Strokez off ij hand swerde:
a brief instruction in the use of personal arms

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Despite ample evidence for the appeal of martial prowess in late medieval Europe, few texts of instruction in arms survive, particularly from before 1500. Manuscript instructions in arms, frequently referred to by the German term Fechtbücher, are rare attempts at the transmission of a physical and mechanical action into text. There are only three examples of this kind of instruction in Middle English, and because of their obscurity and challenging vocabulary they are rarely discussed as part of Europe’s martial and intellectual history. This paper presents an edition of one of those fight-texts, found in the British Library’s MS Cotton Titus A xxv.
Features of the Fechtbuch Genre

The roots of text instruction in personal arms are still obscure. The earliest extant manual, Leeds, Royal Armouries MS I 33, displays a level of complexity in instruction and a careful pedagogical approach to its subject that seem to have sprung “fully armed from the head of its creators.”

Most manuscript fight-books contain instruction on a variety of weapon combinations and combative scenarios: sword and buckler, the two-hand sword, dagger, and fighting in armour, from horseback, in judicial lists, or against multiple opponents. Such variety is common to the illustrated manuals, as is the habit of composers to dedicate them to elite readers. The bulk of surviving texts are from German sources.

Unillustrated manuals are less common but represent some of the earliest material known, such as the collections of instructional verse attributed to the fourteenth-century master Johannes Liechtenauer. Liechtenauer’s instructions take the form of short, easily remembered verse, a literary technique called merckverse or zedeln. These short passages give simple rules of action or describe guiding principles governing technique. Most martial merckverse is accompanied by glosses, necessary for the medieval reader as the verses were never intended for use outside an oral system of instruction. The verse instructions were originally mnemonic tools for use in the classroom. All early fight-texts assume a reader with a good knowledge in arms as there are few definitions of terms, basic instructions on balance and movement, or other elementary principles concerning technique. Although these texts expect a literate reader, they are typically composed entirely in the vernacular; Latin content is rare.

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6 Examples include München, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek Cgm 1507, and København, Kongelige Bibliotek MS Thott 290 2’.
9 Forgeng and Kiermayer are careful to point out that the glosses are necessary only because of the cryptic nature of the text, not because of any intentional secrecy on Liechtenauer’s part. On merckverse see Forgeng and Kiermayer, 155. For a discussion of zedeln see Heidemarie Bodemer, “Das Fechtbuch: Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der bildkünstlerischen Darstellung der Fechtkunst in den Fechtbüchern des mittelalterlichen westeuropäischen Raumes vom mittelalter bis Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts” (PhD dissertation, Stuttgart: Universitat Stuttgart, 2008), 74.
The Middle English Fight-Texts and Cotton Titus A XXV.

British Library, MS Cotton Titus A xxv, like many of the volumes in the Cottonian collection, is a composite of different works of different dates and sources that were bound together by Robert Cotton's librarians in the seventeenth century. The codex contains six discrete items dating from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, copied on vellum and paper. Cotton's early cataloguers were unable to make out the contents of the paper gathering from ff. 94-105, which contains the brief passage of fight instruction, and described it as "certainly Latin verse, worn and fading characters, on paper."

The pages in the gathering are unlined and contain 30 to 32 lines of text each leaf. There is a watermark of a bull that has a strong similarity to Piccard 85965 and other marks typically of German and French paper makers from the 1440s to 1460s.

Because of the composite nature of the codex, the paper gathering of ff. 94-105 cannot be compared with its neighbors for dating or provenance; we have only the internal details of the gathering as clues. There is significant wear and soiling throughout, and large holes affect ff. 94-98 and ff. 104-105, suggesting these leaves spent time acting as covers for the gathering before it was bound into the present codex. None of this damage can be blamed on the 1731 fire at Ashburnham House. The codex was bound prior to that fire and the 1756 report to parliament mentions no damage to the Titus book-press.

The contents of the gathering of ff. 94-105 are an odd mix, beginning with selections from a verse prophecy attributed to John of Bridlington (c. 1320-1379). The selection is copied in a single fifteenth-century secretary hand. The Bridlington verses end at f. 104v. Two more verses in Latin appear at the head of f. 105r, one being an Agnus Dei. The fight-text follows this and is divided into three sections of seven, six, and nine lines respectively, the first and third sections

11 Cotton Titus A xxv was rebound sometime in the nineteenth century. The gatherings are not mounted on tabs, making accurate collation difficult.


13 The first description of the contents of Titus A xxv appears in a 1639 hand-list of the Cotton collection, now London, British Library, MS Additional 36682 (b), f.201r where only “Annales monastery de Buellio in Hibernia” is listed. The next listing of Cotton’s manuscripts is Thomas Smith, Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Cottoniae (Oxford, 1696), 125. Here, item 4 in Titus A xxv is described as “Versus quidam Latin, exesis et evanescensibus characteribus in Charta.”

14 See www.piccard-online.de/?nr=85965

15 Sam Hooper, A Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library to which are Added Many Emendations and Additions with an Appendix (London: S. Hooper, 1777), xii-xiv.


having short titles provided by the same scribe. There is marginal bracing, similar to that seen in contemporary poetry and verse, around each of the three sections, but the text itself exhibits no verse structure. More verses follow the final instructions on 105v. The first verse is heavily damaged by a hole in the leaf and is illegible. The final piece of verse is another prophetic Latin composition which is transcribed in R. H. Robbins.

A single hand is used throughout ff. 94-104, and may be the same hand responsible for the various verses and the fight-text on f. 105. Differences in letter sizes, line spacing, pen size, and the colour and weight of the ink make comparison of the hands difficult. There is consistency among the three groups of text on f. 105, and it is likely they are all the product of a single scribe, produced over an indeterminate period of time. The date for composition is in the third or fourth quarter of the fifteenth century, on the balance of evidence from the watermark and the scribal hand.

For such a short passage, there is considerable variation in spelling in the fight-text. This could suggest that it was an original composition, copied down quickly with little concern for consistency. These elements may also suggest the passage was copied from dictation. The nature of the content and its placement at the end of a gathering of miscellaneous secular writing is evocative of a text that was temporary and ephemeral, supplementing oral instruction in personal arms.

The Techniques of Martial Instruction

Comparison of this text with the other Middle English fight-texts is fairly easy, but does little to improve understanding of the meaning of the martial instruction as presented. There are strong similarities between all three texts in style, content, and vocabulary. The British Library's MS Harley 3542 contains, among its alchemical and medical recipes, passages on the two-hand sword, likely compiled around 1420. These 184 lines of instruction are divided into two prose sections, following a format similar to the Cotton text, and a verse section that uses simple rhyme and rhythm. British Library MS Additional 39564 collects sword lessons using a similar prose format to the Titus text. MS Add. 39564 has forty-one lessons copied onto a small scroll.


This verse appears in Rossell Hope Robbins, “Poems Dealing with Contemporary Conditions,” in vol. 5 of A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1975), 1533.

likewise intended as direction for a single student at practice. As far as the weapons mentioned in the titles for the Titus passages are concerned, the sword is likely the long, double-edged weapon that became popular among elites and fighting men in the fifteenth century. There was great variety in the sizes and proportions of these swords, and shorter versions could be comfortably used with one or two hands. It is not clear what kind of two-hand sword is in mind for these exercises. The staff mentioned in the third section is not necessarily the quarter-staff of popular history, but could refer to any of a variety of two-hand weapons that were not swords or axes.

A helpful analogy has been offered as a way to explain how these texts could instruct swordsmen. The comparison is to practice forms, or kata, used in modern Eastern martial arts schools. A kata is a solo drill used as repetitive practice for students. It works by imprinting set movements in the student’s mental and physical memory in a way that ultimately makes such actions habitual. Such drills appear to be unique to the Middle English fight-texts and are not found in any continental manuals. This approach to martial instruction is not explicitly described in medieval contexts, although similar training techniques are mentioned in the hugely popular De Re Militari and imitators, where the use of a stationary target for training with the sword is mentioned. Solo drills are also described in the sixteenth century by Richard Mulcaster. His 1581 work on training a new swordsman advises the use of a “counterfit adversarie” or “shadow” when practicing alone.

Even with this insight into the function of these texts, there is the problem of vocabulary. The Cotton compiler does not borrow from the continental lexicon of combat instruction, a lexicon largely understood by later fencing historians and one that English manuals adopted consistently in the seventeenth century. Any attempt at translating these passages into modern English will run into various problems with the idiosyncratic use of existing fifteenth-century vocabulary. There are few, if any, borrowed terms from German and Italian texts, as they currently survive, and the English composers have made interpretation much more difficult by

21 MS Additional 39564 has not appeared in publication, having had its first mention, outside the 1933 catalogue entry noted above, in Anglo, The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe, 122, where Anglo transcribes a few lines to illustrate a point about its opaque vocabulary.


23 As a family, staff weapons include some of the most common battlefield tools of the late medieval period and constitute the second most common weapon found in records of assault and homicide: James Buchanan Given, Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England (Stanford: University of California Press, 1977), 189. The term "staff" is often used generically to refer to any long weapon that was not a sword, particularly in Richard R. Sharpe, Calendar of Coroners’ Rolls of the City of London, A.D. 1300-1378 (New York: Borgo, 1996), xxiii, 71, 110. In some cases the only way to tell one kind of staff from another is from their assessed values at an inquest, as is common in Charles Gross, ed. Select Cases from the Coroners’ Rolls, AD. 1265-1413 with a Brief Account of the Office of Coroner (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1896).


26 Quoted in Anglo, The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe, 29.

27 The earliest printed manuals in English are Vincentio Saviolo, His Practise, in two books (London: John Wolf, 1595); and George Silver, Paradoxes of Defense (London: Edward Blount, 1599). These works do not use the vocabulary of the earlier English manuscript texts.
using native English terms in a very context-specific way. A similar problem is posed by early-English dance choreography from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and they also survive in only three instances. In certain features, particularly their context-specific terminology, they show the most similarities to the fight-texts. Dance choreography also uses a simple, un-glossed, system of instruction listing movements using a specialised vocabulary drawn from existing English words with some borrowed French and Italian terminology. Although there are no borrowed terms in the English fight-texts from German or Italian sources, there are several between English and French dance choreography.

Some terms, such as *fune* for thrust, are safely understood regardless of the context, but many terms that appear to refer to quantity, or words that normally act as adjectives, when used in a fight-text, adopt entirely new grammatical functions and meanings that we cannot gloss accurately. An attempt to gloss some of these context-specific terms, based on current interpretations of other English fight-texts and relevant period material, is included in the notes to the apparatus. The modern reader who hopes to identify martial techniques will find this text frustrating, but this demonstrates how dependent late medieval martial instruction was on oral transmission. This texts exist only to assist and support the student, or instructor, engaged in a still predominantly oral practice.

**Editorial Conventions**

The scribe frequently shortens words ending in -er, such as “quarter” and these are expanded in the apparatus and indicated with italics. The scribe is also very inconsistent with spelling, something surprising for such a short passage. Because this is suggestive of the circumstances under which the text was composed, and may represent important scribal intentions, the original spelling has been preserved. Where the original MS is difficult to read, as lines 16-26 on f. 105v, speculative readings are indicated in angle brackets. Unreadable characters, where no suggestion can be offered, are indicated by ellipsis in angled brackets. Line numbering does not include the section titles.

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28 Among the small extant collection of Middle English dance choreography are the late fifteenth-century manuscripts in Derbyshire, Derbyshire Record Office D77 Box 38 (Gresley), pp. 51-79. For a transcription and discussion see David Fallows, “The Gresley Dance Collection, c. 1500,” *Royal Music Association Research Chronicle*, no. 29 (1996): 1-20.


30 This is a particular problem with words such as *sengyll, dowbyll, quarter, vydyng* (voiding) and *rake*. All these terms have well-established meanings outside these texts, but in their context as fight-instruction they take on entirely new meanings specific to this context.
Selected Bibliography


The Manuscript

Shelfmark: London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus A xxv.
Material: Ff. 94-105 paper in a gathering of 12 leaves. Watermark is possibly Piccard 85965. Gathering forms part of composite codex of 138 vellum and paper leaves from the twelfth to sixteenth century.
Size: 11 x 20 cm.
Language: Codex contains Middle English, Latin, Irish, French. F. 105 in Middle English and Latin.
Script: Likely a single scribe, using secretary of the late fifteenth century.

The Text

105r Strokez of ij hand swerde
   a
   flyrste a rownde for the waste sengyll with a fune
   Also a quarter with a fune A rake sengyll with a fune
   A dowbull rownde a dowbyll rake with a nawk
   A quarter & a rake & a wype with a spryng vydng
   with the lyfte hand with a quarter with a fune skypyng
   with a wype Than a quarter & byeke a fune atte pe ryght
   shulder with a robecke

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31 There is a tiny marginal “a” here, where a bracket begins, extending down to line 7.
32 A thrust, likely from the French foine.
33 This term appears in MS Harley 3542 and Additional 39564. James Hester suggests it refers to one of the four quarters of the body, as it is often depicted in illustrated fight-texts. However, there is no corresponding indication in this text as to which quarter is meant. It may refer, in this case, to a specific movement of the student, either with the body or the feet. See James Hester, “The Vse of the Two Hand Sworde; The English Fight Manual of MS Harley 3542 (A Critical Edition),” (MA dissertation, York: University of York, 2006).
34 This term appears in the Gresley dance choreography and is interpreted by Nevile as a lateral movement of the feet. “Dance Steps and Music in the Gresley Manuscript,” 5. Hester defines it as a type of cut, “The Vse of the Two Hand Sworde,” 19.
35 This is identified, by Nevile, with the French dance term semibreve and refers to a specific movement of the feet. Ibid., 5-6.
36 Appears in the Gresley dance choreography, where Nevile equates it with the French breve, a movement of the feet. Ibid.
37 This may modify the movement of the dowbull in line 3, or it could be a separate movement of the weapon in relation to the feet. It has no cognates outside English fight-texts. Hutton glosses rowenis in MS Harley 3542 as a “circular cut,” Hutton, 36. Hester defines it as a “cut using a wide swing to gather strength,” Hester, “The Vse of the Two Hand Sworde,” 18.
38 This appears in MS Harley 3542 as bauke where Hutton and Hester define it as a blow or a cut: Hutton, 36; Hester, “The Vse of the Two Hand Sworde,” 18.
39 “voiding.” Its specific function here is unclear.
40 “skipping.”
41 See also bakke in lines 10 and 11. This may be a contraction of “backward.”
42 This term appears in MS Harley 3542 as rabetis (plural) and in MS Additional 39564 as rabett. Hester interprets this as a metaphor for a “vertical cut,” Hester, “The Vse of the Two Hand Sworde,” 22. However, the French rabatir, used to describe a parry or block, appears in a description of axe combat by Olivier de la Marche in his sixteenth-century memoirs, and may be a more appropriate reading in this
Than þe chase ffyrst a dowbyll rownde with a bakke fune
and a fore\textsuperscript{44} fune rennyng with a robekke þa þa\textsuperscript{45} rowndez
viydyng with a reste a\textsuperscript{46} þa a bakke fune to the tome
a fore fune to the tother\textsuperscript{47} with a bakke fune to þe fune with a
nawke <sw>ynge And on þe fote þe hand the hye\textsuperscript{48} & the herte
to accorde

\textsuperscript{10}Stroekez atte þe iij hand staffe
The fyrst pointe is a florysh about the
fyngere the nexte floryse is aboute þe hande
And thanne iij quarteres And a rownde and
ii rakes in þe rownes iij quarteres closede
staffe\textsuperscript{49} A j rounde war hym your armes be hynde\textsuperscript{50}
& than iij hawkes\textsuperscript{51} for þe wrong syde <bryng>
A fune for hym in þe tother syde And þe
herte þe fote þe Eye to accorde et
cet

\textsuperscript{15}context. See Sydney Anglo, “Le Jeu de la Hache: A Fifteenth-Century Treatise on the Technique of
\textsuperscript{43}A second tiny marginal “a” is placed here at the head of a second bracket, extending to the foot of the leaf.
\textsuperscript{44}Likely a contraction of “forward.”
\textsuperscript{45}This is a construction in Old English that is read as “then the.” My thanks to Dr. Maren Clegg Hyer,
Valdosta State University, for pointing out that this is a deliberate word choice and not a scribal mistake.
\textsuperscript{46}The “a” here is clearly legible, although it may be a scribal mistake where a reading of “and” would make
more sense.
\textsuperscript{47}“other”
\textsuperscript{48}“eyes”
\textsuperscript{49}This word appears in the margin on this line, outside a bracket that runs down the side of the text from line
14.
\textsuperscript{50}“behind”
\textsuperscript{51}Alternate spelling of \textit{awke} from lines 3 and 12.