the bodie, who falling down dead uppon the place received the just reward of his frivolous quarrell."

"Whereof I have my selfe seene a notable example, passing through the Citie of Trieste, in the uttermost part of the territories of Friule in Italy, wher I sawe two bretheren, one a most honorable Captaine, and the other a brave and worthie souldier, who walking together in the streetes, were verie stedfastly eied of certaine young Gentlemen of the Citie, who stared the Captaine and his brother in the face something unseemely, and (as they took it) discourteouslie : wherupon they asked the Gentlemen in verie curteous manner, whether they knew them. They answered no. Then replied the Captaine and his brother, Why then doo you looke so much upon us? They aunswered, because they had eies. That (sayd the other) is the crows fault, in that they have not picked them out. To bee short, in the end one word added on the other, and one speech following the other, the matter came from saying, to doing : and what the tung had uttered the hand would maintaine : and a hot fight being commenced, it could not be ended before the Captaines brother was slaine, and two of the gentlemen hurt, whereof one escaped with the rest, but the cheefest cutter of them all was hurt in the legge, and so could not get away, but was taken, imprisoned, and shortly after beheaded : he was very well beloved in the Cittie, but yet could not escape his end."

"I have my selfe knowen in Countries beyond the seas, two Capitaines, the one named Faro, the other Montarno de Garda, the Lord of Mandlot, governour of Leon met together, wherof the one trecherouslie minded, prayed the other to shew whether he was not privily armed : whereupon as soone as Captain Montarno had opened his doublet, he presently ranne him through, and seeing him fall down dead (as hee thought) on the ground, returned into the citie with counterfeit glorie, as if he had done wonders, until by hap the poore Capteine was found by his friends yet living, to bewraie the other Capitaines vilanie. Satisfaction done to one in Burgandie, by death for his insolencie."

“A Certaine quarrel rose betwixt two souldiers which I knew very well, one a Norman of Roan called James Luketo, a man very wel experienced in armes, who falling into some words with the other (being at Geneua) gave him a boxe on the ear, wherupon he answered Luketo, that because hee knewe him to have great skill in his weapon, which he had not, but beeing a souldier would fight, and challenged him for to meete him with his peece, and going to the Generall of the armye, obtained leave for the open fielde with his consent and the other commaunders : who were present at the action, and seeing that many discharges passed betwixt them, and yet neither of them tooke any hurt, suffered them to charge their peeces no more, but sought to reconcile them againe, and make friends : whereupon it was agreed of both partes, that he of Geneua, to whom the boxe on the eare was given by Luketo, should in presence of the Generall and other Captains of the armie, strike Lucheto on the shoulder, and say I am satisfied, wee will be freends. But the Souldier of Geneua being of stout stomacke, when hee came to doe as it was concluded, tooke Luketo a sound blow on the eare, which Luketo taking for a great injurie beeing in that presence, and against the order set downe, drew his sworde presently and ranne him through, and so slew him out of hand, justly rewarding him for his insolencie.”

“Being in Ravenna, I sawe in one of the Churches the carved image of a Ladie, who, being wife to a Gentleman that was cheefe of the house Rasponi had ever in her life time accompanied her husband in all his warres, and achived immortall fame by her prowess and valour.”

[The lady in question was most probably Giovanna Fabri who became head of the powerful Rasponi clan of Ravenna after the death of her husband Teseo. She died sometime between 1557 and 1565. There was a statue of her (unfortunately no longer in existence) at the church of San Francesco.]

What is of note is that his acquaintances are not only soldiers, as one would expect, but, in the majority of cases, captains. (The term *Captain* was often used to describe anybody in a position of military authority.) This suggests that Saviolo was in a position – either because of his *gentlemanly status* or by his professional attainment – to know and be comfortable in such company. The names are, in the main, just fleeting shadows but we can catch the occasional glimpse of their extraordinary lives.

Very tentatively ... “*Montarno de Garda, the Lord of Mandlot, governour of Leon*” could perhaps be Francois de Mandelot, Governor of Lyons; and if this were the case it would imply that Saviolo was in France and had some connection to the French court. If so, it would have had to have been before 1586 when “*Captain Mandelot*” was killed.

As to his travels, Saviolo seem to have spent time in the buffer provinces of Friuli and Lombardy. Friule was the frontier of the Hapsburg Empire where it met and contested for dominance in Eastern Europe with the Ottoman Empire. In Saviolo’s day, Trieste was part of the Austro-Hungarian province of Carniola. In 1567 the Turks, under the veteran commander Kapudan Piali Pasha, had attacked the city. The district of Lombardy in Northern Italy served a not dissimilar function:

“The Milanese was regarded primarily as a “place d’armes”. Its strategical importance was very great indeed, for it not only linked Spain with Austria and (through the Franche Comte) with the Low Countries, but served as a barrier against French advance into Central or Southern Italy. In consequence, the Lombard towns were all strongly fortified, as were the frontiers of the Duchy. There was a permanent garrison of about five thousand Spanish infantry, besides Italian troops, which included a native

militia, for which each Lombard commune had to provide and equip its quota of recruits."³

Lastly, and most interestingly, we have Saviolo's reference to an engagement in which he participated against the Turks in Croatia:

"There were two Noblemen of account under Archduke Charles, Prince of Stiria, Carinthia, & some places in Croatia and of Fruili, who were both of the confines of Friuli, one of them being called the Earle Rimondo of Torre, with whome I have served in warres when he was Coronell of certaine companies of the Emperours in Croatia, against the Turkes, at which time the Christians had as famous a victorie, as likely hath beene heard of, by the industrie and valorous vertue of generall Pernome, and the Lord Firinbergher."

Johan Ferenberger of Auer (1511-1584) had a long record of service with the Hapsburg Empire, having sailed with the Imperial fleet under Andrea Doria in 1552 and fought with the Papal army in 1556. From humble beginnings, he worked his way through the ranks and by 1566 is recorded as commanding a small company of Tirol-enlisted troops on the borders of Croatia. Between 1578 and 1579 he was appointed as Supreme Commander of the Croatian Krajina (the "military frontier" of the Croatian border with the Ottoman Empire) to protect the region against the aggressions of the Ottoman Turk. Immediately he appears to have gone on the offensive, managing to re-conquer some towns previously taken by the Turks.

One of his captains was the young Andreas von Auesperg (1556-1593), who would in time take over Ferenberger's command and go on to earn the titles of "The Christian Achilles" and "The Terror of the Turks" at the Battle of Sisak (1593).

In 1578 came Ferenberger's most successful engagement. In the early part of that year the Ottomans attacked the town of Dreznik. Ferenberger, with "18 great guns and 7,000 soldiers"⁴ (mainly from Carinthia, Carniola, Gorizia and the Austrian part of Istria – remembering that Rimondo Della Torre, Saviolo's colonel, was Captain of Gorizia), responded, lifting the siege with such success that he "killed and captured over 900 Turks"⁵. Ferenberger would win other victories, but it would seem likely that the conflict at Dreznik is the "*famous victorie*" to which Saviolo refers.

ENGLAND

The Stranger Return

On the 6th of March 1593 the order for a census was issued to record every foreigner ("stranger") living and working within the city of London. The return was to be completed within four days. For the census the alderman of each ward were to make –

"with as great secrecy as may be ... diligent search ... within all parts in your ward what and how many foreigners are residing ... of what nation, profession, trade or occupation ... how many servants ... how long they ... have been in the realm, to what Church every of them resort, whether they keep

3. "Don John of Austria." Sir Charles Petrie.

4. German Dictionary of Biography

5. German Dictionary of Biography

*[employ] any English-born people in their houses or otherwise set them to work, or whether any of them sell [prohibited] wares ... whereby the prices of things be enhanced or Her Majesty ... decreased in customs.”*⁶

The Return contains the following entry:

929. Saviola, Vincenzia, 1; Italian, born in Venice; no occupation; no children; no stranger maid servant; dwelt in England 6 years; no denizen; of the Italian Church; keeps one English man servant and one maid servant; sets no English person to work.

By this account, Saviolo arrived in England in 1587.

The English swordsman and author George Silver, complaining about the popularity of foreign fencing instructors, wrote:

*“There were three Italian Teachers of Offence in my time. The first was Signior Rocko : the second was Jeronimo, that was Signior Rocco his boy, that taught Gentlemen in the Blacke-Fryers, as Usher for his maister in steed of a man. The third was Vincentio.”*⁷

Rocco Bonnetti was a Venetian Captain who had arrived in London around 1569 and, at some point, opened a “College” of fencing in Warwick Lane to teach the *Gentry and Nobility of England* the continental style of arms (much to the annoyance of the London Masters of Defence). Bonnetti’s salle was situated in the building that was to become the first Blackfriars theatre, and his second wife was a relation of James Burbage (father to the famous actor Richard) who owned the lease on the building. The relationship between Rocco and his wife would appear to have been a difficult one; in 1583 the French Ambassador Michel de Castelnau Mauvissiere, appealing to Sir Francis Walsingham on Bonnetti’s behalf would write:

*“There is poor Rocco Bonnetti, who on his return from Scotland as poor as Job, has repaired to me in order the sooner to tell me of his miseries and the bad turn which his wife and her bullies (ruffiens) have played him. I have [no] means to aid him except with goodwill. You may do it since you have known him here. Next to God, he looks to you for support, and thinks perhaps that my recommendation to you may be of some service to him. He has prayed me, being sick in bed and without money, to write this letter to you in his favour, to beg you to help him from your resources against these parties, and those who are keeping his goods from him, and to have granted him a Commission of gentlemen of your Council, that he may have justice against them; wherein I think that your abundant courtesy towards all men will be of more service to him than this letter.”*⁸

At the time of his second marriage in 1576 to the widow Ellen Cuttle (his first English wife, Eleanor St. John, had died a few years earlier) he appears to have been in the service of the Earl of Leicester. Apart from being an ex-military man and a teacher of fence Bonnetti was also a spy, probably first coming to England in the pay of Catherine di Medici. In 1583 he was working for Sir Francis Walsingham’s “Secret Service”, carrying letters from Scotland that would eventually be used in the uncovering of the Throckmorton

6. Irene Scouloudi (“Elizabethan London.” Liza Picard.)

7. “Paradoxes of Defence.” George Silver. 1599.

8. Calendar of State Papers Foreign vol. 17.

Plot. Worth noting is that this service came by way of recommendation from Ambassador Mauvissiere. Bonnetti died in “thospital” in 1587, the year that Saviolo seems to have arrived in England.

Was there a connection?

The most obvious one is Jeronimo. George Silver writes:

*“Then came in Vincentio and Jeronimo, they taught Rapier-fight at the Court, at London, and in the countrey, by the space of seveun or eight yeares or thereabouts.”*⁹

Jeronimo is described by Silver as the “boy” of Rocco Bonnetti, but whether he means by this that he is his son, a student or a servant is unclear.

On his arrival to England, Saviolo appears to have worked in partnership with Jeronimo. Is it possible that his reason for coming to England was to take over the ailing Bonnetti’s business as a fencing master? It would seem unlikely as Mauvissiere’s comment to Walsingham would indicate that Bonnetti’s salle was not in the rudest of health.

The first known mention that we have of Saviolo in England is by John Florio in his 1591 work “Second Frutes”. Florio (1553- 1625/6) was the son of an Italian Protestant refugee who had briefly settled in London. John studied and taught at Oxford and, in time, was to become well connected with the court, counting Robert Dudley – Earl of Leicester, Robert Devereux, – Earl of Essex and Henry Wriothesley – Earl of Southampton among his patrons. His passion was in introducing and translating texts from the Continent, especially Italy, to England.

In 1591, at the time of publication of “Second Frutes”, it is thought that Florio was in the employment of the Earl of Southampton. However, between 1583 and 1585 he had worked at the French Embassy as tutor to Mauvissiere’s daughter. Perhaps Florio had met Bonnetti during his time at the French Embassy. This might offer a connection between Rocco and Vincentio.

Working there at the same time as Florio was the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno. The two men would become great friends and it is probable that “Second Frutes” was written by Florio in part as a remembrance to his absent friend – the book contains constant reference to him. “Second Frutes” was the second of Florio’s *Dialogue manuals* (a text book for teaching Italian to Englishmen and English to Italians). In Chapter Seven, two friends – Giordano and Edward – engage in conversation as they walk through the streets of London:

“G. But to come to our purpose againe, of whome doo you learne to plaie at your weapons?”

E. Of master V.S.

G. Who, that Italian that lookes like Mars himselfe.

E. The verie same.

G. Where dwells he?

E. In the little streate, where the well is.

G. Alas we have a great waie thether yet.

E. Pardon me sir, it is but hard by. G. At what signe dwells he?

E. At the signe of the Red lyon. G. Dooth he plaie well? Hath he good skill in his weapon?

E. As much as any other man.

G. Is he valiant, and a talle man of his hands?

E. More valiant than a sword itselfe.

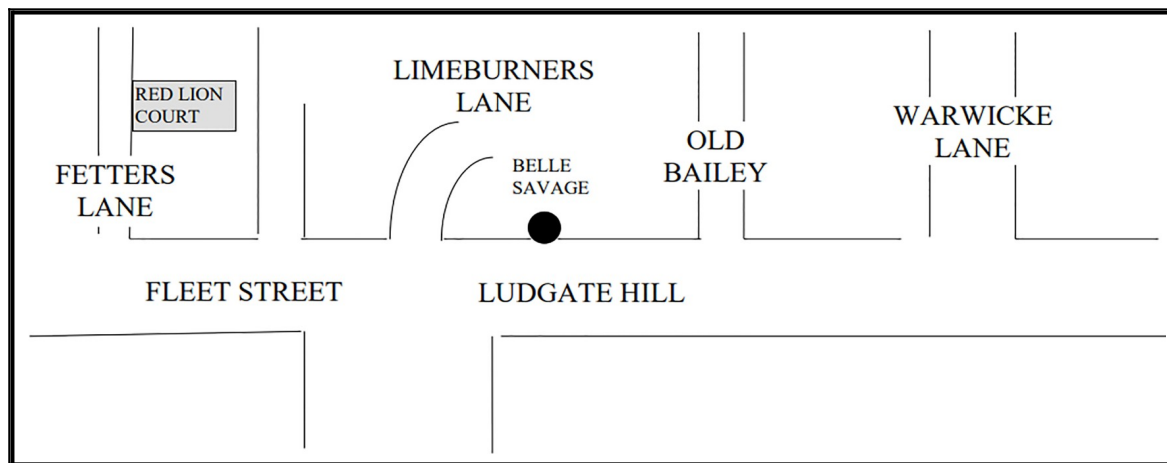
G. How much doo you give him a moneth?

9. “Paradoxes of Defence.” George Silver. 1599.

E. I have made no price with him.
G. What weapon doo you plaie at moste?
E. At rapier and dagger, or rapier and cloake.
G. The true and right gentleman-like weapons.
E. Trulie he teacheth verie well, and verie quicklie.
G. Have you learned to give a thrust?
E. Yea. And to warde it also, and I knowe alle the advantages, how a man must charge and enter upon his enemie.
G. You have spent your time verie well then.
E. I cannot tell what I should doo else.
G. What place in Italie was he borne in?
E. I take him to be a Padoan.
G. I have heard him reported to be a notable talle man.
E. Hee will hit any man, bee it with a thrust or a stoccada, with an imbriocada or a charging blowe, with a right or reverse blowe, be it with the edge, with the back, or with the flat, even as it liketh him.
G. Is he left or right handed?
E. Both, all is one to him.
G. What dooth he commonlie take a moneth?
E. But little, and there is no man, that teacheth with more dexteritie and nimblenes than he.
G. Can he doo nothing else, but plaie at fence?
E. Yes hee hath good skill in everie kinde of weapon, hee shootes well in a peece, he shootes well in great ordinance, and besides he is a verie excellent good souldier.
G. All these rare good qualities doo verie seeldome times, concur in anie one of our fencers.
E. Moreover, hee is a good dancer, hee danceth verie well, both galiards, and pavins, hee vaultes most nimble, and capers most loftily.
G. He differs verie much from other fencers.
E. Yet there are manie honest and proper men among them.
G. There may be some, but one swallowe brings not sommer, nor one divell makes not hell.
E. Is he a great quarelour, and a brawler?
G. Hee is most patient, neither dooth he goe about to revenge any injurie that is offered him, unless it touch his credit and honour verie far. E. He should bee no Italian then ...”¹⁰

So, if Florio is to be believed, by 1591 Saviolo had established a fencing salle close to the sign of the Red Lion. There still remains a Red Lion Court today, off Fleet Street and near New Fetters Lane – named after the Red Lion Tavern (first mentioned officially in 1592), which was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666). George Silver tell us that Saviolo and Jeronimo held their school of fence “a bowshot” from the Belle Savage tavern (the inn’s sign was a “savage” man standing on a bell), situated in Ludgate Hill, near today’s Lime Burner Lane. The Blackfriars Theatre is close by but not that near to the “signe of the Red lyon”, so it seems likely that Saviolo and Jeronimo were using a different site for their school.

10. “Second Frutes.” John Florio. 1591.



Florio makes no mention of Jeronimo. Is this because of his social status or because he took a junior role in the partnership or was he perhaps dead by this point?

Florio's presents a rather glowing and magnificent advertisement for Saviolo and his business – was Florio simply helping out a fellow Italian or was there a deeper bond?

The Stranger Report records that Saviolo was a member of the Italian Church. The church, at the Mercer's Chapel of St. Thomas of Acorn (in West Cheap, to the East of Bow Street), was founded by continental Protestants who had come to England. It "was a haven of refuge for persecuted Protestants of many nationalities and shades of opinion".¹¹

Between 1550 and 1554 the minister of the church was one Michael Angelo Florio, father of John Florio. (Florio senior was forced to flee the church and country after an undisclosed indiscretion – possibly the birth of his son, John.) So Saviolo was (at least publicly) a Protestant, and this may in some way have contributed to his decision to come to England. He ends his second book with a description of Queen Elizabeth as the "*Sunne of Christendome, and the onely Starre whereby all people are directed to the place which aboundeth in peace, religion and vertue ...*"

It might seem strange that a Protestant would have served in the army of the (Catholic) Holy Roman Empire, but it was not uncommon. The Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire during this period showed, in the main, a tolerance towards its Protestant subjects. Andreas von Auesperg, who led the Hapsburg forces at the Battle of Sisak, was a Protestant, and on the occasion of his victory was sent letters of congratulation by both Pope Clement VIII and King Philip II of Spain.

HIS PRACTISE

Stationer's Record:

XIX DIE NOVEMRIS [1594]

John Wolf / Entred for his copie under Master Hartwelles hand and the Wardens, a book intituled Vincentio Saviolo his Practise vjd.

On 19th November 1594, John Wolf obtained the licence to print "Vincentio Saviolo his Practise. In two Bookes. The first intreating the use of the Rapier and Dagger. The second, of Honor and honourable Quarrels."

11. "John Florio." Frances Yates, 1934.

The work was published in 1595 and presented as a New Year's gift to Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex (1567-1601): "The most prominent courtier and most famous military leader of Elizabeth's last years"¹² Later in the same year the printer William Mattes published another edition with the slightly different title page: "*Vincentio Saviolo his Practise : In two Bookes. The first intreating the use of the Rapier and Dagger. The second of Honor and honorable Quarrels. Both interlaced with sundrie pleasant Discourses, not unfit for all Gentlemen and Captaines that professe Armes.*"

That the work was dedicated to Essex is no surprise. Devereux was the most celebrated English military man of his day and many works about military matters were devoted to him. Saviolo, as a soldier, would know he was on safe ground in offering a work on the martial arts to he "...whose valour inforceth all soldiers to acknowledge you the English Achilles"¹³

It is possible that Saviolo was part of Essex's retinue:

"I have thought good to dedicate the same unto your honor, as unto him whose bountie most bindeth me ..."

And perhaps Essex's entourage were the "*Gentlemen good friends*" to whom Saviolo makes numerous allusions throughout the text:

"...at the request of certaine Gentlemen my good friends, & to make the world witnes of my gratefull minde towards them for the many curtesies which I have received at their handes since my first comming into this Countrie ..."

Or perhaps Saviolo had indeed come to England and, in particular, to Devereux, to avoid religious persecution:

"... whose benigne protection and provision for strangers, maketh you reported off as theyr safe sanctuary."

Saviolo's treatise is presented as "his practise", this implies that he (Saviolo) is not necessarily the author but that it is most definitely his system of fence. Closely connected to Essex's circle was John Florio. His acquaintance with Saviolo has been demonstrated above, and Florio's hand, his use of phrase and proverb in particular, runs throughout the work. That Florio would assist Saviolo in writing his work, aiding him with the subtleties of the English language, would be no surprise.

The first book is undoubtedly the practice of Saviolo, but the second, dealing with the legal ramifications and protocol of the duel, would appear to be, in the main, a translation of an earlier work by the Italian (Paduan) author Girolamo Muzio, "*Il Duello*" [Venice 1551]. Anecdotes and remembrances by Saviolo are clearly interpolated to give it a more personal flavour. Florio would have delighted in the chance to translate such a major work and on such a topic. (His bitter literary rival, John Eliot, had translated a similar work – "*Discourses on Warre and single Combat*" – from French a few years earlier in 1591.)

Perhaps, in a way, Saviolo was repaying Florio for the earlier kindness shown to him in "*Second Frutes*". Saviolo would certainly seem to try to further his friend's endeavours. In his opening dedication to Essex, Saviolo makes the following remark:

12. "Historical Dictionary of the Elizabethan World." A. Wagner.

13. "His Practise." Vincentio Saviolo.

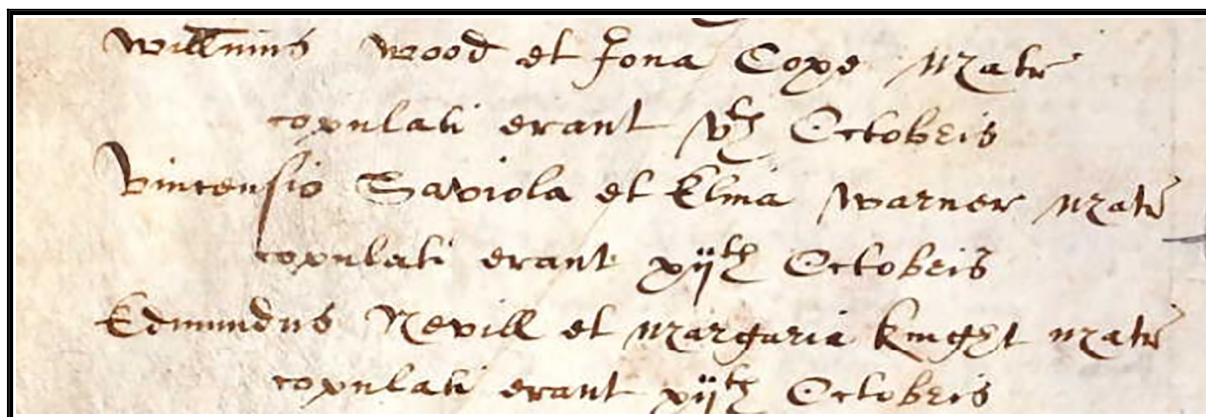
“This work, I must confesse, is farre unworthie your Lordships view, in regard eyther of method or substance : and being much unperfector than it shoulde have beene, if I had had copie of English to have expressed my meaning.”

Was Saviolo echoing or speaking on behalf of Florio for the need for an English - Italian dictionary in the hope that Essex would finance such an endeavour? Essex never did fund the project, but Florio would eventually publish the first English - Italian dictionary, “Queen Anna’s New World of Words”, in 1611.

LOVE & DEATH

On the whole, 1595 seems to have been a busy year for Saviolo. Not only was his book published but, later that year, he married.

His wife was one Elina Warner and, on the 12th of October 1595, they were wed in Westbury, Wiltshire.



(picture courtesy of Steph Holt)

There are a few other glimpses of Saviolo during his time in England, most notably from the anecdotes of George Silver. In “Paradoxes of Defence” (1599) Silver, who was no friend of Saviolo (nor any of the Italian masters) recounts his version of the following events:

“Then came in Vincentio and Jeronimo, they taught Rapier-fight at the Court, at London, and in the countrey, by the space of seveun or eight yeares or thereabouts. These two Italian Fencers, especially Vincentio, said that Englishmen were strong men, but had no cunning, and they would go backe too much in their fight, which was a great disgrace unto them. Upon these words of disgrace against Englishmen, my brother Toby Silver and my selfe, made challenge against them both, to play with them at the single Rapier, Rapier and Dagger, the single Dagger, the single Sword, the Sword and Target, the Sword and Buckler, & two hand Sword, the Staffe, battell Axe, and Morris Pike, to be played at the Bell Savage upon the Scaffold, where he that went in his fight faster backe then he ought, of Englishman or Italian, should be in danger to breake his necke off the Scaffold. We caused to that effect, five or sixe score Bills of challenge to be printed, and set up from Southwarke to the Tower, and from thence through London unto Westminster, we were at the

place with all these weapons at the time appointed, within a bow shot of their Fence schoole: many gentlemen of good accompt, carried manie of the bills of challenge unto them, telling them that now the Silvers were at the place appointed, with all their weapons, looking for them, and a multitude of people there to behold the fight, saying unto them, now come and go with us (you shall take no wrong) or else you are shamed for ever. Do the gentlemen what they could, these gallants would not come to the place of triall. I verily thinke their cowardly feare to answeere this chalange, had utterly shamed them indeed, had not the maisters of Defence of London, within two or three daies after, bene drinking of bottell Ale hard by Vincentio's schoole, in a Hall where the Italians must of necessitie pass through to go to their schoole: and as they were coming by, the maisters of Defence did pray them to drinke with them, but the Italians being very cowardly, were afraide, and presently drew their Rapiers: there was a pretie wench standing by, that loved the Italians, she ran with outcrie into the street, helpe, helpe, the Italians are like to be slaine: the people with all speede came running into the house, and with their Cappes and such things as they could get, parted the fraie, for the English maisters of Defence, meant nothing less than to solie their hands upon these two faint-hearted fellows. The next morning after, all the Court was filled, that the Italian teachers of Fence had beaten all the maisters of Defence in London, who set upon them in a house together. This wan the Italian Fencers their credit againe, and thereby got much, still continuing their false teaching to the end of their lives."

As to Saviolo ignoring the Silver brothers' challenge, it is no surprise. Throughout "His Practise" Saviolo clearly states his belief that the only reason to draw your weapon was in the defence of your prince or your honour. To fight for mere entertainment would have appeared a ridiculous and dishonourable notion to him.

The fracas on the streets of London was not the first time that the London Masters had targeted foreign teachers. Rocco Bonnetti had had to ask for intervention from the court to stop the continual harassment that he suffered at their hands.

Finally, we find Saviolo in the city of Wells, Somerset, not far from Westbury.

"This Vincentio proved himselfe a stout man not long before he died, that it might be seene in his life time he had bene a gallant, and therefore no marvaile he tooke upon him so highly to teach Englishmen to fight, and to set forth bookes of the feats of Armes. Upon a time at Wels in Sommersetshire, as he was in great braverie amongst gentlemen of good accompt, with great boldnese he gave out speches, that he had bene thus manie yeares in England and since the time of his first coming, there was not yet one Englishman, that could once touch him at the single Rapier, or Rapier and Dagger. A valiant gentleman being there amongst the rest, his English heart did rise to heare this proade boaster, secretly sent a message to one Bartholomew Bramble a friend of his, a verie tall man both of his hands and person, who kept a schoole of Defence in the towne, the messenger by way made the maister of Defence acquainted with the mind of the gentleman that sent for him, and of all what Vincentio had said, this maister of Defence presently came, and amongst all the gentlemen with his cap off, prayed maister Vincentio, that he would be pleased to take a quart of wine with him. Vincentio verie scornfully looked upon him, said unto him. Wherefore should you give me a quart of wine? Marie Sir, said he because I heare you are a famous man at your weapon."

Then presently said the gentleman that had sent for the maister of Defence: Maister Vincentio, I pray you bid him welcome, he is a man of your profession. My profession said Vincentio? What is my profession. Then said the gentleman, he is a maister of the noble science of Defence. Why said maister Vincentio, God make him a good man. But the maister of Defence would not thus leave him, but prayed againe he would be pleased to take a quart of wine of him. Then said Vincentio, I have no need of thy wine. Then said the maister of Defence: Sir I have a schoole of Defence in the towne, will it please you to go thither. Thy schoole said maister Vincentio? What should I do at thy schoole? Play with me (said the maister) at the Rapier and Dagger, if it please you. Play with thee said maister Vincentio? If I play with thee, I will hit thee 1. 2. 3. 4. thrustes in the eie together. Then said the maister of Defence, if you can do so, it is the better for you, and the worse for me, but surely I can hardly believe that you can hit me: but yet once againe I hartily pray you good Sir, that you will go to my schoole, and playe with me. Play with thee said maister Vincentio (verie scornfully?) by God me scorne to play with thee. With that word scorne, the maister of Defence was verie much moved, and up with his great English fist, and stoke maister Vincentio such a boxe on the eare that he fell over and over, his legges just against a Buttery hatch, whereon stood a great blacke Jacke: the maister of Defence fearing the worst, against Vincentio his rising, catcht the blacke Jacke into his hand, being more than half full of Beere. Vincentio lustily start up, laying his hand upon his Dagger, & with the other hand pointed with his finger, saying, very well: I will cause to lie in the Gaile for this yeare, 1. 2. 3. 4. yeares. And well said the maister of Defence, since you will drinke no wine, will you pledge me in Beere? I drinke to all the cowardly knaves in England, and I thee to be the veriest coward of them all: with that he cast all the Beere upon him: notwithstanding Vincentio having nothing but his guilt Rapier, and Dagger abut him, and the other for his defence the blacke Jacke, would not at that time fight it out: but the next day met with the maister of Defence in the streete, and said unto him, you remember misused a me yesterday, you were to blame, me an excellent man, me teach you how to thrust two foote further then anie Englishman, but first you come with me: then he brought him to a Mercers shop, and said to the Mercer, let me see your best silken Pointes, the Mercer did presently shew him some of seaven groates for two dozen, and said to the maister of Defence, there is one dozen for you, and here is another for me. This was one of the valientest Fencers that came from beyond the seas, to teach Englishmen to fight, and this was one of the manliest frayes, that I have hard of, that ever he made in England, wherin he showed himselfe a farre better man in his life, then in his profession he was, for he professed armes, but in his life a better Christian.”

Saviolo's response to the statement "I pray you bid him welcome, he is a man of your profession" is interesting. "My profession said Vincentio? What is my profession. Then said the gentleman, he is a maister of the noble science of Defence. Why said maister Vincentio, God make him a good man".

The Stranger Return records that he (Saviolo) has "no occupation". Is this because he is a gentleman and therefore does not need to work? Does he simply not wish to give information to the aldermen? Or is he, like Bonnetti before him, a man of many roles: a gentleman, a military man, a master of fence, a dancer ... and, perhaps, a spy. On his travels, teaching at the "Court, at London, and in the countrey" he would have been in an ideal position to observe, acquire and pass on information.

Again, in the Stranger Return, Saviolo gives his place of birth as Venice: was he, perhaps, in some capacity working for the Republic?

From the “Calendar of State Papers relating to English Affairs in the Archive of Venice. Vol 19. 1592-1603”:

“May 15th. - Original Despatch, Venetian archives. 168. Palo Paruta, Venetian Ambassador in Rome, to the Doge and Senate. His Holiness said that there was another point upon which he wished to speak, namely, that he was fully informed that there was a proposal to send an Ambassador from Venice to England. He was well aware that such proposals had been presented before, but always rejected; he was therefore, all the more surprised that they should be renewed at a time where many obvious reasons counselled otherwise. I replied that I had no information on this subject, all I knew was that a Venetian gentleman had gone to England for his own private affairs, and this might possibly have given rise to the rumour. Rome, 15th May 1593.”

There is no way of knowing who this gentleman was, but it does illustrate that in an age of political paranoia whoever you were and wherever you went, somebody, somewhere, was taking note.

According to Silver, Saviolo was in the West Country “not long before he died”. How he died, or when, as yet remains a mystery. Silver wrote “Paradoxes of Defence” in 1599 and so (if Silver is correct) Vincentio was obviously dead before then. As Silver makes no mention as to the manner of his death we can assume that he was not killed in combat. Remembering also that Silver said that Saviolo taught “at the Court, at London, and in the countrey, by the space of seveun or eight yeares or thereabouts” and if, as stated in the Stranger Return, Saviolo arrived in England in 1587, that would imply that he died shortly after his wedding.

LITERARY REFERENCES

References to Saviolo and his treatise are to be found among the works of some of the literary figures of the day. Shakespeare uses one of Saviolo’s anecdotes and reshapes it in “As You Like It” (1599). Saviolo’s tale concerns Luigi Gonzaga, (nicknamed “Rodomont” on account of his “courageous character and athleticism”) brother to the Duke of Mantua, who accidentally kills the Emperor Charles V’s champion wrestler in a match.

Later in the same play the jester, Touchstone, would seem to parody chapters from “Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels”.

From James L. Jackson’s introduction to “Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals”:

“Editors of Shakespeare usually note in annotating As You Like it that the seven kinds of lies described by Touchstone in Act V, Scene 4, satirize books on honor and good manners popular in England at this time and may have been derived from the discussion of the five kinds of lies in Saviolo : lies certain, conditional lies, the lie in general, the lie in particular, and foolish lies.”

In “Romeo and Juliet” (1595-96) [the “fencers’ play”, if ever there were one] Shakespeare uses language and phrases lifted straight from Saviolo’s text. He also gives a clear description of a fight that mirrors Saviolo’s martial system:

*“Of Tybalts deafe to peace, but that he Tilts
With Piercing steele at bold Mercutio’s breast,
Who, all as hot, turnes deadly point to point,
And, with a Martiall scorn, with one hand beates
Cold death aside, and with the other sends
It back to Tybalt, whose dexterity
Retorts it”*

During the course of the play, by way of coincidence, Romeo is banished to the Duchy of Mantua.

That Shakespeare was familiar with “His Practise” there can be little doubt. There may be a personal connection – Saviolo’s likely co-author was John Florio; Florio was tutor and secretary to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated the poems “Venus and Adonis” (1593) and “The Rape of Lucrece” (1594).

In 1599 Saviolo is referenced by John Marston in his satirical work “Scourge of Villany”:

*“Oh! Come not within distance Martius speaks
Who ne’er discourseth but fencing feats,
Of counter time, fincture, sly passataes,
Stramazzone, with resolute stoccataes;
Of the quick change with the wiping mandritta,
The caricado with th’ imbrocata.
The honourable fencing mystery
Who does the honour?
Then falls he in again
Jading our ears; and somewhat must be sain
Of blades, and Rapier hilts, and surest guard,
Of Vincentio and the Burgonian’s ward.”*

Again, we find the use of *Italianate* fencing terms that in all probability were first introduced into England through Saviolo’s work. It is interesting that Marston talks of the “Burgonian’s ward”: is it possible that Saviolo, having been a soldier of the Hapsburgs – whose ancestral seat of power was the Duchy of Burgundy – saw his fighting system as more Burgundian than Italian? He had, by his own account, taken the styles of five or six different masters, along with his own personal experiences and observances, and blended them into his own system. The armies of the Hapsburgs would have been made up of troops from many different nations – including, among others: Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, and Eastern Europe – and their martial influence can be seen in Saviolo’s system.

JERONIMO

In 1627 it is Jeronimo who is remembered by the playwright Ben Jonson.

“The New Inne” (1629?)

“FLY – Go by, Hieronimo!

TIPTO – What was he?

FLY – The Italian That played with Abbot Antony i’ the Friars, And Blinkinsop the bold.

TIPTO – Ay, marry, those Had fencing names, what are become o’ them?

HOST – They had their times, and we can say they were. So had Carranza his, so hath Don Lewis.

TIPTO – Don Lewis of Madrid is the sole master Now of the world.”

(Carranza is the great Spanish fencing master Geronimo Sanchez de Carranza, and Don Lewes is his most famous pupil, Luis Pacheco Narvaez.)

This passage refers to a “prize-fight” where fencers displayed their proficiency for admission into the guild of the London Masters of Defence.

John Blinkinsopps played for his scholler’s prize in 1572, his provost’s prize in 1577 and his master’s prize on –

*“the firste daye of June at the Artillerye garden at four kynde of weapons That is to saye the two hand sword the backe sword, the sword and buckeler and the staff. Ther playd with him six maisters videlicet Richard Peters / Anthonye ffenruther / Gregorie Grene Richard Smyth Richard Donne & Henrye Naylor An[d] so the said Blinkinsop was admitted maister under Willyam Thompson maister/1579/.”*¹⁴

The only Anthony to be found in the papers of the Masters of Defence of London is the above-mentioned Anthonye ffenruther, but there is no mention of a Jeronimo.

We know very little of Jeronimo. If he was an Italian by birth rather than an “Italianated” man then perhaps we would hope to find him in “The Strangers Return”. The only Jeronimo to be found in “The Return” that might fit the bill is one Jeronimo Fero who, along with four others, was a servant of an Italian by the name of Verzelini Vassecin. All of Vassecin’s five servants came from “*the province of Venice of the town Murano (Demuran?)*”. Fero being the Latin for “iron”, and also a slang word for a sword, perhaps it is the same man? It is, as yet, impossible to know.

The most comprehensive account we have of Jeronimo comes from George Silver. Rather unfortunately, it concerns his premature death:

“Jeronimo this gallent was valiant, and would fight indeed, and did, as you shall heare. He being in a Coch with a wench that he loved well, there was one Cheese, a verie tall man, in his fight naturall English, for he fought with his Sword and Dagger, and in Rapier fight had no skill at all. This Cheese having a quarrell to Jeronimo, overtooke him upon the way, himselfe being on horsebacke, did call to Jeronimo, and bad him come forth of the Coch or he would fetch him, for he was come to fight with him. Jeronimo presently went

14. Sloane Ms. 2530. Papers of the Masters of Defence of London.

forth of the Coch and drew his Rapier and dagger, put himself into his best ward or Stoccata, which ward was taught by himselfe and Vincentio, and by them best allowed of, to be the best ward to stand upon in fight for life, either to assault the enemie, or stand and watch his comming, which ward it should seeme he ventured his life upon, but howsoever with all the fine Italianated skill Jeronimo had, Cheese with his Sword within two thrusts ran him into the bodie and slue him.”

A CURIOUS FOOTNOTE

So here, at present, is where the scent runs cold. In the future, no doubt, new truths will be uncovered and falsehoods revealed.

There is, however, a curious footnote to this tale: it revolves around a gentleman by the name of Alexander Wye.

Alexander Wye was born in Gloucester in 1581. He studied at Magdalen Hall in Oxford and went on to become a student of the Inner Temple in 1600. In 1606 he was named as a Jesuit spy. The following entry is found in “The History of Wiltshire – Vol. 8. James I vol. 121 – June 1621”

June 11. Sandwich

95. [Commissioners for the passage] at Sandwich to Lord Zouch. Have imprisoned Alex. Wye of Gloucestershire, who landed near Sandwich, assuming the name Saviolo, and refuses the Oath of Allegiance. Inclose.

95.i Attested statement that Alessandro Saviolo describes himself as the son of Geronimo Saviolo of Piedmont.

Chris Chatfield, 2010.