

# The Ferrara Manuscript: A Discussion of Destreza and Vulgar Fencing Traditions in Spain



Manuel Valle-Ortiz

**Abstract** The *destreza* was a characteristic fencing system present in Hispanic countries during the Golden centuries. Contemporarily, there were other fencing systems of possible European origin known as common or vulgar fencing. Even with striking differences, both systems share some technical terms and concepts. We present the Ferrara manuscript, a recently discovered item which, although written from the perspective of *verdadera destreza*, also covers many features of both systems. This book was written on behalf of an Austrian nobleman present at the Spanish court, probably Johan Ferdinand von Kueburg. It includes some basic *destreza* techniques as well as a description of a number of vulgar techniques and their counters. It also contains a nice set of illustrations, which is uncommon for *destreza* manuals.

**Keywords** Fencing · *Destreza* · *Verdadera* · Vulgar · Common fencing · Ferrara manuscript

## 1 Introduction

*Destreza* can be translated as dexterity or skill. It has been employed as the denomination of specific fencing practices that were widely employed in the Hispanic kingdoms and dominions from the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century (Valle Ortiz 2016). Originally, this denomination appeared in opposition to the “common” or “vulgar” *esgrima* (fencing), suggesting an elevated level of scientific knowledge and moral superiority on their side. However, as some vulgar fencers also used the denomination of *destreza* in order to increase their prestige, the qualification of *verdadera* (true) was added, while the term “vulgar” had a derogative association, even if attached to *destreza* (Fallows 2012).

There are discussions about the limits and definitions of these different modalities of fencing, with heated debates between different schools claiming their approach is the “authentic” one. This is nothing new, as such competing claims were made by

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M. Valle-Ortiz (✉)  
Universidade Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain  
e-mail: [gurnemanz@hotmail.es](mailto:gurnemanz@hotmail.es)

historical masters, each stating that their approach was the “true” *destreza* while their rivals were practitioners of mere common or vulgar traditions. A further distinction could be made between common and vulgar fencing: the popular fencing systems already in use when the *destreza* and its derivatives appeared (in the late sixteenth century) may be called the common *destreza*, while vulgar *destreza* is those aspects of these systems as viewed by the *verdadera destreza* practitioners. This distinction is modern and, in my opinion, only adds unnecessary confusion.

There is a considerable corpus of Hispanic fencing treatises (more than five hundred documents) with perhaps more than two hundred from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unfortunately, some of the oldest treatises, such as those authored by Jaime Pons de Perpinan and Pedro de la Torre or Francisco Román in the fifteenth or the early sixteenth centuries, were already lost at the time of *destreza*’s creation (Valle Ortiz 2012; Valle Ortiz and Curtis 2009). Nonetheless, there is enough information in the surviving materials to reconstruct and bring back to life a full fencing system or at least certain approaches to the *verdadera destreza* systems (see caveats by Burkart 2016). In this chapter, we will analyze the distinction between *verdadera* and vulgar *destreza* in light of the Spanish fencing treatises and other sources, with a focus on the work of Octavio Ferrara based on a previously unknown manuscript dated to 1625.

## 2 Verdadera Destreza and Vulgar Fencing: Opposition or Continuum?

There is a shared language between common fencing and *verdadera destreza*, as we can see in works such as *Arte de Esgrima* by Godinho (2015), published after 1599, which is the only surviving manual of Iberian common fencing, or in the *Manuscrito da espada* (2013) compiled during the seventeenth century—an eclectic work where the concepts and terminology of *destreza* are mixed with techniques clearly on the vulgar side.

On the other side, the *destreza* masters, starting with Jerónimo Sánchez de Carranza (1539–1600), have made descriptions of vulgar techniques, often mocking them, sometimes counteracting them, with more or less accurate descriptions of these techniques. Eventually, Pacheco de Narvaez (1570s–1640) established some sort of a canon, initially with eighteen vulgar techniques (*Las cien conclusiones y 18 contradicciones*) up to a total of almost thirty in his last work (*Nueva ciencia*) (Pacheco de Narváez 1608, 1672). There are some additional and occasional techniques that appear in other treatises or in literary sources as *Las valentonas y destreza* by Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) (*Manuscrito da espada* 2013; Valladares Reguero 2001).

*Destreza* masters usually describe only a series of techniques but not the fundamentals and core doctrines of vulgar *destreza*. However, in the only extant book of common *destreza*, a complete fighting system with several arms is described

(Godinho 2015). Usually, the vulgar destreza is reported by most of the destreza masters as the counterpart of verdadera destreza, claiming their work as the definitive rebuttal of such corrupt practices, but under this derogative attitude, we can find some meeting points.

We do not know the methods and contents of other common fencers if indeed there was common ground between them since the early works are lost. Some of the remaining works of early authors such as Pons, de la Torre, and Roman, can be found as partial copies or are mentioned in later treatises. They appear to have constructed complete fighting systems that include the use of a range of weapons, based on underlying principles that unite their practice, such as the positions *uñas arriba* and *uñas abajo* (with fingernails up and down), as recorded by the verdadera destreza practitioners in later books (Rivera 2012a, b, c).

We have a few clues about the origin of vulgar fencing. There is a European background with some fencing representation in manuscripts and other pictorial manifestations (Dawson 2016) where striking similarities appear. We do not know if this is a manifestation of a common practice or the result of scribal fancies. However, there is cumulative evidence that a number of written sources across Hispanic, German, or English backgrounds share certain names, concepts, and techniques through a European common ground. Some have even proposed to avoid such terms as common or vulgar destreza, which could have derogatory connotations, but use instead commonplace or customary fencing (Acutt 2014).

As for the fencing books, it has been proposed that some early works as *Les secrets du premier livre sur l'espée seule* by de Saint Didier (1573) are closely related to Iberian common fencing (Rivera 2013). The Iberian countries might have had an autochthonous style that survived the eruption of destreza, maintaining this dual tradition during a long period as can be seen as late as the early seventeenth century (Cruzado y Peralta 1702). In classical destreza fencing treatises such as *Nueva ciencia* where many vulgar techniques are described, certain techniques are attributed to specific countries or styles (for example, Italian or Flemish) (Pacheco de Narváez 1672). In late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the destreza masters started to address the appearance of such styles, mainly Italian and French, and describe specific counteracting actions against these new foes (Ettenhard y Abarca 1697; Guerra de la Vega 1681; Lorenz de Rada 1705; Rodrigo Noveli 1731).

In conclusion, if the destreza masters were so interested in fighting against the vulgar practitioners during such a long period of time, even if we only have scant evidence of the extent of vulgar practice, common destreza must have been well established if the destreza masters went to such lengths to oppose it.

### 3 The Ferrara Manuscript

As a manifestation of the opposition between “vulgar” and “true” practitioners of verdadera destreza (*diestros*), several works were written during the seventeenth century—from the classical works of Pacheco’s *Grandezas*, *Cien conclusiones*, and

*Nueva ciencia* (1600, 1608, 1672) to other works such as Perez de Mendoza's *Principios* (1672), which deal specifically with the vulgar techniques and the way to fight them. A very singular work is the Ferrara manuscript, not only for discussing, to some extent, the vulgar techniques but for the descriptive illustrations, which are extremely rare in *destreza* manuals. This previously unstudied manuscript is here described and analyzed for the first time. A codicological description is included in Appendix.

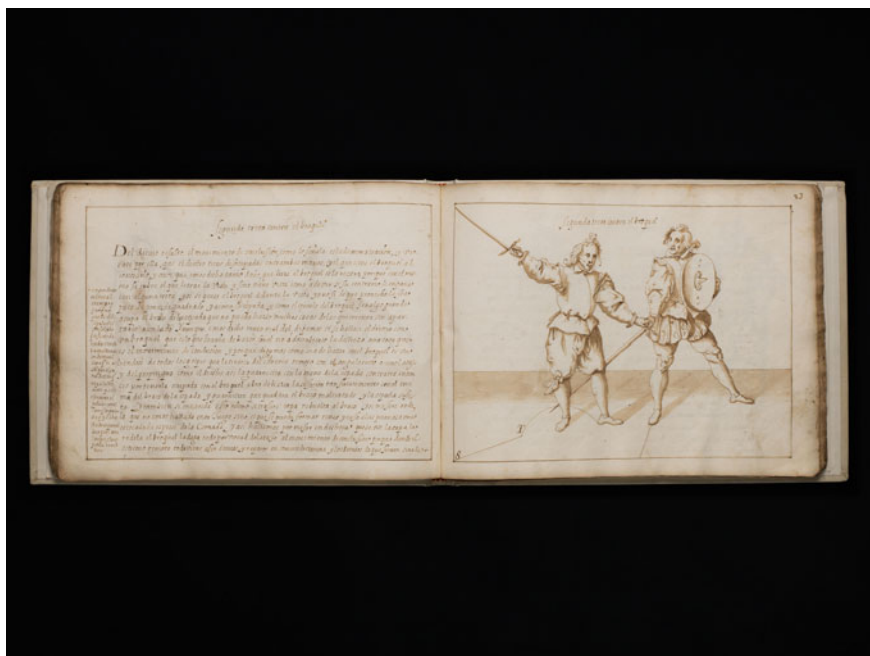
A copy in trace paper of illustrations of an unknown manuscript of *destreza* is in the Corble collection in the Leuven University Library. Based on the watermarks of the tracing paper, the copy was made at the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Galas (2006) identified it as work from Octavio Ferrara, but the original was lost. We have no documentation as to how it became part of the Corble collection, nor do we have any information on the original manuscript. It has been found again by Roberto Gotti and bought in a public auction. It is now part of the MAM collection (Martial Art Museum, Botticino).

The manuscript is titled *Compendio y Filosofía y destreza de las armas reducido a su simplicidad* and is authored by Octavio Ferrara in 1625. The author is born in Zaragoza. No further information is known about him, except that he was active as a fencing master in Madrid in 1624.<sup>1</sup> This paper manuscript (22 × 30 cm, oblong format) has thirty-nine pages including thirty-six illustrations in ink and watercolors. It is written by one hand, with additions by a second. The high number of illustrations is uncommon for *destreza* treatises. As an example, Fig. 1 depicts a *diestro* with a sword and his opponent armed with sword and buckler. The steps of the *diestro* during the attack are marked on the floor. Different ways to fight an opponent with a buckler, and how to react to their successive actions are described in great detail on the facing page.

It is dedicated to Barón Don Juan Ferdinando Quiemburg. This can be a Spanish rendering of an Austrian name. The most likely candidate according to our conjecture is Johan Ferdinand von Kuenburg (also written Kienburg, Kühnburg, or Küenburg, all of which can be spelled in Spanish in a similar way, see Kneschke 1852, 489). He belonged to a Salzburg family of the lower nobility which had several branches, many of whose members were involved in the Church (with several bishops) or held administrative, legal, or official positions. He was born in 1600 and died in 1641, so he was contemporary with the manuscript. We have no data if he was in Spain or was related in some way with the book, so this is only a guess. Previously, based on the Leuven copy, Galas (2006) has identified him as Baron Gruemberg, but this appears to be inaccurate.

During most of the sixteenth century and the whole of the seventeenth century, the Habsburg dynasty of Austrian origin ruled the Hispanic countries. There was frequent inbreeding between the Spanish and the Austrian branches of the dynasty which led to considerable consanguinity. The King Carlos II had a consanguinity index of 0.25—similar to a union between a brother and a sister (Ceballos and Alvarez 2013). There was also a cultural exchange between the courts of both countries, so Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Archivo General Palacio: Personal, caja 778/5, quoted in Ceballos-Escalera et al. (1997).



**Fig. 1** Octavio Ferrara, *Compendio y Filosofia y destreza de las armas*. Zaragoza or Madrid, 1625. f.21v–f.22r. *Segunda treta contra el buquel* (second technique against the buckler) (collection of Martial Art Museum (BS), Botticino)

comedies performed at the Royal Palace were fashioned on the Viennese Court, while certain chivalric practices such as Spanish horsemanship continue to be practiced in Austria even today (*Spanische Hofreitschule*) (Noe 2001). There were also frequent exchanges of ambassadors and courtiers who brought home cultural artifacts from the other country. For example, we can point to Pacheco's book, *Grandezas de la espada*, in the National library of Austria,<sup>2</sup> which belonged to the Earl Pötting.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript *Llave y gobierno de la destreza*, also a copy of Pacheco work, now in Budapest,<sup>4</sup> once belonged to a Zacharias Conrad von Offenbach (Fernández Lanza 1991, 26). There is also the manuscript from the Prince Gundaker von Liechtenstein's *Über die Fechkunst*,<sup>5</sup> again in Vienna, that includes some instructions about Spanish fencing system with drawings and commentaries on the Pacheco work *Grandezas de la espada* (Fortner and Schrattenecker 2015).

The first part of the book is a brief exposition of some elementary concepts from the destreza: basic lines and circles, the right-angle stance. It also introduces

<sup>2</sup> Österreichische National Bibliothek 58.G.32.

<sup>3</sup> Franz Eusebius Graf Pötting (1627–1678) Ambassador in Spain for Leopoldus I (Noe 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Archivo Széchényi, Ms. 1. Inventarium Codicum Manuscriptorum, Hispanicorum.

<sup>5</sup> Palais Liechtenstein Archive Aa298.

core concepts in *destreza* such as proportions, which determine the relative distance between the fighters. The section, *Las Generales* (*General Techniques*), introduces a series of techniques that allow the fencer to safely approach his opponent and perform effective strikes. The book also discusses the basic cuts (*tajo*, *reves*, half *tajo*, and half *reves*); as well as *atajo*—a concept very particular to *destreza*, which implies control of the opponent’s blade and protection from their attacks, the “conclusion movement,” which is a technique directed to disarm or disable the sword of the opponent while simultaneously gaining a dominant position to wound him unopposed; fighting against left-handed opponents; and the use of double weapons (sword with *rotella* or *daga*). The book also discusses the different guards used in *destreza*. Then comes a description and counter to several vulgar techniques. The book ends with a table that lists out the best *destreza* measures against the vulgar techniques. Several appendices are added at the end that deals with the remarkable points, dangerous places, and a commentary on Girard Thibault’s work.<sup>6</sup>

In several places, the author mentions his master without naming him. The only master who is named is Thibault, once in the text when explaining “*La Torneada*” (*The Turn*) with some mockery, and again in one of the appendices. But most of the *destreza* theories being discussed follow the teachings of Pacheco de Narvaez, including the five ways to make an attack, which are represented in the general demonstration at the beginning of the book, and the description of “*tretas generales*,” with only some minor changes.<sup>7</sup> The description of the vulgar *tretas* and the way of counteracting them is, for the most part, original and different from other sources.

## 4 Conclusion

The *destreza* system had a wide distribution across Europe, mainly in the Hispanic dominions and the allied and related countries. This manuscript serves as an introduction and provides a unique perspective on the contemporary verdadera *destreza* and vulgar fencing techniques. It is a valuable addition to the bulk of *destreza* texts, showing more nuances and details of the techniques. Its illustrations are uncommon in *destreza* books and add a lot of information to the extant texts. It is clearly written and intended as an introductory manual for teaching *destreza* in a very practical way. The amount and the extension of material dealing with vulgar techniques (which

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<sup>6</sup> The *Academie de l’Epee* (1628) is a monumental work on fencing. It can be regarded as *destreza*-related. Its author was living in Spain for a period of time, was able to write (and perhaps speak) Spanish, and developed a friendship with the masters in Spain such as Perez de Mendoza. Although his book had not yet been published when the manuscript was dated, there are other indications that the doctrine of Thibault was known in Spain.

<sup>7</sup> *Tretas generales* refers to the techniques employed to initiate and engage combats in a safe way. The techniques provide the fencer several options to continue and end a fight (in a way which we could compare them to chess openings).

take up almost half of the manuscript) are remarkable. It perhaps reflects the presence of common fencing as a widespread practice; this would explain the interest in counteracting it.

The discovery of this book opens up expectations for rediscovering lost or other unknown sources of *destreza*, either the precursors, such as De la Torre, Pons, Román, or more recent losses like *Destreza iluminada* de Rejón de Silva (Valle Ortiz 2012).

In closing, I would like to thank Roberto Gotti for his incredible enthusiasm which made this research possible.

## Appendix—Codicological Note of the Ferrara Manuscript

*Compendio y Filosofía y destreza de las armas reducido a su simplicidad. Dirigido a Don Juan Ferdinando, Baron de Quiemburg, por su maestro Octavio Ferrera, natural de la ciudad de Zaragoza, residente en la corte de el Rey católico de España. N. Sr. Año de 1625.*

Kept at the Martial Art Museum, Botticino.

### *Description*

MS. 2 f.b. Frontpage, 39 f. (36 plates in ink and watercolors depicting diverse fencing positions, with related text on the facing page), 2 f.b. 22 × 30 cm oblong.

Hand-copied manuscript on paper. Clear Spanish cursive hand from the seventeenth century, main text f. 1–38r, dark ochre ink. Second hand in addenda, f. 38v–39v, and in marginal notes and corrections, period or slight posterior, black ink. Contemporary foliation in ochre ink. Full page text inside borders. Modern binding in full parchment with the authors' name in gilded letters on spine.

### *Author*

Octavio Ferrara. Birth and death date unknown. He was active as a fencing master in Madrid in 1624 (Ceballos-Escalera et al. 1997).

### *Dedicatee*

Johan Ferdinand von Kuenburg (1600–161) (also spelled as Kienburg, Kühnburg, or Küenburg).

## *Provenience*

Late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. Trace paper, partial copy kept in the Corble Collection at the University Library of Leuven. No information prior to Roberto Gotti's purchase in 2017.

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