

Saviolo's Exercises for the Single Rapier

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In the late 1500's, Rapier was fairly new in England. Rocco Bonetti opened a school for the Rapier in London, in 1586. His school was very popular with the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth. Bonetti's school was depicted by George Silver, an English Fencing Master, in his book *Paradoxes of Defense*, published in 1599: *He disbursed a great Somme of money for the lease of a faire house in warwick lane, which he called his college, for he thought it great disgrace for him to keep a Fence-school, he being then thought to be the only famous master of the art of arms in the whole world. He caused to be fairly drawn and round about his school all the Noblemen's and gentlemen's arms that were his scholars, and hanging right under their arms their Rapiers, daggers, gloves of male, and gauntlets. Also, he had benches and stools, the room being very large, for gentlemen to set around about his school to behold his teaching.*[\(1\)](#)

Saviolo joined the school four years later. After Bonetti died, Saviolo and Jeronimo [\(2\)](#) took over the school and moved it to Blackfriars. The school and Saviolo were doing so well by 1595 that Saviolo published a book on his teachings. The book was entitled *Vincentio Saviolo His practice in two books. The first intreating of the use of the Rapier and Dagger. The Second, of Honor and honorable Quarrels*. The book was one of two written in English on the Subject of Rapier prior to 1600. [\(3\)](#)

Saviolo's manual was embraced by the English, hungry for any information on the New Rapier Style. Saviolo's first book was a treatise on the use of the Rapier and Dagger. He argued that it was the perfection of this noble science. His second work was a discourse on Honor and Honorable behavior, as well as a set of rules for dueling. Eagerton Castle, in his book, *Schools and Masters of Defense, in the 16th and 17th Century*, says that there was little new in Saviolo's book. He said that the real strength of Saviolo's book lies in his ability to combine the best of the Italian, Spanish and French schools. [\(4\)](#)

His book takes the form of a discussion between Saviolo and a scholar named Luke. During these discussions, Saviolo spent time discussing the use of the single Rapier and mail glove [\(5\)](#), and the Rapier and dagger. Saviolo did not spend a lot of time discussing theory, or using geometry to justify his style, as had earlier masters.

Instead, Saviolo uses his experience as justification, stating in the introduction that he had studied under several masters in several countries and that he has taken the best of these styles to perfect the art. He further states that the wards he will show you are the same that he himself uses. These wards were choreographed exercises taking place between a Master and a Scholar. With these he gave examples of a basic fight in three different stances with the Single Sword, and three different stances with the Rapier and Dagger. These Wards are the foundation of Saviolo's teachings. He uses these wards to instruct his students in the proper use of time and measure (distance). *Because they may learn the just time and measure, and make the foot, hand and body readily agree together, and understand the way to give the stoccata and imbroccata right: so that these principles are very necessary, and will serve for the Rapier and dagger, therefore whosoever will make a perfect scholar, let him show the principles in this ward* (6).

Through the use and study of these wards, Saviolo's students came to an understanding of the use of the Single sword, which he felt to be the foundation of the true science of this art. It is my hope that by reconstructing these exercises, and using them as a training tool, we can better understand period rapier combat, as well as develop a more period style of combat. To this end, we will look at Saviolo's exercises for the Single Rapier, reconstruct them, use them, and then using these results, break down Saviolo's style as far as measure, time, attacks, and defense. For the purpose of this project we will be primarily concerned with the first days lessons of Saviolo's first book. It is here that he gives the exercises for the Single Rapier. But before we can begin to reconstruct the exercises, we must understand Saviolo's use of some of the Fencing Terms. This is important, as his names for some moves and the way some moves are performed varies from other fencing masters. I have tried to find examples of each of the moves that Saviolo has named in the work, so the moves will be consistent with the exercise. These actions are broken down into different forms of Attacks, defenses, and movements.

Saviolo has two types of attacks in his exercises. These are thrusts and cuts. There are three types of thrusts that Saviolo uses. The first is the stoccata. This is a thrust that comes under the opponent's sword. It is usually targeting the belly, but can target the head as well. The second is the Imbroccata. The imbroccata is a thrust above the opponent's sword. Its target is usually the head but can be angled down to attack the stomach as well. The third type of thrust is the Punta Reversa, or left-sided thrust. It is performed by moving the sword arm (presumed to be the right arm), across your body and then thrusting at your opponent's right side. As for the cuts, Saviolo names three distinct cuts. The first is the Mandritta or a cleaving cut coming down at an angle from the right to left. It is performed with the palm and fingers facing up. Its opposite is the Reversa. It is a backhanded cleaving cut coming down at an angle from the left

to right. It is performed with the palm and fingers facing down. The Third cut is the DownRight Blow, as the name suggests this blow comes down in a straight vertical movement. In all instances, the targets of these cuts seem to be the head (7).

The only specific defensive move that Saviolo explains is the beat. Contrary to modern notions, this move is not performed with the sword but with the off hand (8). The chain mail glove mentioned earlier was used to protect the hand from hurt. This is the only active defense that Saviolo allows, for he says that you are not to use the blade to parry your opponents weapon. *I will tell you this weapon must be used with a glove, and if a man should be without a glove, it were better to hazard a little hurt of the hand, thereby to become master of his enemies sword, then to break with the sword and so give his enemy the advantage of him. Moreover, having the use of your left hand, and wearing a gantlet or glove of mail, your enemy shall no sooner make a thrust, by thou shall be ready to catch his sword fast and so command him at your pleasure: wherefore I wish you not to defend any thrust with the sword, because in so doing you loose the point.* (9)

Saviolo does not limit the use of the off hand to just the thrusts however. Both in the first and third exercises he advocates the use of the off hand to deflect cuts as well. At no point during these first exercises does he advocate using the sword to parry and attack. (10) In the Majority of the exercises, the off hand will be used to beat the opponent's blade out to the left side. The only exception to this is the Punta Reversa which Saviolo clearly says should be beaten off to the right side. The reason for this becomes self evident with practice. By trying to move the Punta Reversa off the left side, you are bringing the blade all the way across your body and taking great risk of being "offended".

The last set of terms we need to look at involves movement. Saviolo defines several specific types of movement. The base movement of all of his style is the Circular step. To perform the circular step you will step forward with the right foot (again he assumes you are right handed) at a 45 degree angle and bring the left foot back into your starting position, while bringing the body back in line to the opponent. In this manner if you continue this step you will spiral in on your opponent. Saviolo is very clear in the first several uses of this term, that the left foot follows. He drops this statement in later uses of the term but I have continued to include the recovery as part of the step. The second step he describes is the Pasatta. This move is performed by the left foot (the back foot) being moved straight forward so that it is now the lead foot and the right foot shifting into the reverse of the original stance. These effectively shift you out of the straight line. Saviolo sometimes uses the term Carricado to mean this same move when the right foot is the back foot and you are moving back into the basic stance. The third movement that Saviolo uses in the exercises is the Half Incartata. This move is made by pivoting on the right toe, and bringing the left foot

beside it, almost touching. The body is perfectly in line and behind the sword arm. This move is only used once in the third exercise. All of these move the body at an angle, never forward in a straight line. This is a point that Saviolo make very clear to Luke. *And therefore to proceed, I say that in my opinion and judgement, it is not good to use the right line, whereas in removing in circular wise, you are safe from your enemy, who cannot in such sort hurt you, and you have his weapon at command...*(11) Castle states that this concept of avoiding the straight line was quite prevalent in the teaching of the Spanish (12).

There is only one move detail that must be considered before we can begin to look at the exercises. How should we hold the sword? On this point Saviolo is quite vague. He begins by telling Luke not to hold it in the current fashion, nor should he hold it with two fingers looped over the quillion. The second part of this admonishment is quite clear, but as the first part, one can only guess. The description of how you should hold the sword does not help much either. *I would have you put the thumb on the hilt, and the next finer toward the edge of the Rapier, for so you shall reach further and strike more readily.*(13)

This passage was interpreted by Castle to mean that you have your thumb next to the crossbar, with the index finger looped over the quillion. This was the method most used by the Italians. Castle notes however (as a shortcoming of the illustrations) that this is not the grip shown in the illustrations. In these, they show a grip much more like a modern saber grip with the thumb up against the underside of the quillion. Saviolo then says that you should hold it however it is the most comfortable. For this exercise the Scholar is using the more traditional style and the master will be using the grip from the woodcuts. Now that we have sword in hand, we need to know where to hold it. Saviolo advocates what he calls his short guard. This is with the arm hanging straight down just outside of the right knee, with the tip raised up towards the opponent's face. This is the only manner of holding the sword that Saviolo uses (14). For easy reference, there is a [glossary](#) of terms included below, as well as copies of the woodcut showing the hand position and stance for the first and second [exercises](#).

Now that we have an understanding of the terms used by Saviolo, we are ready to begin the reconstruction of the exercises. The first step in this process was to isolate the actual exercise. In each of the three wards, Saviolo would give a description of a fight between a Scholar and a Master. During this process he would stop to explain some point of philosophy to Luke, or describe some duel he witnessed. Sometimes this actually applied to the principal he was teaching but not always. Instead of going back to the original exercise he would start again, or break down into an If/then style of teaching, where he describes an opponent's attack, and then tells you how to deal with it, but these are disjointed and have no continuity. In all three cases the exercises that are the longest and the most clear are the first exercises described. In the case of

the first exercise there is another fairly long exercise but it merely repeats the same steps as the first one, and did not have the flashy move of the student dispatching the master.

Saviolo also was quite clear in descriptions of movements and attacks and defenses in the First exercise, but becomes a little on the vague side with the Second and third. In the Second exercise he stops explaining the terms and just uses the term itself. However he becomes even more vague by the Third exercise. As a whole, the Third exercise has a completely different feel to it and seems a little odd after watching the first two. Saviolo acknowledges this himself when introducing it to Luke (15). In this exercise the Circular movement is gone and is replaced by sideways movement he refers to as a shifting of weight. This particular exercise took some time to reconstruct because of these differences.

I have modified the Second exercise only slightly by shortening it. The second exercise ends with a very boring move on the part of the Master, right after the scholar performs this spectacular pasta. It is one of the better moves that the Scholar gets to use, and I believe as a training device, the Scholar should always end with positive reinforcement. It is for this reason that the Second exercise ends with the Scholar dispatching the Master.

The final reconstruction of the exercises chosen are included in the appendix. This was done for ease of reference. Each exercise begins with the explanation of the stance and distance (for this is the main difference between the three wards). Both the Master and Scholar will begin in the exact same stance. Then we will describe each action of both the master and scholar in turn. Saviolo explained when to start the action, and we have left this direction in and added it to the Third exercise. We have also clarified the movement directions. In Several instances Saviolo simply said to remove the right foot, but did not say were to put it. It quickly became clear, by the rest of the exercise where it needed to go, and it is reflected as such in the reconstruction. All three of the exercises as mentioned above, will also end with the Scholar dispatching the Master.

While reconstructing these exercises, we decided to use Elizabethan Street clothes instead of protective equipment. We did this for several reasons. First was to try and achieve greater authenticity. If the moves could not be performed in the clothes of the time period (late 1500's), then obviously the reconstruction would have been wrong. We also wanted to create a period feel for the exercises, and since they were choreographed and did not pose a true danger to the Master and Scholar, we opted not to use modern protective equipment and went instead for the Period protective equipment worn by the average person (or not so average person). We attempted to recreate the style of doublets shown in the manual woodcuts. The manual showed

curved sleeves sewn into the doublet with epaulets and venicians. (16) We also decided to use mailed gloves on our off hands. These are actually Butchers gloves that we are wearing over our leather gloves. This is done for aesthetic purposes, and to give a realistic weight to the off hand. Our gloves are of a smaller diameter ring, and not sewn to the leather glove as was the custom in period. (17)

In two of the exercises the distance between the Master and Scholar will vary according to their reach. The first exercise is at a fixed distance so the length of the blades of the rapiers will make a difference. Italian rapiers of the Elizabethan period would have been about 40 to 45 inches of blade measured from the crossbar. They would have had a swept hilt and a balance point about 3 to 6 inches from the crossbar. The rapiers would have weighed about 3 pounds. For this exercise we decided to use the Del Tin practice rapiers. These simulate the above-described blades very nicely and are legal for SCA combat.

In the process of watching these exercises there are several things I would like to point out. The first is that, true to his admonishment to Luke, he does not have the Scholar or master move in a straight line. All movement is designed to take you out of the line of attack. His avoidance of moving in a straight line is very noticeable in the Second exercise, as the two combatants spiral around each other, and then as the range closes to close quarters, he then begins to use lateral movements to take you out of danger. This method of angling out of your opponent's attack also opens up wonderful opportunities for your own attacks as you are now faced towards the opponent's unprotected side. Even in the Third ward, where you are not spiraling away from your opponent, one can see the avoidance of the line of attack with the shifting of the body as well as defending with the off hand. This is key to Saviolo's style. He uses two different methods of defending against an attack. It is only after you are safe from the opponent's weapon (and you have control of it by pushing it out away from you) that he initiated the attack. This brings us right in to Saviolo's conception of time and measure. The timing of the attack was crucial. Saviolo did not initiate an attack until after the body was moved out of the way, and the opponent's attack had been stopped. Only then did he initiate his own attack. And the Combatants always followed up with their own attack. The defensive maneuver is designed to bring you in range of your opponent, by exploiting the opening they have created by their initial attack. By using these methods, one did not have to be fast or strong. As long as you have control of the opponent's blade, you set the pace, not the opponent. The danger, as Saviolo warns Luke, comes from exposing yourself, when you are not in control of the opponent's blade.

Other things of interest to note are the cuts. One of the speeches that Saviolo makes to Luke is that you should never use cuts. *...For to tell the truth, I would not advise any friend of mine, if he were to fight for his credit and life, to strike nether Mandritta nor*

Reversa, because he puts himself in danger of his life.(18) He also explains that the cut is not as effective because it is harder to make cut, and without practice one may only slap his opponent without doing damage. Castle has assumed therefore that Saviolo only includes them to “meet the natural love of Englishmen for that mode of fight.” (19) However, Craig Turner and Tony Soper, in their book *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, have a little different view. Saviolo’s warning against using cuts was for the inexperienced fighter. The reason that they are included in the exercise was to teach the more advanced student, who would be playing the master, the proper way to execute the cut. The mistake most often made was getting in too close to give a proper drawing or slicing cut with the rapier. (20) In all three instances where Saviolo uses cuts, they are accompanied by a step backwards (or in the case of the third exercise, with a shifting of the body away from the cut); naturally producing a slice as the cut is made. (21)

Not only was Saviolo teaching the Master how to properly cut, but he was teaching the Scholar how to defend against it, by staying so close that the master cannot cut. At that close range it is quite easy to deflect the cut by pushing on the blade and still not get cut, especially if one is wearing a glove of mail. We also found that the doublets being worn for the exercise hampered using the cuts. With the curved set in sleeves, it was difficult (to almost impossible) to raise the arm above the head to produce a cleaving strike. The cuts by necessity were performed by the wrist and elbow. This produced a lighter faster strike, and may also explain why the blow could be deflected with the off hand. The cuts as performed in this exercise closely resemble the cuts from Digracie’s manual. The limitations of the Doublets on the arm movement also reinforce the concept of the rapier being held low as much as possible.

It was also interesting to note that the manner of gripping the sword made little difference. It became a matter of personal preference as to which grip was preferred for cutting, and which for thrusting. The only difference between the two grips was that the one shown in the wood cut did allow for a greater reach, almost two inches. However this grip was only possible on the sword with the simple crossbar hilt, and was not possible on the Swept hilt Rapier.

As to the value of these exercises as a training tool, I think there can be little doubt. The Katas of the Asian martial arts have proven effective and have been used for hundreds of years. These exercises provide a great foundation to a new fencer, by showing them 3 simple attacks, and three simple movements and then having them repeat them over and over. You have a great system for helping the new Fencer learn muscle memory of movement, attacking, and defending with the off hand. This last is something that is probably the hardest to teach a new fencer. Working slowly through these lessons takes the fear out of reaching out to touch an opponent’s sword. These exercises also teach the scholar to deal with different situations encountered on the

list. The first exercise deals with in fighting, and how to safely follow a retreating opponent. The second deals with open space, with an opponent just out of range, and the third deals with an opponent in a confined space. An added benefit to this style is that it provides a very defensive mindset, which can be employed as a primary style, or as a secondary style when confronted with an opponent with superior skill, or when one is fatigued. Whether this style is used as a primary combat mode, or is just used in specific situations, it still gives the SCA Rapier combatant additional techniques that are both safe, usable and period.

Bibliography

- Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay, Craig Turner and Tony Soper, copyright 1990, and published by Board of Trustees Southern Illinois University. ISBN # 0-8093-1562-9
- Paradoxes of Defense, George Silver, Published originally in 1599, and Reprinted in The English Experience, Da Capo Press, 1968
- Schools and Masters of Fence, From the Middle ages to the End of the Eighteenth Century, With a Complete Bibliography, By Egerton Castle, M.A., F.S.A., “Con Brevetto Di Nomina a Maestro di Scherma.” Member Honoraire de l’Academie d’Armes de Paris. Printed in London and New York by G. Bell and sons, LTD, 1910.
- Vincentio Saviolo, his Practice in Two Books. The first intreating of the use of the Rapier and Dagger. The second, of Honor and Honorable Quarrels. By Vincentio Saviolo. Printed in London by John Wolff, 1595.

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Footnotes

1 George Silver Paradoxes of Defense, first published in London 1599, Reprinted in The English Experience, 1968, page 64 [Back](#)

2 There is some dissent as to whom Jeronimo was. Silver alluded that Jeronimo was the son of Bonettie, but Eagerson Castle says that there is no evidence to support this theory. Castle also says there were some who believed that Jeronimo was the translator to Digracie's Fencing Manual. Both Castle, and Silver did not list any manuals or credit him with anything other than taking over the school after Bonetti's death. [Back](#)

3 The second is the translation of DiGrassi spoken of above. [Back](#)

4 Castle, page 115 [Back](#)

5 The Mail glove was the hallmark of Saviolo's style, and according to George Silver, also of Rocco Bonetti's. Saviolo used his off hand to parry a sword, and covered this hand in chain mail to protect it from being cut. The Glove was used both in practice as well as in Duels, but Saviolo argues that even if you are without the mail glove it is better to suffer a little hurt on the hand, then to loose your life. [Back](#)

6 Saviolo, page 46. Saviolo is discussing the benefits of his second ward, with his scholar Luke. [Back](#)

7 Saviolo digresses greatly on occasion and begins to ramble in a series of if/then situations. In one he suggests a Mandritta at the opponents legs, however he never gives an example of this in the exercises. [Back](#)

8 Even Castle claims that Saviolo used this term to mean a movement with the sword (Castle, page 123). As you will see in the exercises it clearly does not. [Back](#)

9 Saviolo, page 44. Saviolo is discussing the use of the First Ward. [Back](#)

10 Although he will use the sword to parry a cut during the Sword and Dagger Exercises (but only once). [Back](#)

11 Saviolo, page 39, discussing the opening move of the first ward. [Back](#)

12 Castle, page 123. [Back](#)

13 Saviolo, page 24. [Back](#)

14 Saviolo pages 9, 17, and 17 (Saviolo's numbering of the pages are not very consistent). [Back](#)

15 Saviolo Page 17 (the second page 17). [Back](#)

16 The doublet worn necessitated a modification of how we were performing the cuts, this will be explained in more detail later on. [Back](#)

17 There were several types of chain mail gloves that have survived. [Back](#)

18 Saviolo, page 11. [Back](#)

19 Castle, page 119 [Back](#)

20 Turner and Soper, page 66. [Back](#)

21 I had an opportunity to see a demonstration on cutting with an edged rapier (not sharpened) and a roast. The Mandritta out of the first exercise produced a cut in the roast about 4 inches long and an inch and a half deep. This sword was unsharpened and still produced a cut that would have opened any artery in the neck. [Back](#)

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Glossary

- Staccata: A thrust made under your opponent's blade. Can be targeted at either the belly or the face.
- Imboccata: A thrust made above your opponent's blade. Can be made at either the belly or the face.
- Punta Reversa: Moving the arm across the body and delivering a thrust at the opponent from the left side.
- Mandritta: A right-handed cut, coming down from the right to the left. This is usually targeted at the head.
- Reversa: A back handed cut coming down from the left to the right. This is usually targeted at the head.
- Down Right Blow: This is a cut coming down vertically. The Target is usually the head.
- Circular Step: This step is made by moving the right foot forward and to the right, at about a 45-degree angle. As the left foot is moved back into place, the body is repositioned so as to be facing the opponent.
- Passata: Step forward with the left foot so that it is now in front. Bring the right foot in to the back position so that you are now in a mirror image of the original stance. The first step is performed at an angle if the opponent is stationary and straight forward if the opponent is retreating.
- Carricado: This is the same as the Passata, except that the left foot is already forward, and the passing step will be made with the right foot.
- Half-Incartata: Pivot on the right foot with the body coming in line behind the right arm. The left foot should be parallel to the right, almost touching.

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Saviolo's Exercises for the Single Rapier

The First Ward

Both the Master and Scholar should place themselves into position so that they are standing with their right foot forward, the left foot behind, and turned so that the instep of the left foot is in line with the right heel. Shoulders and hips should be squared, with the left hand up to protect the face, and the Rapier held short. The Master and Scholar should be standing toe to toe.

Master: Make a circular step to the right with the right foot, make a stoccata to the stomach of the Scholar.

Scholar: As the Master moves his right foot, make a circular pace to the right, beating the Master's stoccata off to the left, and present your own stoccata to the belly of the master while tuning your knuckles in and the wrist bone out.

Master: As student moves back foot, beat away blade with left hand to the left side, and performing a Carricado do a Reversa to the head of the Scholar.

Scholar: As Master moves foot and Lifts his hand, make a Passata and give a stoccata to the master's stomach. Raise left hand to deflect the Reversa, not the Rapier.

Master: As Scholar steps forward, break the stoccata outward with the left hand, remove back with the left foot so that the right is not the forward foot, and give a Mandritta at the head of the scholar.

Scholar: Perform a caricado. Turn the rapier hand out and give the Master a stoccata to the stomach, while bringing your left hand on high to protect the face and head.

Master: Yield and shrink of body the beat the stoccata to the left side. Circular step to the right, and deliver an imbroccata to the face of the Scholar.

Scholar: Circular step to the right, while beating the imbroccata to the left side. Give an imbroccata to the Master's face.

Master: Circular step towards the right. Break imbroccata out to the left side, and strike a down right blow to the head of the Scholar.

Scholar: As the Master delivers the downright blow, perform half incartata and deflect the blow with the left hand. Turn the hand out, give a stoccata. Do not move forward.

The Second Ward

Stand with the right foot forward, and the left foot behind. The left foot should be at a slight angle so that the middle of the left foot is in line with the heel of the right. Legs should be slightly bent and weight should be on the left leg. The rapier should be held short, with the tip towards the opponent's face. The Master and Scholar's right feet should be in line with each other. Both should be just far enough apart that they may reach the other with a step forward.

Master: Stoccata to the belly of the Scholar, while making a circular step to the right.

Scholar: Circular step to the right, while beating the stoccata off to the left. Answer the Master with your own stoccata to his stomach.

Master: Break stoccata off the left side, as you make a circular step to the right. Give the Scholar an imbroccata to the face.

Scholar: Make a circular step to the right, while beating the imbroccata away. Return an imbroccata to the face of the Master.

Master: Make a circular step to the right as you break the imbroccata with left hand. Make a staccato to the belly of the Student.

Scholar: Make a circular step to the right as you break the stoccata to the left side. Give the Master a stoccata to the stomach.

Master: Pull back hips, brining stomach out of range, and break the stoccata to the right side. Perform a Punta Reversa to the Scholar's head.

Scholar: Perform the Pasatta at a 45-degree angle to the right. Make an Imbroccata to the head of the Master.

The Third Ward

Both Master and Scholar should stand parallel to each other with their knees slightly bent (as if you were about to sit down) and feet should be about a shoulder width apart. Rapiers should be held short and aimed at the opponent's head. Master and Scholar should be at the same distance as the Second Exercise.

Scholar: Shift right foot to the side. Stoccata at length, between the Master's arm and Rapier.

Master: Pull hips back out of range, beat stoccata to the left side and answer with a stoccata at length.

Scholar: Move right foot to your left (do not reset back foot), while beating the stoccata off the left side. Bearing back with your body, give a Reversa on the head of the Master.

Master: Deflect cut with left hand. Free the point of your Rapier and give an imbroccata to the Scholar's head as you shift your weight on to your right foot.

Scholar: Half incartata. Use the left hand to beat master's imbroccata away while shrinking back with the body. Give a Punta Reversa at the Master's head.

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