

AN EXCERPT FROM
GOMARD'S *THE THEORY OF FENCING*



Chapter 4

THE GUARD

The **guard** is the most proper position for defense and offense.

The right-arm should be half-extended, in such a way that the wrist, if defense requires it, does not have more than a short distance to get close to the body, and, if an attack requires it, to extend to its greatest distance.

In a proper guard, the wrist should be at the midpoint of the chest in such a way as to equally allow for defense above and below. If you have an adversary that departs from this rule by holding a guard higher or lower than what's customary, it is better to abandon this rule yourself and to match your guard's height to your adversary's. To hold a medium guard against fencers with a high or low guard is to imprudently expose to those fencers that part of the body that they threaten.

The left arm, which remains curved behind the head, is not placed there solely to add more grace to the guard. It should serve as a counterweight to the right arm, by lowering when the other lifts, and lifting when the other lowers. The two arms' countering movements are a powerful balance, which, in aiding the lunge and the retreat, accelerate the execution. Fencers who neglect the left arm's position deprive themselves of an excellent aid to the attack and the retreat, at the same time that they harm the proper harmony of their guards' poise and grace. In general, students beginning assaults are disposed to neglect the left arm, and to rest it on the hips, believing that this relieves a superfluous fatigue. The master must diligently root out this abuse by making the students understand how harmful it is to their progress.

The body should remain directly over the hips and well effaced, in order to present as little target area as possible, so that the parries become more rapid by moving less. There are some fencers who believe that they make defending easier by leaning the body forward and thus hiding part of the chest. On the other hand, others lean their bodies backward in order to leave less to the range of the enemy's thrusts. These two positions are dangerous for these reasons. The fencer who leans forward exposes more of his shoulder and forearm to his adversary's thrusts and places himself in a less-favorable position to execute his parries and judge his adversary's movements. The fencer who leans backward greatly harms the speed of his attack and riposte by losing time in righting his body in order to make a fast lunge.

We have said that, in the guard, the two heels should be separated by an interval of two soles; this is the smallest distance that should be taken by a fencer who wants to have a good base in the guard and a bend in the knees so as to obtain the necessary spring to lunge without harming the lunge's grace. This need to have the knees bent is a point on which we particularly insist because it is one of the most important conditions to a good guard. Without bent knees, there is no rapid lunge, and without a rapid lunge, there is no chance of success in the attack. The legs are the springs that thrust the body forward, therefore it is necessary to allow them all elasticity in holding them constantly bent and ready to extend to lunge. Fencers so keenly feel the need for speed in the attack that, in the assault, they are often seen leaning more forward in their guard and placing more of an interval between their heels than the master demands in the lesson. Despite the wrong that they can do to their posture's grace, we should not blame them too much for seeking a slightly exaggerated position, which is their way to be faster than they could in the usual guard.

The guard often takes the name "the engagement." We say that one is on guard in *tierce* when one is engaged in *tierce*, and likewise with all the other engagements. Therefore, there can be as many guards as there are engagements.



Chapter 5

THE LUNGE

The **lunge** is the extension from the guard to carry a thrust to the adversary.

In the lunge, the distance from the right heel to the left heel should be twice the interval that it is in the guard. The right knee should be placed perpendicularly over the instep. To carry the right foot further would harm the ability to retreat without benefiting the attack's greater reach. As in the guard, the body should remain directly over the hips. You should avoid leaning too far forward in order to give greater reach to the lunge because then the retreat becomes more difficult than from the right foot's forced extension.

Let's review the different movements that compose the lunge's action:

1. the extension and elevation of the right arm;
2. the lowering of the left arm;
3. the straightening of the left leg; and
4. the right foot's action in moving forward by shaving the floor.

In the assault, these four movements should be made with such rapidity that they appear as a single action to the eye. But to get the student to this degree of speed, the master must be careful to not require the student to practice these movements one at a time. He should first make the student lift and hold the right arm and simultaneously lower the left (which is the fourth position). Then, finally, straighten the left leg in displacing the left hip and carry the right foot forward, shaving the floor, to complete the lunge. This approach in the student's instruction is very important, especially the movement of the right arm, which should always precede the last two movements. Whatever degree of speed a fencer can acquire in his lunge, those who come from a good school always have a sensitivity to correctly executing the lunge, indicating to the trained eye that the fencer's hand moved first.

We urge the master to demand that the student make the sandal sound in the lunge in order to force the student to make his foot fall flat and perpendicularly to the ground.¹ Without wishing to argue that the noise made by the foot is overly useful, we do not find it superfluous to the attack's authenticity. If we *do* require it, it is more for the cause that produces the noise than the noise itself, because the sound indicates that the fencer did not restrain his extension and that his heel was not raised from the ground before the toe, which is the sole reason for the silence of the sandal.

The master should also keep watch that, in the lunge, the left foot does not budge from where it is planted. It is important that the attacker maintain all possible solidity and fixity in his sole support point.



¹ During and after Gomard's time, fencers frequently wore sandals when fencing. Sometimes they wore two sandals, other times they wore a sandal only on the lead foot with a slipper on the rear one. The sandals were designed to not only let the fencer feel the floor as he moved, but also to make a distinct sound when it hit the floor indicating, as Gomard tells us, that the fencer's lead foot landed properly in the lunge. —*Transl.*