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The Humanist Component within Renaissance Martial Arts Teachings

Submission: 17.11.2010; acceptance: 10.11.2010

Key words: Renaissance, humanist, chivalry, ethics

Renaissance martial arts were an integral part of the Humanist culture of their times, as well as a collection of closely related systems of physical self defense. These martial arts not only taught effective armed and unarmed hand to hand combat skills, but they also taught the ethical, appropriate use of those skills. The goal of this ethical instruction was to improve society as a whole, through improving the personal moral character of the martial arts practitioner.

This can be seen by examining both the Humanist literature of the time, and the Renaissance martial arts manuals themselves. Both genres show the same concern that education be well-rounded, including mental, spiritual and physical aspects. They also both acknowledge that training in arms plays an important role in that education. And they encouraged the use of that training only in ethically appropriate circumstances, such as defense of women and the sick.

One explanation for this correspondence is the way that both genres shared the same origins in not only the Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions, but the medieval chivalric tradition as well. Examining the medieval chivalric literature in addition to the Renaissance Humanist and martial arts literature shows this to be true.

One of the most important legacies of the Renaissance was the idea of humanist education. The *studia humanitatis* was considered to be a curriculum of those educational disciplines outside of theology and natural science. It was thought to be the knowledge and skills required for a human being to be truly free. Part of this was the belief that the end of humanist studies was the well-being of the community with the aim of producing an individual who would secure its safety and property. Physical training in close-combat skills was recognized as integral to this. The humanist emphasis on martial arts specifically reflected the goal of preparing the citizen so that he would be ready to defend the state or his own honor.

It should come as no surprise that within the still little known but rich literature of Renaissance martial arts it is not difficult to find a work which includes significant ideas on personal combat relating to chivalric, Christian, or humanistic

components. No major treatise of systematic self-defense method was produced in this era that did not in some way also address aspects of the social and ethical behavior of the fighting man. This derived from a long tradition within Medieval chivalric thought. The concept of knighthood embraced an ideal of physical prowess manifested in personal martial skill, the exercise of which was governed by an ideal of social behavior allied with personal virtue. The most famous version of this is perhaps Mallory's version of the Arthurian round table oath – a code of “public service” as well as a “peacekeeping oath” with clear “political and judicial implications” [French 2003, p. 116].

In his 14th century book of chivalry, the knight Geoffroi de Charny, had expressed a belief in living “by force of arms and good works.” Geoffroi's words echo in those of the professional instructors of knightly combat systems over the next three centuries. He criticized “those skillful and brave

men-at-arms good at handling weapons,” yet who pursued a career in arms without benefit or consideration to “the harm done either their friends or enemies nor contributed to the common good in any other way except through physical exploits in feats of arms” [Kaeuper, Kennedy 1996, p. 151].

In the early 14th century, *Krönike von Prüzinlant*, the chronicler Nicolaus von Jeroschin noted six humanistic reasons for training in fighting arts: keeping in practice at arms; readiness for enemy treachery; engaging in defensive war; peacekeeping and property protection; regaining lost land and belongings; and deterrence to enemies. Considering these in light of the transgressions which the famed 15th century knight and fencing master, Hans Talhoffer, considered causes worth fighting over reveals seven key articles: guarding of human life; support of king and country; faith and piety; loyalty to one’s lord; trustworthiness; truthfulness; and respect for and protection of women [Hull 2007]. Awareness of the need for virtuous education among warriors is also reflected in the popular writing of Christine de Pizan, who by 1410 was to declare that chivalry had become a neglected and forgotten art and that true knightly leaders needed an ethical education that combined physical training in weaponry with military strategy and noble ideas [Le Saux in Saunders *et al.* 2004, pp. 97-98, 100].

The traditions of chivalry thus came to leave their imprint on the emerging humanist educational practice, as seen in the first great work on the subject, *De Ingeniis Moribus*, of 1392 by Petrus Paulus Vergerius (Pier Paolo Vergerio). In Vergerius’ physical curriculum in particular, “Skill in arms is cultivated as a necessary training for civic duty, that each citizen may be capable of taking his part in the defence of public liberty and independence” [Woodward 1912, p. 246]. The athletic Vergerio’s educational program encompassed “moral and religious training, together with physical fitness and instruction in the bearing of arms” [Gilbert 1998]. His liberal arts curriculum aimed to holistically combine intellectual, moral, and physical development through, “those studies by which we attain and practise virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble men, and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only.” Vergerio’s influential work was to become widely studied in the 16th century, a time when humanistic ideas took greater hold among teachers of the “noble science of defense” [Woodward 1912, p. 103]. By 1406, Guarino da Verona (Guarino Veronese), another foundational figure in Renaissance humanist education, had designed his own entire program

for young students in Ferrara. Consisting of both intellectual and physical education it aimed at supporting the well-being of the community. Once again, martial training and physical fitness made up a large part of this liberal arts curriculum [Zeigler 2006, p. 84].

Following from the earlier Vergerio, the influential humanist educator, Vittorino da Feltre, himself an expert in arms steeped in the chivalric tradition of his knightly class, developed in 1404 a profound curriculum of instruction closely based upon classical Greco-Roman liberal arts traditions. By 1423, under the Dukes at the court of Mantova he maintained a school at Casa Giocosa to instruct both noble youths as well as gifted children of the poor. Vittorino made sure students devoted time to strenuous physical activity in a Spartan atmosphere [Grender 1999, p. 267]. It was also a training linked to a clear moral outlook, since, “Vittorino, as a genuine product of the Renaissance, required as a correlative to a fine intellectual humanism a standard of physical excellence and personal bearing to match” [Woodward 1924, p. 23]. He recognized that as a discipline physical education could play a part in developing a student’s character, and thus, socially valuable qualities.

Vittorino especially encouraged fencing as an activity for health and fitness [Woodward 1912, p. 65]. At his school, “The instruction given was of the new Humanistic type but Christian in character and spirit. It was not merely a literary training but embraced the physical and moral requirements of a liberal education” [Vittorino da Feltre 2009]. Military training played a smaller role in his curriculum than with other humanists as he believed that the highest level of humanist culture could be attained by the full personality being developed within the three components of the mental, physical, and spiritual [McIntosh, Munrow, Willetts 1957, p. 70].

As one historian notes, Vittorino da Feltre “advanced a philosophy of the oneness of mind and body and the ideal of a harmonious all-round human development wherein physical training played a large role. His goal was the improvement of mind, body, and character through rigorous physical and mental exercise.” We are also informed, “He urged the necessity of warlike skills as part of Christian duty to defend against Muslim invaders” [Brailsford 1969, p. 11]. Vittorino’s ideas were to later find their full incarnation in that most Renaissance of men, the soldier-prince Frederigo de Montefeltro of Urbino, who ideally melded study of martial arts and liberal arts. Frederigo’s court was later home to the fencing master Filippo Vadi as well as served as the ideal model court for Castiglione.

The great Renaissance humanist educator, artist, and architect, Leonardo Battista Alberti, in the mid-1400s also advocated pursuit of wrestling for health and the harmonious fusion of mind and body. A biography of Alberti written sometime after 1460 stated, "[As] in everything suitable to one born free and educated liberally..." his study was "assiduous in the science and skill of dealing with arms" [Ketchum 1961, p. 331]. Alberti, who also wrote on the chivalric ideal in his, *Ecatonfilea*, followed the advice of the ancient Cato in referring to the social virtue to be found in teaching a young man fencing and other military skills *in addition to letters*. Alberti wrote, "it was a father's duty to teach his children all the virtues worthy of free men" and that it was not "just to call anyone free who lacked any of these virtues." Like Vergerio, he further expressed the idea that physical training and activity was necessary not only in youth but throughout one's life. Alberti wrote, "Together with letters, I should like our sons to practice from an early age riding, fencing, swimming, and other noble exercises and skills with are useful and honorable throughout our lives, and whose lack may be harmful in later years" [Bazzano 1973, pp. 98, 100]. An iconic "renaissance man", Alberti was a frequent welcomed guest at the famed court of, Federigo da Montefeltro. After later taking holy orders, Alberti became prior of San Martino at Signa.

A contemporary of Alberti, Matteo Palmieri, also wrote a humanist work concerning the intellectual and physical training of youth, *Della Vita Civile* (c.1435-40), the first book of which consisted of a dialogue on the mental and physical development of the student. For Palmieri the ultimate educational aim was to produce an individual who would secure the safety and property of the community [Woodward 1924, p. 71]. Again, this required they possess some martial expertise. The humanist educator Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (who later became Pope Pius II) in his, *De Librorum Educatione* (c.1450), likewise instructed: "Every youth destined to exalted position should further be trained in military exercises. It will be your destiny to defend Christendom against the Turk" [Woodward 1912, p. 138]. Such views had wide influence. In 1449, for example, the educational program of the English knight, Sir John Fastolf, included for his household the inculcation of military and heroic ethics [Church, Harvey 1995, p. 135].

While the discipline of arms was deemed a necessity by humanist educators, its central component can be found within much Renaissance martial arts writings. These ideas represent above all values of disciplined conduct that accepted the need for personal responsibility and, if necessary,

sacrifice of the self for a greater cause of duty. In the teachings compiled in 1389 of the great fencing master, Johannes Liechtenauer, whose method came to permeate Germanic systems of self-defense, the fighting man is directly counseled with an humanist message: "you should not learn fencing if you plan to subject your fellow men unjustly by use of this art." The text then advises the reader, "Practice your art by necessity, honestly and never in foolish vanity. Then you will always remain a good and true man, a true swordsman. For thus is the art of the sword thought out, that you should practice truly in a spirit of chivalry" [Lindholm 2005, 43V & 44R]. As many later fencing masters were to do, Liechtenauer also listed a range of qualities and attributes important in a knightly warrior, including: wisdom, reason, intelligence, piety, strength, courage, and prudence, among others.

Humanist ideas became a repeated theme in Renaissance martial arts writings throughout the 16th century. As the Italian master, Antonio Manciolino, stated in his 1531 guide to the sword, "The art should be studied as a science, for pleasure and the preservation of life." Similarly, the Florentine politician, Pier Filippo Pandolfini, in the early 16th century wrote of the "discipline" of arms by comparing the soldier to both the artist and the scholar all of whom he declared sought "virtue and wisdom" [Trim 2003, p. 19]. By the early 1540s, Paulus Hector Mair, himself a learned scholar of the liberal arts curriculum, compiled his *Ars Gladitoriae*, the largest and most detailed martial arts tome ever produced. Mair, a municipal official in Augsburg, intended his immense work as a comprehensive reference on the subject in part because he believed firmly in the *sittigend* or "civilizing" value of the craft as well its usefulness for the proper education of youth. Mair's compendia contains extensively illustrated material not only on traditional knightly weapons and armored fighting, but use of common farming implements, infantry techniques against cavalry, and fencing with the newer urban rapier.

Surely among the most "renaissance men" of his age was the physician, mathematician, and engineer, Camillo Agrippa, who in 1553 produced his own scientific treatise on fencing for both duel of honor and practical street-level self-defense. Although he stated he had selected to not address the topic, Agrippa did acknowledge that justice and social responsibility were an element of practicing the craft. A generation later, in his celebrated treatise on combat published in 1570, *Kunst der Fechtens*, the noted master Joachim Meyer connected the practice of martial arts directly to individual character and his own desire for his work to serve as proper guidance for youth:

“I hope that [fighting men] will seek to thoroughly understand this art and learn to apply a true honorable earnestness, to purge themselves of useless peasants’ brawling, and to be diligent in all manliness, discipline, and breeding, so that when they have truly and fully learned this art and lead an honorable life, then they may be thought able to direct others, and particularly the youth, and thereby to be of service” [Forgeng 2006, p. 42].

In his own 1570 book of fencing, the master Giacomo di Grassi taught that knowledge of arms and weapons which defended life, country and honor, was not a matter of violence and aggression, but of a higher, nobler purpose for the greater social good. We find in master di Grassi the familiar view that skilled men refrained from senseless combat more often than did unskilled men. In a dedicatory poem from Henri de Saint Didier’s 1573 treatise on fencing, we are given another familiar example of the humanistic civil virtues of the art of defense: “By arms the greatness of Kings are maintained, the honors defended, the ladies upheld, by arms one acquires them, one keeps liberty, by arms each lives in life and surety, by arms in all places one sees the vice punished, one sees the laws kept and justice maintained, and the cities flourish and reigns succeed, necessary by all and to each in all times.”

The fencing master Salvatore Fabris in 1606 treatise on the rapier similarly declared with evident sincerity that, “it is with the sword that Kingdoms are protected, Religions are defended, injuries are avenged, and Nations achieve peace and happiness” [Leoni 2006, p. 2]. The English fencing master, Sir George Silver, in his 1599 writings, *Brief Instructions Upon My Paradoxes of Defence* (Sloan MS. No. 376), directly stated the preference for the rule of law over private combats. Admonishing against the rashness of seeking revenge in dueling, Silver advised men look for redress not through private assault but “by civil order and proof, by good and wholesome laws.” Rather than engage in personal duel over issues of insult and reputation, Silver counseled that satisfaction was instead to be sought “far more fit and requisite in a place of so civil a government as we live in.”

Despite the street-wise nature of their fighting guild and urban self-defense focus, the records of the London Company of the Masters of Defence from the mid 16-century also included a code of values for their members. Among many instructions regarding moral behavior and civic duty, they taught charity and compassion for others, stating “you shall aid and strengthen to your power (if you see them wronged) and help all masters and [rovo]sts of this science, all widows and fatherless children. And if you know any master of science that is fallen into sickness being in poverty you shall put the

masters in remembrance at all prizes and games and other assemblies” [Berry 1991, p. 91]. Such a pledge might be viewed cynically as something expected of a public organization teaching combat skills that could be put to undesirable use, yet they reveal much more when taken in the larger context of Renaissance martial arts culture.

For a Renaissance Master of Defence, there was a distinct relationship between cultural values, social ethics, and personal honor. In keeping with the best of both the Medieval chivalric tradition and Renaissance humanist philosophy, those who taught fighting arts gave considerable advice as to whom they believed should and should not be taught combat skills and under what circumstances martial arts were to be used. A self-employed master would, naturally, be concerned with his professional reputation as exemplified in the repute of his students (who he would reasonably advise to avoid picking fights or violating civil and clerical edicts against dueling). Refusing to teach martial arts to those deemed of poor character is a repeated theme in Renaissance martial arts literature, not surprisingly.

In his fighting treatise of 1409, the knight and master, Fiore dei Liberi, stressed the importance of teaching martial skills only to nobles and knights who he felt as a class not only ruled justly but also alone had the role of protecting widows, orphans, and weak people as well defending the faith from outside threats. The prologue of the Pisani-Dossi (or Novati) edition of Fiore’s treatise comments on preventing “peasants” from learning such a “precious and secret science” as fencing, reserving it instead for those entitled to it. Fiore also goes out of his way to acknowledge that death of the opponent need not always be one’s objective.

A further example of the humanistic theme within Renaissance martial teachings comes from the master Filippo Vadi. In his, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, of circa 1482, Vadi stated there was no greater good than life and that the value and importance of fencing as self-defense was precisely that it could preserve your life a “thousand times.” Vadi called fighting skills more important than any material wealth. To master Vadi, the “art and doctrine” was something that should not fall into the hands of wicked men “alien to this science” who would use it for vile work. Those who practiced it, he argued, must accept the “principle of *instituta*”, the idea that it properly served civil and religious authority [Vadi, fol. 1v-2r.].

When we consider the role played by fighting prowess as integral to the development of both Medieval knightly virtue and the ideal of the 16th century courtier, leading to the concept of the

proper gentleman, there can be no question of the importance it held for the Renaissance fighting men. The pragmatic pursuit of martial discipline was recognized as ideally a journey of self-improvement toward being a better person and better citizen. Christian Europe at first developed chivalry in the 12th century as a means of controlling knightly violence. Gradually it took on a range of ideological, literary, and social values that defined the Medieval knight. Knighthood itself became seen as an “order” in the same way as the priesthood was a calling. The role of martial discipline instilling prowess in arms was integral to this identity. Their descendants in the Renaissance courtiers adopted this ideal of martial virtue as character — a character which Renaissance humanist educators attempted to encourage.

Along with Christian spiritual elements addressing the needs for emotional control and mental discipline of the fighting man, the ethical component of Renaissance martial arts teachings can also be well established. Nearly every major source work addressed the rationale behind the need for a system of self-defense and the condition and occasions under which violent force was necessary. Virtually every major author filled his teachings with admonishments to avoid provoking or being provoked. That a Judeo-Christian, classical, and chivalric foundation underpinned their philosophy goes without question. That a humanist outlook was often central to this should also be realized.

In such violent times martial practicality was paramount, yet as has been shown, there were increasingly social, aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural influences upon how a man handled a weapon or defended himself. As essentially, but hardly exclusively, the skills of the noble warrior caste, the teachings of fighting arts have traditionally always included some instruction in the social etiquette of behaving toward superiors, equals, and subordinates. Chivalry as a code of conduct for the noble martial class especially had a social, moral, and spiritual component. But education in the classic liberal arts during this period began to include the martial arts as a part of their curriculum precisely because of their compatibility. The “liberal” arts were, after all, those of a “free man” — a man free only because he was armed and able to take up arms. As one scholar of the age put it: “Renaissance man was a transitional man who synthesized Christian morality and Hellenic individualism, reconciled the man of action with the contemplative man, and complemented courage with courtesy and strength and endurance with grace and beauty. He was the man who initiated the deliverance of history from theology, who grappled with the problem of whether there was such a thing as reliable historical

knowledge...” (Van Dalen, p. xxvi).

There is a long literary tradition in Western society of philosophical discussion on what constituted the proper behavior of fighting men. From its classical, chivalric, and Christian sources, we can follow a connection between Renaissance liberal arts and Renaissance martial arts curricula. The respected Renaissance historian, William Harrison Woodward, once noted of three key educational texts of the Renaissance, “those of Vergerius, of Castiglione, and of Milton, we see that each lays special stress upon the practice of martial exercises: each of them presents that union of the Courtly with the Humanist ideal...” [Woodward 1912, p. 65]. In his seminal work on the martial arts of Renaissance Europe, the leading scholar, Dr. Sydney Anglo, observed that by the 16th century, “the notion that skill in arms was somehow conducive to good citizenship became a pedagogic commonplace.” Educational reformists, he notes, from Luther to Ulrich Zwingli, as well as academies proposed by Gilbert Humphrey and Richard Mulcaster, all accepted the union of “arms and letters” as an ideal element of humanist curricula [Anglo 2000, p. 65]. They united physical and intellectual development within a humanist educational framework. And in doing this they recognized that professional teaching of weaponry and unarmed fighting was the exclusive realm of the Masters of Defence.

The discipline of arms was long seen as a force that could raise a man above violence, anger, and fear. The craft could be pursued as a socially positive force, to the improve character of the individual, and thereby benefit the state and the community. This is part of the very tradition of the Western warrior, following from the classical Greek ideal of a free citizen with the right and responsibility to bear arms in defense of his property and his community. This unique aspect of our Western martial heritage is still with us today. For modern students of Renaissance martial arts the tradition of these values can once again be an element of its practice.

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Humanistyczny składnik w nauczaniu renesansowych sztuk walki

Słowa kluczowe: Renesans, humanistyczny, rycerski, etyka

Streszczenie

Renesansowe sztuki walki były integralną częścią kultury humanistycznej swoich czasów, a także zbiorem ściśle powiązanych ze sobą systemów fizycznej samoobrony. Owe sztuki walki nie tylko uczyły efektywnych umiejętności przydatnych w czasie bezpośredniej walki przy użyciu broni lub bez, uczyły także etycznego wykorzystania owych umiejętności. Celem etycznych wskazówek była poprawa społeczeństwa jako całości poprzez poprawę moralnego charakteru osoby trenującej sztuki walki. Humanistyczne podejście do edukacji polegało na przekazywaniu wiedzy i umiejętności, które miały sprawić, że człowiek, a także społeczeństwo byłyby prawdziwie wolne. Można to zaobserwować w trakcie studiów nad literaturą humanistyczną tego okresu oraz samych podręczników sztuk walki z okresu Renesansu. Oba gatunki literatury wykazują tę samą troskę o to, by nauka była wszechstronna i obejmowała zarówno umysłowe, duchowe i fizyczne aspekty oraz uznają, iż szkolenie w zakresie broni odgrywa istotną rolę w edukacji. Już w 1389 wielki niemiecki mistrz szermierki Johannes Liechtenauer wymieniał cechy i atrybuty rycerza takie jak m.in.: mądrość, rozsądek, inteligencja, pobożność, siła, odwaga i roztropność. Dzieła literackie i podręczniki sztuk walki zachęcały także do stosowania technik walki jedynie w etycznie usprawiedliwionych okolicznościach takich, jak obrona kobiet czy osób chorych i słabych.

Jedynym wyjaśnieniem tej zgodności jest fakt, iż oba gatunki mają to samo pochodzenie. Jest to nie tylko Judeo-chrześcijańska i klasyczna tradycja, ale także średniowieczna tradycja rycerska. Potwierdza to badanie średniowiecznej literatury rycerskiej, a także renesansowej literatury humanistycznej oraz prac dotyczących sztuk walki. Przykładowo w XIV i XV wieku rycerze: Geoffrey de Charny i Hans Talhoffer oraz kronikarz Nicolaus von Jeroschin uczyli wykorzystywania mocy broni do dobrych uczynków, a zniechęcali do uczenia się sztuk walki tylko dla własnych korzyści. Chociaż już przed 1410 rokiem Christine de Pizan twierdził, iż rycerskość stała się zaniedbaną i zapomnianą sztuką, to prawdziwi przywódcy powinni łączyć naukę w zakresie treningu fizycznego i użycia broni ze szlachetnymi ideami.

Wpływ idei rycerskich na edukację humanistyczną jest widoczny poprzez postacie takie, jak: Petrus Paulus Vergerius (Pier Paolo Vergerio) oraz Guarino Da Verona (Guarino Veronese), którzy na początku XV wieku uczyli według programów edukacyjnych zawierających rozwój intelektualny, moralny i fizyczny. Sztuki walki stanowiły tu integralną część tych programów. Wśród innych humanistycznych pedagogów z XV wieku byli: Vittorino da Feltré, Leonardo Battista Alberti, Matteo Palmieri i Aeneas, Sylvius Piccolomini. Wszyscy oni propagowali w swoich programach nauczania treningi fechtunku i zapasów obok studiowania wiedzy. Dla renesansowych mistrzów istniał bezpośredni związek między wartościami kulturowymi, etyką społeczną i osobistym honorem.