



**A comparative analysis
of literary depictions of social violence
in two important 16th Century autobiographies,
from the perspective of the fencing manuals of the Renaissance.**

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and with special thanks to Dr. Jürg Gassmann

Abstract – In the late 16th century two interesting individuals made substantial contributions to the relatively new genre of the autobiography. In 1595 *Bartholomäus Sastrow* (1520–1603), a north German burgher, notary, diplomat, and eventually burgomeister of the Hanseatic City of Stralsund, penned his life story. *Benvenuto Cellini* (1500–1571), goldsmith, soldier, musician and famous Renaissance artist from Florence, wrote his memoir between 1558 and 1563. Though they were born twenty years apart, both men had similar backgrounds. Both were from the lower-middle strata of society but rose to high status, both were widely traveled and directly acquainted with the most powerful individuals of their time (as well as some of the most lowly) and both experienced firsthand some of the most dramatic and important political and military events of the mid-16th century.

Amidst a backdrop of war and severe religious conflict, Sastrow, a German and a Lutheran, traveled to Italy, and Cellini, an Italian Catholic, travelled through Germany to France. This allows us to see each region from both a native and an outsider's perspective. Both men participated in or were witness to numerous incidents of social violence and warfare during their lifetimes, as described in detail in their memoirs. These accounts give us an opportunity to examine the depiction of incidents of social violence by people who witnessed or participated in them first-hand, allowing us to contrast these episodes with the principles of self-defense as portrayed in the fightbooks. We can also compare these personal anecdotes with documented written and unwritten rules governing dueling, fighting, and the carrying of arms. This will help grant us further insight into the reality of personal armed conflict in the era of the fightbooks, and improve our understanding of their context and meaning.

Keywords – dueling, social conflict, Cellini, Sastrow, Rome, Renaissance, Florence, Greifswald, Stralsund, Reformation, fencing, swords, Joachim Meyer, Bolognese School of Fencing, Achille Marozzo, George Silver, Nicoletto Giganti

I. INTRODUCTION

In the autobiographies of Benvenuto Cellini and Bartholomew Sastrow we are presented with a valuable window into the world of Renaissance Europe. Both men were intelligent, resourceful and ambitious, and their lives followed a trajectory which took them through many social strata, ranging from the company of prostitutes, mercenary soldiers and horse thieves to princes, popes, and kings. Both men also traveled physically across much of western and central Europe, their journeys overlapping to some extent in space as well (particularly in Italy), allowing us some opportunity to see the same places from two different literary points of view. This gives us a reasonably wide range of contexts to look at for incidents of violence depicted in the texts, and to compare with the fightbooks.

I.1. The approach of the paper

This paper does not seek to verify the stories the authors tell of their experiences. Nor will it address the literary context of their work, except very briefly. We will leave these interesting topics to other researchers to explore, past and future. In the case of Cellini in particular a large number of academic papers have been written already on all manner of subjects including the violent themes in his life. This violence has been described as an example of the quest for personal honor and money (*onore e utile*) characteristic of the era¹, sometimes as an expression of gender roles² and from many other perspectives. Our intent here is to focus on a very specific angle: the relationship between violence as depicted in these two autobiographies and the techniques and stratagems of the fightbooks written in roughly the same era.

We will examine what, if anything, the fightbooks can tell us about the violence depicted in these two autobiographies, and what if anything they can tell us about the fightbooks. This is not an angle which has been tried before and we believe that it will provide some unique insights, both in the study of the lives of these two interesting men of the 16th century, and for the further understanding of the ever-widening corpus of European martial arts literature which has come down to us from this era.

I.2. Themes

The article consists of three parts: this introduction, a series of numbered excerpts of violent incidents from the two autobiographies, and an analysis. In the analysis we will cover four themes. First, we will examine how the apparent recklessness in certain of the incidents depicted can be seen as more deliberate acts, in light of the advice of the fightbooks. Second, we will examine the concept of scaled violence and the escalating

¹ Beth L. Holman, 'For 'Honor and Profit': Benvenuto Cellini's Medal of Clement VII and His Competition with Giovanni Bernardi', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 58/2 (2005), p. 513.

² Paul Oppenheimer, 'Benvenuto Cellini: Sexuality, Masculinity, and Artistic Identity in Renaissance Italy', reviewed by Margaret A. Gallucci, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 57/4 (2004), 1391–1393.

bluff as a mechanism by which social confrontations were resolved in 16th century Europe. Third, we will note the descriptions in the two books of what appear to be the dangerous streets and dangerous countryside of 16th century Europe. Finally, we will note the unpredictability of the tactical environment, and how this impacts our understanding of the fightbooks.

I.3. Social violence as opposed to duels or military campaigns

In the historical fencing community, much analysis of the fightbooks has been done on the basis of attempting to distinguish contexts for the martial arts depicted, of which so far three have been identified: warfare, formal arranged fights (including both judicial combat and private duels), and sport. A fourth context, representing various forms of social conflict including informal and impromptu duels, assassinations, brawls, and other types of escalating verbal and physical confrontations, also appears to be a common part of the landscape of late medieval to early modern Europe³. One of the main purposes of this article is to explore and expand this fourth context which has hitherto not been widely explored from the perspective of the fightbooks.

I.4. Brief overview of major events experienced by both men

Cellini witnessed a great deal of war and social strife during his lifetime. In his home town of Florence the republic was going through its violent death throes and transitioning into a duchy under the direct (as opposed to indirect) control of the Medici family⁴. This process was marked by coups and counter-coups, bitter exiles, lethal rivalries and vendettas. He personally experienced (and fought in, as an able defender) the ghastly sack of Rome in 1527⁵, one of the worst military atrocities of the 16th century. He served the pope during the initiation of the Counter-Reformation and traveled through a Europe rent by religious sectarian wars and violent dynastic struggles⁶. In addition to the skill he showed during the siege of Rome as a marksman and master of cannon, like other artists Cellini assisted in updating the fortifications of both Paris and Florence during wartime⁷.

Sastrow, similarly, experienced the Counter-Reformation firsthand as a diplomat and a kind of spy, and found traveling home from Italy sufficiently dangerous that he resorted to disguise and the pretense of being mute in order to remain safe from religious

³ B. Ann Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 172.

⁴ Cellini Benvenuto, *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, translated by J. A. Symonds (London: Penguin, 1998), p. viii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

persecution⁸ (Sastrow Excerpt 4). The situation in Europe was so tense that Sastrow and his traveling companion both had to disguise themselves as Italians while in Italy and then switch to German costumes once they crossed back into the Protestant side. His home town of Greifswald and the region of Pomerania were loosely affiliated with the losing side of the Schmalkaldic War, and Sastrow spent a good part of his book describing his efforts to extract his Pomeranian clients from trouble with the emperor over the conflict. While in Germany Sastrow took part in and was witness to the *gebarnischter Reichstag*, the momentous Diet of Augsburg, which decided the fate of much of the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire in the aftermath of the war and saw the production of the Augsburg Confession.

I.5. Document conventions

The quotes from the two autobiographies are referred to in bold face in the manner **Cellini 1**, **Sastrow 2** etc. The ancient fencing manuals are referred to by the generic term fightbook throughout the document. For the purposes of this document that term refers only to the European fencing manuals of the 16th and early 17th Centuries.

II. INCIDENTS OF BRIGANDAGE, MAYHEM AND MURDER

II.1. Sastrow⁹ Excerpt 1: Grandfather is assaulted by brigands

Sastrow's grandfather and father are ambushed by a rival family on the road.

They intended to watch Sastrow's going, to gallop after him and intercept him on the road, and to kill him and his child. My grandfather, having been warned, immediately took the advice not to delay his departure for a moment. Taking his son by the hand, he started there and then. Alas, the atrocious murderers who were lying in wait for him in a clearing, trampled him under their horses' hoofs, inflicted ever so many wounds; then, their rage not being spent, they dragged him to a large stone on the road, and which may be seen unto this day, chopped off his right hand at the wrist, and left him for dead on the spot. The child had crept into some damp underwood, inaccessible to horses; the fast gathering darkness saved him from being pursued.

Result: Sastrow's grandfather is trampled and his hand is cut off. He later dies. The child (Sastrow's father) manages to escape.

⁸ Bartholomäus Sastrow, *Bartholomew Sastrow: Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster* (1595), available from Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33891/33891-h/33891-h.htm>> [accessed 02 March 2015].

⁹ Ibid.

II.2. Cellini¹⁰ Excerpt 2: Cellini avenges his brother

The fellow had lodgings near to a place called Torre Sanguigna, next door to the house of one of the most popular courtesans in Rome, called Signora Antea. It was nightfall, and the clock had just struck the hour. The arquebusier had finished supper and was standing in his doorway with his sword in his hand. I crept upon him, grasping a Pistoian dagger, and aimed a sudden back-stroke with the idea of cutting his head clean off. But he turned in a flash and the blow landed on the edge of his left shoulder, shattering the bone. He staggered up, was so dazed by the terrible pain that he let go his sword, and then took to flight.

I went after him and caught him up in a few steps. Then I raised my dagger above his bent head and drove it exactly between his neckbone and the nape of his neck. The dagger went in so deeply that although I used tremendous force it was impossible to withdraw it, because just then four soldiers, with drawn swords in their hands, burst out from Antea's lodgings, and I was forced to draw my own sword to defend myself. I abandoned the dagger and took to my heels. Then, for fear of being recognized, I made my way to Duke Alessandro's palace, which stood between the Piazza Navona and the Rotunda.

Result: One dead from two dagger wounds. The duke and the pope seem to have protected Cellini from the consequences of this murder (the pope specifically alludes to it when he says Cellini has been "cured" after he sees an objet d'art that Cellini made for him), though it contributed to the reputation which ultimately led to his loss of status with the pope.

II.3. Cellini¹¹ Excerpt 12: Cellini is paid a large sum of silver by the French treasury but is accosted by robbers before he can make it back to his house

The money was counted out, and I put it all in the little basket and thrust my arm through the two handles. As I had to force my arm through the coins were well secured and I carried them more comfortably than if they had been in a bag. I was well armed with a mail coat and gauntlets and carrying a sword and dagger, and I sped on my way as fast as I could.

¹⁰ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, p. 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 262–263.

Just then I caught sight of some servants whispering among themselves, and they hurriedly left the house too and set off as if to go in the opposite direction to me.

...

Then I drew near the monastery of the Augustinians: this was a very dangerous spot, it was only five hundred yards from where I lived but, as the inhabited part of the castle was as far again inside, if I had called out my voice would not have been heard. But when I saw four men advancing towards me with drawn swords in a flash I made up my mind what to do. I quickly covered the basket with my cloak and, seeing that they were closing in fast, I cried out:

‘All you can win from a soldier is his cloak and his sword; and I hope you’ll be the losers before I surrender mine.’

I began fighting fiercely, and every now and then I opened my arms so that if they’d been incited to do this attack by those servants who had seen me take the money they’d have reason to see that I had no such sum with me. The fight was soon over; they gave way, step by step, saying in their own language:

‘This Italian’s a brave fellow, and he’s certainly not the one we were after – or if he is he has nothing on him.’

I shouted at them in Italian; and I kept on thrusting and cutting, coming near more than once to dealing a deadly blow. Seeing how wonderfully skillful I was they decided that I was a soldier rather than anything else; and little by little they drew away from me, keeping close together and muttering quietly in their own language. I myself kept saying, very gently, that anyone who was after my weapons and my cloak wouldn’t find them easy to take. I began to quicken my pace, and they slowly followed on after me: I grew more alarmed at this, thinking that if there were another ambush waiting for me I’d be attacked on two sides. So when I was about a hundred yards from where I lived I took to my heels and started bellowing: ‘To arms! To arms! Outside! Outside! I’m being murdered.’

Four young men with pikes ran out immediately: and when they were pursuing my attackers – who could still be seen, I said in a very loud voice:

‘Those four cowards couldn’t plunder one man by himself of the thousand gold crowns that are breaking my arm. So let’s go and put the money

away, and then with my big two-handed sword I'll come along with you wherever you like.'

Result: Nobody is wounded; Cellini escapes with his treasure.

II.4. Cellini¹² Excerpt 13: Cellini attacks Norman lawyers to end a lawsuit

Believing a lawsuit between Cellini and his tenants is unjustly going against him due to what he claims is the standard French practice of hiring false witnesses (a practice which Cellini learned about too late to make use of himself) he takes advantage of his status with the indulgent French king and simply assaults the lawyers.

Well, then, to return to my affairs. When certain decisions of the court were sent me by those lawyers, and I perceived that my cause had been unjustly lost, I had recourse for my defense to a great dagger which I carried; for I have always taken pleasure in keeping fine weapons. The first man I attacked was the plaintiff who had sued me; and one evening I wounded him in the legs and arms so severely, taking care, however, not to kill him, that I deprived him of the use of both his legs. Then I sought out the other fellow who had brought the suit, and used him also in such wise that he dropped it.

Result: Apparently there are no direct consequences to this though yet another violent incident further erodes the patience of the French King. Cellini notes that he took care not to kill the man but he did permanently maim him.

II.5. Cellini¹³ Excerpt 9: Cellini evades a dangerous ambush

The three of us left Rome on our own on the Monday of Holy Week, and we met the company I mentioned at Monte Ruosi. As I had spread it around that I was going with the Cardinal I felt sure that none of my enemies would be looking out for me. However I came off badly at Monte Ruosi, for a band of well-armed men had been sent ahead of us to assault me. As God would have it, while we were at dinner, having found out that I wasn't travelling in the Cardinal's party they made their plans to attack. But at this point the Cardinal's troop arrived, and so with a light heart I traveled safe in their company. As far as Viterbo.

Result: Nothing happens; Cellini avoids trouble by the lucky arrival of the cardinal's party. Otherwise he would have been facing a battle.

¹² Ibid., p. 278.

¹³ Ibid., p. 240.

II.6. Sastrow¹⁴ Excerpt 5: Sastrows brother is robbed by highwaymen

In another incident, Sastrow's brother is accosted by highwaymen (Sastrow says they were nobles of Mecklenburg) during a stagecoach ride through the countryside. His companions are Johannes Lagebusch, an unnamed woman, and a youngster named Hermann Lepper who is carrying 100 florins he has just exchanged for new coins.

The brigands came up with them and entered into conversation. Suddenly one of them snatched the loaded pistol Lagebusch was carrying at his saddle-bow – the fashion of carrying two had not come in – fired it at Lepper, who was galloping back to the carriage, killing him there and then, while Lagebusch set spurs to his horse in time to warn Sonnenberg, who hid himself in the brushwood. My brother, armed with a pole, and standing with his back against the carriage to prevent an attack from behind, offered a stout and not unsuccessful resistance. He managed to wound in the thigh an assailant who, carried away by his horse, bit the dust further up the road.

But another miscreant, charging furiously, sliced away a piece of my brother's skull as big as a crown (the fragment of bone that adhered to the skin was the size of a ducat), and at the same time dealt him a deep gash at the throat. As a matter of course, my brother lost consciousness; nay, was left for dead while the bandits sacked the carriage, caught the horse of their wounded comrade, but seeing that he could not be transported, abandoned him and decamped with their spoil. They, however, did not take the carriage team. In a little while Sonnenberg emerged from his hiding-place, and, with the aid of the driver, hauled my brother into the carriage. The woman bandaged his head and kept it on her knees. Lepper's body was placed between the legs of the wounded young man, and in that condition they reached Ribbenitz, where the surgeon closed the gash in the neck by means of pins.

The Rostock council promptly sent its officials to the spot. The brigand was conveyed to the city, but almost immediately after his being lodged in prison, he died without naming his accomplices. There was, moreover, no great difficulty in finding them out, but their friends succeeded in hushing up the whole affair; the authorities acted very mildly. The dead robber was nevertheless judged and beheaded. His head remained for many years exposed on a pike.

Result: One robber wounded in the thigh and later dies in prison without naming his accomplices. Lepper killed by a pistol shot from the robber. Sastrow's brother wounded on the head and throat and later recovers. A surgeon heals Sastrow's brother who recovers.

¹⁴ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*.

III. INCIDENTS OF ESCALATING PERSONAL CONFRONTATIONS

III.1. Cellini¹⁵ Excerpt 4: A snarling spat with Florentine exiles while watching a joust.

‘They and their Duke can kiss my arse!’

I replied that he was mistaken about us and that we had nothing to do with his affairs. Then old Nardi took our part and told Benintendi that he was in the wrong; but he still continued insulting us. So I told him that I would say and do something to him that he would find very disagreeable, and that he should mind his own business and leave us alone. He repeated that we and the Duke could kiss his arse, and added that we were all a pack of asses. So then I threw the insult back at him, and drew my sword.

The old man, who wanted to get downstairs first, tripped over the top, and they all piled on top of him. I dashed forward scraping my sword viciously along the wall, and shouting ‘I’ll kill the lot of you.’

But I was careful not to hurt any of them, though it would have been only too easy. In the middle of the commotion, the innkeeper started shouting. Lamentone cried out: ‘Don’t do it!’, some of them were screaming ‘Help! Murder!’ and the rest ‘Let’s get out of here!’ They were all in a wonderful muddle and looked just like a herd of swine. Then the innkeeper came along with a light, and I went back upstairs and sheathed my sword.

Result: A group of exiles is intimidated when Cellini shows he is ready for violence. Nobody injured or killed.

Note: Scraping the sword against the wall is listed by Tlusty as one of the illegal provocations in German town law, also mentioned in specific incidents by Tlusty. Tlusty also makes note of the legal role of the innkeeper in breaking up fights¹⁶, as well as the legal status caused by calling for peace, which the Germans called *Friedbot*¹⁷.

¹⁵ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, p. 135.

¹⁶ B. Ann Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order: The Culture of Drink in Early Modern Germany* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), pp. 158–161.

¹⁷ Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic*, p. 65.

The innkeeper then informs Benintendi:

‘It’s as much as your life is worth to draw a sword here, and if the Duke heard of your audacity he’d have you hanged. I won’t do what you deserve, but if you show yourself in this inn again it’ll be worse for you.’

This is the territory of the Duke of Milan. Sastrow also ran into this very (apparently unusually) strict prohibition against carrying arms in the same area (see Sastrow excerpt 2).

III.2. Cellini¹⁸ Excerpt 5: A second encounter at a ferry landing with the exiles while in the outdoors, with pikes.

When we arrived there we found Niccolo Benintendi’s brother and three others laying in wait for me. They were carrying two lances, while I was armed with a good pike that I had bought in Ferrara. As I was also well armed I was not in the least bit scared – unlike Tribolo who began crying ‘God help us! They’ve come to kill us.’

I spurred my horse, and when I was within fifty paces of them I dismounted and walked boldly forward holding my pike. Tribolo had stayed behind, huddled on his horse as if he had been frozen, and Lamentone, the courier was puffing and blowing like the wind itself.

(Cellini and the exiles have an argument about sharing the ferry)

I answered, ‘If God, and the right that’s on my side, and my own strength have anything to do with it, you’ll do nothing of the kind.’

And as I said this I jumped into the boat. Then I pointed my pike at them and shouted:

‘This’ll prove to you how impossible it is.’

The young Magalotti, wanting to put up some sort of show, gripped his weapon and marched forward. I leapt onto the side of the boat and landed him such a thrust that if he had not fallen backward I would have run him through. His friends, far from coming to his help, began to move away.

I saw that I could kill him, but instead of attacking I said: ‘Get up, my friend, take your weapons and go away. You can now see clearly enough that I can’t be forced to do what I want to do, and that what I could have done, I didn’t want to.’

Result: Apparently no serious injuries. Cellini once again intimidates the exiles, but the encounter is even more violent and he comes closer to actually killing or injuring someone.

¹⁸ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, pp. 135–137.



*Figure 1: In this detail from Sebastian Munster's 1550 map of Speyer, a couple sets off down the road toward a ferry landing. Sebastian Munster, *Cosmographia*, Basel, Henrichum Petri, 1544.*

III.3. Sebastian Munster, *Cosmographia, Basel, Henrichum Petri, 1544.*

Sastrow¹⁹ 2: Father fights an informal duel over butter

Sastrow's father gets into an argument with a young man, Hartmann, over the sale of some butter. Armed with a "short sword" and then given a hatchet by his mother-in-law, Hartmann seeks out Sastrow's father with the intent of assaulting him.

Emboldened by a safe-conduct of the prince, which Doctor Stroientin had got for him, Hartmann fell in with my father at the top of the Sporenmacher Strasse. He was going to the public weigh-house to have a case of honey weighed, and he had not as much as a pocket knife wherewith to repel an assailant armed with a sword and a hatchet. He rushed into a spurmaker's shop, getting hold of a large pitchfork, but the bystanders wrenched it out of his hands; moreover, they prevented him taking refuge in the gallery. Thereupon my father snatched up a long stick with an iron prod standing against the wall, and going back into the street, shouted:

'Let the fellow who wants to take my life come out and show himself.' At these words, Hartmann issued from an adjoining workshop. Not satisfied with his short sword and his hatchet, he had taken a hammer from the anvil and flung it at my father, who warded it with his stick, though only partly, for my father spat blood for several days. The hatchet went the same way, and just caught my father on the shoulder. The double exploit having imbued him with the idea that the game was won, the aggressor made a rush with his bare sword, but my father spitted him on his iron-prodded pole, and Hartmann dropped down dead.

Result: Sastrow's father sustains two wounds from which he recovers. His attacker is killed by an "iron-prodded pole" resulting in lawsuits which lasted most of Sastrow's life.

III.4. Cellini²⁰ Excerpt 10: Cellini has a confrontation with an Italian postmaster and his sons

After riding a postmaster's horse back to its station while traveling, Cellini realizes he left his expensive stirrups behind in the stable. Though warned by the innkeeper that the apparently dangerous postmaster claims that Cellini raced the horse, so he was lucky to only lose what he lost, Cellini nevertheless approaches the man and asks for his property back.

¹⁹ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*.

²⁰ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, pp. 241–243.

Anyhow seeing that it was Good Friday I reckoned that, as far as their madness was concerned, madmen would have the day off. We reached the Camollia gate, and I recognized the postmaster when I saw him from the signs that had been given me, for he was blind in the left eye. I left my young men and travelling companions some way off, rode up to him, and said courteously:

‘Postmaster, if I assure you that I didn’t race your horse, why aren’t you good enough to give me back my pillion and stirrups?’

He replied exactly as I had been told he would, like a mad beast. At this I exclaimed:

‘What, aren’t you a Christian? Do you want both of us to cause scandal on a Good Friday?’

He said that he didn’t care a damn whether it was Good Friday or Bad Friday, and that if I didn’t clear off he’d knock me down – and my arquebus as well – with the halberd he had taken hold of. Hearing these violent words, an old Sienese gentleman made his way towards us.

The Sienese man scolds the postmaster for making Sienna look bad by being so mean.

The two young men shook their heads without saying anything and went inside the house. Their frenzied father, exasperated by what the fine old gentleman was saying, strait away started blaspheming shamefully, lowered his halberd, and swore that whatever happened he would murder me with it.

When I saw his brutal intention, in order to make him keep his distance, I made as if to point my gun at him. He came at me more furiously than ever. I was ready to defend myself, and I had the arquebus ready, but I hadn’t lowered it to the extent that it was pointing at him, and in fact it was pointing upwards; and then it went off by itself. The ball hit the arch of the doorway, glanced back and struck him in the windpipe. He fell down dead; and then his two sons came rushing out. One of them armed himself from the stand they had there and the other seized his father’s halberd. Then they rushed on my young men. The one with the halberd attacked Pagolo, the Roman lad, striking him about the left breast; the other ran at a Milanese who was traveling with us. His face was stupid with fear: without success, he tried to save himself by crying out that he had nothing to do with me, and then he defended himself from the pike that was thrust at him with a little cane he had in his hand. But all this did not prevent his receiving a slight wound in the mouth.

Cherubino was in clerical dress, for although he was a first-rate clockmaker, as I said before, he also held some very profitable benefices from the Pope. Ascanio was well armed, and so unlike the Milanese he stood his ground. So he and Chrubino weren't touched. As for me, I had clapped my spurs to my horse and while I was galloping away I quickly prepared and loaded my gun; and then I turned back, almost choking with rage. I had been treating the matter as a joke, but now, I thought, it was time to take it seriously. Under the impression that my young lads had been killed I determined to die myself. But my horse had not galloped back far when I met them coming towards me and asked if they were hurt. Asciano replied that Pagolo had been mortally wounded by a halberd.

'Pagolo, my dear son,' I said, 'then the halberd pierced your coat of mail?'

'No,' he answered, 'I packed it in my bag this morning.'

'So coats of mail are worn in Rome to please the ladies but when there's danger and they have a purpose to serve they're packed away? You deserve all you've got – and it's your fault that I'm riding to my death as well.'

Result: The postmaster is killed and two of Cellini's companions suffer what prove to be moderate wounds and recover. Cellini expected the mail to protect his apprentice. Cherubino was protected by his status as a priest, Ascanio by his mail armor, his sword, and his bold stance.

Subsequently Cellini, his friends, and his traveling companions escape to Steggia where a doctor sees to Pagolo and the Milanese. Pagolo proves to have a superficial wound and the Milanese has had his mouth widened by a cut, which is sewn up. The Duke of Melfi refuses to aid the postmaster's two sons with "light horsemen" they asked for to pursue Cellini, because he knows that they are "the Cardinal of Ferrara's men." Cellini does not appear to have suffered any long term consequences from this affray.

III.5. Cellini²¹ Excerpt 11: Cellini has a confrontation with a French royal official

When I said that he gave vent to offensive language in French, whereat I retorted in my own tongue that he lied. Stung with rage, he clapped his hand upon a little dagger which he had; then I set my hand also to a large dirk which I always wore for my defense, and cried out: 'If you dare to draw, I'll kill you on the spot.' He hesitated for a while, not certain what to do, but more inclined to make mischief than otherwise, and muttering to himself: 'I'll never put up with this.'

²¹ Ibid., p. 258.

I saw that things were taking a turn for the worse and making a sudden resolution I turned to Pagolo and Ascanio and said: ‘As soon as you see me draw my dagger, throw yourselves at those two servants, and if you can, kill them. I’ll kill this fellow at a blow, and then we’ll get out of here together.’

After hearing what I proposed Marmagna thought himself lucky to escape the place alive. I wrote and told the Cardinal of Ferrara all that had happened, though I modified it a little. He at once reported it to the King; and his Majesty in exasperation put in charge of me another member of his bodyguard, called the Viscount of Orbec. This man in the pleasantest way imaginable provided me with all that I needed.

Result: The French courtier suffers no physical harm. Cellini intimidates the French official and his servants. The king is both exasperated and amused, but sends another official to deal with him.

III.6. Cellini²² Excerpt 8 Ascanio attacks a goldsmith named Michelle during a fit of rage

Cellini, who is in detention at the Castelo San Angelo, has dismissed his apprentice and friend Ascanio after an argument and banned him from his workshop. Ascanio is weeping. He has “a little scimitar that he sometimes wore hidden under his clothes.” Two goldsmiths, one named Michele, then mock Ascanio for crying.

‘What’s Ascanio crying for? Perhaps his father is dead? You know – his father in the castle.’

‘He’s alive,’ shouted Ascanio, ‘but you’re going to die this instant.’

Then he lifted his hand and aimed two blows with the scimitar, straight at his head. The first knocked him down, and with the second, though he was aiming at his head, Ascanio cut three fingers off his right hand. He lay stretched out as if dead. The Pope was at once informed of what happened.

The incident gets Cellini in more trouble with the pope (he is already under arrest) but he is saved by the intervention of the castellan (effectively Cellini’s jailor), who has witnessed the whole incident. Ascanio leaves town and avoids punishment.

Result: One man wounded, loses three fingers but later recovers.

²² Ibid., p. 195.

III.7. Cellini²³ Excerpt 14: Cellini harasses tenants to get them to leave his building in France

Next day, I began to make use of my weapons, and although it proved a difficult undertaking, I looked on it as a pleasure. Every day I made an unexpected assault with rocks, pikes and arquebuses. I fired without ball, but I put so much fear into them that no one was willing to come and help him. One day when I found out he was resisting only feebly I forced my way into the house and threw him out, hurling all his belongings after him.

Result: Nobody is wounded; Cellini's tenant is evicted.

III.8. Cellini²⁴ Excerpt 15: Cellini argues with a condottieri while fortifying a town gate during the war of Siena

All the artists in town are assigned to fortify the various town gates of Florence. Cellini is given a plan but decides he has a better though apparently unorthodox idea and convinces the duke to let him try it. He begins to implement the plan but runs awry of a veteran soldier.

There was a Lombard captain on guard at the Prato gate: he was an extremely powerfully-built fellow, of very coarse speech, as well as being overbearing and extraordinarily ignorant. He immediately began to ask me what I was up to. In reply I very courteously showed him my plans, and took great pains to let him understand the procedure I was going to follow. But while I was doing so the vulgar brute kept shaking his head, and twisting and turning, balancing first on one leg and then the other, tugging at his moustache, pulling the peak of his cap over his eyes, and muttering at the same time: 'What in hell's name is all this about!'

Beginning to lose patience with the idiot, I answered: 'Very well, then, leave it to me, I do know what it's about.'

Then I turned my back on him, intending to go about my own business. At this the fellow began tossing his head angrily, dropped his left hand to the pommel of his sword, and lifted the point a little.

'Wait a minute, my master,' he said, 'so you want to make a fight out of it?'

²³ Ibid., p. 297.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 361–363.

I spun round in a temper – he had so provoked me – and retorted ‘It would mean less effort on my part to have a battle with you than to make a bastion for this gate.’

In an instant both of us clapped hands on our swords, but before we could draw them we were suddenly surrounded by a crowd of honest fellows, some, Florentine citizens, and others, courtiers.

Result: Cellini is probably lucky in this case that the fight was broken up before it started.

III.9. Cellini²⁵ Excerpt 16: Challenged to a formal duel

While in the in the company of some artist friends during street celebrations on the feast day of St. John, Cellini has some words with a soldier named Lorenzo da Ceri over a trivial matter.

Next day he sent round a challenge which I was only too glad to accept, saying that this business was something I could polish off far quicker than any of my ordinary work. I immediately went to confer with a fine old fellow called Bevilacqua, who had the reputation of having been the best swordsman in Italy. He had fought more than twenty duels in his time, and come out of them all with honor. This upright man was a great friend of mine, he knew me as a goldsmith, and besides that he had acted as a go-between in some violent quarrels I had had.

Bevilacqua agrees to act as his second in the affair.

He took on the job of second and we went along, armed, to the place that had been agreed on. In fact no blood was shed, because my opponent withdrew. I came out of the affair with honor.

Result: There is no fight. Nobody is hurt. Bevilacqua and Cellini gain honor thereby.

III.10. Cellini²⁶ Excerpt 6: Shooting a pigeon

‘One day that gentleman of Santa Fiore’s household came to me bringing a little gold ring that was all stained with quick-silver. ‘Clean away this ring.’ He said, ‘and be quick about it.’

Cellini goes on to note that he was very busy at that time doing projects for various nobles, so he refused and said he had no appropriate tool ready.

Then, for no reason at all, he told me I was an ass. I replied that he was wrong there and that I was a better man than him on every count, but

²⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 207–208.

if he provoked me, I said, he'd find that I could kick much harder than an ass. He told the Cardinal what happened, and painted me as if I had been the devil himself.

Two days later I was behind the palace, firing up towards a hole where there was a pigeon brooding.

Cellini claims that he had been in competition for several days with another Goldsmith from Milan to get the pigeon.

On this occasion, when I was firing, the pigeon – which had become wary because of the other times it had been shot at – just let its head peep out.

Cellini goes on to make a wager with several witnesses for a bottle of wine that he can shoot the bird in spite of the tiny target it presents.

'...if it stays put till I take aim with my splendid Broccardo' (that was the name I had given my gun) 'I shall knock its little head off.' So without giving a thought to the Cardinal or anyone else, I took aim, using my arms and no other support, and did what I had promised.

Result: This pigeon was brooding near the apartment window of the same Cardinal Santa Fiore, grandson of the pope and nephew of the powerful Cardinal Pierluigi Farnese, the pope's son and Benvenuto's enemy. This is one of those ambiguous incidents which Cellini describes as perfectly innocent but others perceive in a far more sinister light: Cellini was a famous and feared marksman who was believed to have killed Philibert of Chalon, Prince of Orange, and Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, during the siege of Rome in 1527. The sinister coincidence of the location of the pigeon so soon after the confrontation between Farnese and Cellini is too much for the pope's family. Two days later Cardinal Pierluigi has told his own version of the story to the pope, and Benvenuto is locked up in the very Castelo St Angelo from which he had once directed the pope's artillery. Cellini is at that point in mortal peril.

IV. INCIDENTS OF VIOLENT PASSION

IV.1. Cellini²⁷ Excerpt 1: Cellini's brother attacks the Roman town guard

But on the way he met my brother, Cecchino, who asked him what was up; and although some onlookers made signs for him to keep his mouth shut he shouted out like a madman that Bertino Aldobrandi had been murdered by the police. My poor brother let out a roar that could have

²⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

been heard ten miles away and said: 'Can you just let me know which one of them killed him?'

Giovanni said, yes, that it was the man who carried a two-handed sword and wore a blue feather in his cap. My poor brother dashed off, recognized the murderer by the way he had been described, and with his usual boldness flung himself furiously into the middle of the patrol. Before the man whom he was after had time to get on guard, he ran him right through the belly and forced him to the ground with the hilt of his sword.

Then he turned on the others with such ferocious energy that he would have driven them off by himself, if it had not been for the fact that one of them, firing his arquebus in self-defense, wounded the brave, unlucky young fellow above the right knee. As he lay there on the ground, the police ran off, fearing a possible attack from another fighter as formidable as he was.

Result: One dead from a sword wound, one mortally wounded by a bullet to the thigh. Cellini was subsequently restrained by his friends just as he was about to attack the guard captain. His brother died after raving for a few days. Cellini broods over his brother's death for some time before deciding to avenge him.

IV.2. Cellini²⁸ Excerpt 17: A brawl with a romantic rival and his friends

Cellini learns that his girlfriend Pantasilea has been seeing another man named Luigi, and goes to seek him out. Luigi is in the company of four captains from Perugia and some other young soldiers, altogether twelve armed men according to Cellini. Because of this, Cellini attempts to hide in some thorny hedges, but becomes enraged when he sees the man embracing his girl.

At this, maddened by the thorns and forced on by what I had just heard, I sprang out, lifted my sword, and shouted: 'You're all as good as dead!'

My sword fell with such tremendous force on Luigi's shoulder that, even though those satyrs had plated the wretched young man with coats of mail and suchlike, when it was turned it struck Pantasilea across the nose and mouth. The two of them rolled to the ground, and then Bachiacca, who is breeches half down, gave a scream and ran for his life. I attacked the others furiously with my sword, and at the same time there was such a great commotion in the inn that those brave fellows thought they were being set on by an army of a hundred strong. They had all boldly drawn their swords, but two of the horses panicked and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

threw them into confusion. So when two of their best riders were thrown the rest of them took to flight.

When I saw how well things were going, I hurriedly retired from the engagement – at great speed, but with honor – not wanting to tempt fortune more than necessary. There was such a muddle that some of the soldiers and officers wounded themselves with their own swords, and Benvegnato – the papal chamberlain that I mentioned – was kicked and trampled on by his mule.

Result: Luigi, Pantasilea, and two of the soldiers receive minor wounds. Cellini retreats to the home of Neapolitan nobleman with whom he is friendly. Benvegnato recovers and eventually helps negotiate a peaceful settlement.

IV.3. Sastrow²⁹ 6: The tragic demise of an ape

While working for a powerful prelate, Sastrow witnesses a bizarre incident with an ape.

Herr von Loewenstein owned an old ape, a strong customer, who could get into formidable passions. The animal, which was kept on a chain, would only allow its master, the baker and myself, to come near it. Most dangerous was it when showing its teeth, as if laughing. When I sat down within its reach, I dared not get up without its leave; perched on my shoulder, it amused itself by scratching my head, and I had to wait till it got tired; then I shook hands with it and I was allowed to go. One day a landsknecht, a handsome, well-built fellow, tempted by the prospect of a good meal, came into the commandery.

He carried a javelin, and the ape, who unfortunately was free of his chain, jumped at him, and after having wrenched the weapon from him, bit him in several places that it was most pitiful to see; after which it crossed the moat, climbed to its master's window, opened it, and made its way into the room. With one glance the commander perceived that the animal was in a rage; he endeavored to soothe it with kindly words. It so happened that a silver dagger was lying near the window sill; our ape ties it round its waist; thereupon the commander gently draws the weapon from its sheath, plunges it into the animal, and notwithstanding its bites, holds it pinned down until the breath is out of it. There is no denying that an ape is a terrible creature when it gets on in years and grows big.

Result: The ape is killed by a dagger. The landsknecht and the commander both suffer wounds but do not die.

²⁹ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*.

V. INCIDENTS INVOLVING CONFRONTATIONS WITH AUTHORITIES

V.1. Cellini³⁰ Excerpt 7: The Roman police attempt to arrest Cellini in his home

...hurredly put on a splendid coat of mail over my shirt and, on top of that, a few old clothes that I picked up at random.

Cellini learns that it's the police come to arrest him, but he isn't sure if it is a legitimate arrest.

Imagining that this was a trap to murder me, like the one that Pier Luigi had set before, I grasped a splendid dagger in my right hand and the safe-conduct in my left. Then I ran to the back window, which looked out on some gardens, and saw below me more than thirty policemen. I realized that it would be no good trying to run away from that side of the house, so I made the two lads stand in front of me and told them to open the door when I gave the word. Then I stood ready, in a defensive attitude, with the dagger and the safe conduct in my hands, and said to the boys:

'Now don't be afraid – open the door!'

Like a flash, Vittorio the chief constable rushed in, with two others at his heels. He must have thought it would be easy to hold me fast, but when they saw how I was prepared they fell back and cried out:

'This is more than a joking matter!'

At that I tossed the safe-conduct to them and told them to read it.

'And you shan't even touch me,' I shouted, 'let alone arrest me.'

Vittorio ordered some of them to catch hold of me and not worry about the safe-conduct till later. But in reply to this I thrust my dagger forward and cried:

'God will see justice done! If I don't get away, you'll arrest a corpse.'

The room was crowded with them, they made signs as if to take me forcibly, and I showed I was ready to fight. So in the end the chief constable realized that I meant what I said.

The safe conduct is read three times and the police leave without arresting Cellini.

³⁰ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, p. 145.

Result: No serious injuries; the arrest attempt is foiled for the time being through a combination of a legal document and a bared dagger. Neither would have been sufficient alone. He also is using the possibility of his own death as a threat.

V.2. Sastrow³¹ Excerpt 3: Carrying weapons in Milan

In many parts of Europe in the 16th century, carrying weapons in the countryside was commonplace, but in some districts restrictions on the carrying of weapons in public were becoming more frequent and more strict. Sastrow runs afoul of this while traveling through Milan.

We carried our daggers at our backs in Walloon fashion, which caused us to be summoned before the authorities. How did we dare to appear in public armed with daggers – a crime which was punished with hanging in Italy? In consideration of our presumed ignorance of the law, mercy would be shown to us this once, but we ought to take it as a warning.

Result: Sastrow avoids legal trouble by pleading ignorance as a foreigner.

VI. THE DANGERS OF THE ROAD

VI.1. Cellini³² Excerpt 3: An ominous encounter in an inn

I arrived in the morning at the inn in Anagni and decided to have some food there. I had almost reached it when I shot and killed a few birds with my arquebus and tore my right hand on an iron splinter in the lock of the gun. It was not a very serious wound, but it looked very ugly because my hand was bleeding profusely. I entered the inn, stabled my horse, and went upstairs to a gallery where I found a large gathering of Neapolitan gentlemen who were just about to sit down at a table. There was a charming young lady with them – one of the most beautiful I have ever seen.

As I walked up the stairs my fine young servant came after me with a great poll-axe in his hand. As a result, what with the district being known as a den of murderers, the sight of two armed men and all that blood struck much terror into these poor fellows that they rose from the table, and, trembling with fear, called on God to help them. I immediately started laughing and called out that God had already helped them, because I was the sort of man who would defend them against any attacker.

³¹ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*.

³² Cellini, *The Autobiography*, p. 123.

The girl bound his hand with a gold embroidered silk handkerchief, and Cellini joined the still suspicious men on the ride back to Rome, flirting with the girl the whole way back. Cellini does not appear very concerned about minor wounds.

Result: Nobody dead or wounded, though sight of armed men in the tavern incites fearful reaction.

VI.2. Sastrow³³ Excerpt 4: Traveling during wartime

Sastrow prepares to travel through a countryside in which the Imperial armies are on the move. This excerpt conveys a sense of the risks involved.

On the morning of July 6, 1546, in my twenty-sixth year, I left Rome with my faithful companion Nicholas. My gold was sewn up in my neck collar, the chain in my small clothes. In the way of luggage I had a small satchel containing a shirt and the poems composed by my brother at Spires and in Rome; slung across my shoulders I wore a kind of strap to which I tied my cloak in the day. I had my sword by my side and a rosary dangling from the belt, like a soldier joining his regiment. We had agreed (it being a question of life and death) that I should pretend to be dumb; hence Nicholas did not stir from my side for a moment wherever I went.

Result: The strategy works and Sastrow and his companion are able to travel out of Italy safely. The reason Sastrow pretends to be mute is so that people won't recognize his Pomeranian accent and thereby suspect he is a Lutheran (which he is).

VI.3. Sastrow³⁴ 7: Landsknechts in an inn

While traveling back toward home, Sastrow falls in with various French (whom he calls Welch) and Italian (whom he calls Latin) soldiers. He is witness to some of their rowdy behavior.

When we got to Ronciglione, about two miles from Viterbo, we made up our minds to sup there, and go to bed afterwards, in order to arrive early in the city fresh and hearty, though not before daylight, inasmuch as we wanted to lay in a stock of things. Scarcely had we sat down to table when a turbulent crowd of soldiers invaded the inn; the host told us to remain quiet, for he was shaking in his shoes for himself. The bandits commenced by flinging him out of his own door; the larder was pillaged, and after having drunk to their heart's content, they staved-in the barrels and swamped the cellars with the wine. It was an abominable bit of business and unquestionably the Welch, and Latin

³³ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*.

³⁴ Ibid.

mercenaries are greater ruffians than the German landsknechten; at any rate, if we are to judge from what they did in a friendly country, and virtually under the very eyes of the pope. They invited us to accompany them to Viterbo, in spite of Nicholas pointing out to them that night was coming on apace, and that the gates would be shut. ‘We’ll get in for all that,’ they said. We were bound to follow them.

Result: Sastrow avoids trouble by playing along, the innkeeper suffers considerable financial damage but survives.

VII. COMPARING THE TWO AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Cellini is a much more violent person than Sastrow, but they do both seem to live in the same world. Cellini is bold and bombastic to the point of being overbearing, and often gets himself into trouble due to his short fuse and unwillingness to back down. He brooks no insult, cannot suffer the company of fools and jealously protects his honor. Sastrow is much more pragmatic; his use of disguise while traveling is emblematic of this philosophy. He prefers to avoid confrontation through clever means and though he can be forceful when necessary, he does not describe himself personally fighting in any brawls or duels. The most violent incidents in his book are the result of attacks perpetrated against his father, brother, and grandfather.

We are unfortunately missing what was possibly the most interesting part of Sastrow’s book, the depiction of his time in the town of which he became mayor, the city of Stralsund, which came as a surprise to him since he had acted as a legal antagonist against the city in several lawsuits. The title of this chapter is the provocative *des Teuffels Battstube* (“the devil’s bathhouse”)³⁵, but unfortunately it is lost to posterity. Based on what we do have, Sastrow dealt with the violent world in which he lived in a manner almost the polar opposite of Cellini’s, and though he too jealously guarded his honor, he preferred to sidestep trouble rather than confront it head on. This tells us that while 16th century Europe was clearly a violent place, it was possible to navigate with the help of a combination of skill and luck without oneself being violent.

VII.1. What the fencing manuals tell us about Cellini

To the non-fencer, Cellini’s approach to combat may seem to be erratic, overly aggressive, or simply deluded fabrication. But some of the incidents he describes correspond reasonably well to advice given within the fightbooks. This could be a coincidence, but it might also allow us to see some of the incidents, and therefore the autobiography and Cellini himself, in a slightly different light, implying a method to his madness in at least some of the incidents. Though Cellini does not mention any formal

³⁵ Karl-Reinhart Trauner, *Identität in der frühen Neuzeit: die Autobiographie des Bartholomäus Sastrow, Geschichte in der Epoche Karls* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2004), pp. 91 and 95.

fencing training in his autobiography, fencing training was commonplace for young men of Florence and Rome and it was a normal part of education for young men in Renaissance Europe generally speaking³⁶.

Not all of the fencing masters of this period wrote books that are still extant, and since we don't know which masters, if any, Cellini studied with, we certainly don't have any evidence that Cellini trained with any of the known fightbook authors. The most important school of fencing in Italy during his lifetime was in the city of Bologna, though there were also several known fencing masters in Florence and Rome. One Florentine master who was active during Cellini's lifetime, Francesco di Sandro Altoni³⁷, wrote the fightbook Monomachia ovvero Arte di Scherm, dedicated to Cellini's patron and occasional nemesis Cosimo II de Medici.

Though Cellini does not describe his fights with the same level of technical detail that we see in the fightbooks, and therefore we can't precisely match the lessons of the fightbooks to these incidents, he does give us enough hints and other details that we can say that they are consistent with the advice of the masters in several key respects. Just as the two autobiographies seem to be part of the same world, so do the fightbooks. We can see strategies and tactics similar to those described by Cellini in manuals from throughout Europe, and with the same wide variety of weapons which he employs³⁸.

VII.1.1. The Pike

For example **Cellini 5, 12 and 14** mention the use of pikes, and **Sastrow 2** mentions an iron-tipped pole which proved to have an advantage over a sword. Out in the open, the pike confers an advantage in reach. The pike as primarily a mass-combat weapon with little obvious value for individual use, but methods for its personal use and dueling are described in several fightbooks. In his Paradoxes of Defense, George Silver advocates the "long staff" or the "morris [moorish] pike" as the best of all weapons saving only the Welch hook or forest bill³⁹. He also notes that the "The morris pike defends the battle from both horse and man, much better than can the short staff, long staff, or forest bill"⁴⁰, though he goes on to say that it does not offend the enemy as much as the two-handed sword, halberd or battle axe⁴¹. So Cellini's choice of a pike as a traveling

³⁶ Sydney Anglo, *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 29.

³⁷ Francesco di Sandro Altoni (1539), available from Wiktenauer, <http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Francesco_di_Sandro_Altoni> [accessed 29 March 2015].

³⁸ Anglo, *The Martial Arts*, pp. 25–27.

³⁹ George Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence* (1599), available from Wiktenauer, <http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Index:Paradoxes_of_Defense_%28George_Silver%29.pdf> [accessed 04 February 2015], pp. 27–44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–44.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–44.

weapon is clearly something normal during his own time, and specifically it was regarded as a good defensive weapon for the open road or the mean city streets. The fact that the weapon was considered (at least by Silver) to be better for defense than attack may reflect Cellini's agenda in these encounters: to either fend off attackers, or safely bluff.

For the actual use of the pike in a duel with a similar weapon, we have as one example an entire section of Joachim Meyer's 1570 *Kunst des Fechten* fightbook devoted to fighting with the weapon one-on-one. Meyer notes that "The pike requires a strong, earnest and cautious man who knows how to control his pike judiciously, and to plant his thrust upon his opponent certainly, and who can act at the right time in the work"⁴². Fightbooks often use this type of language, referring to bold steps, and wielding the weapon in a strong and decisive manner. This echoes the language Cellini typically uses to describe his own posture whenever he is facing a potential enemy. The fencing masters say that indecision can be deadly with any weapon. This is especially true when facing an inexperienced opponent due to the severe risk of both parties being wounded or killed, which, as Giganti notes, often happened in real encounters⁴³.

To forestall this problem, the fencing masters spend a lot of time dealing with the opponent's weapon before attacking. Meyer notes "...if your opponent encounters you with a similar weapon, that is with a similar pike, then take heed whether he is hasty and wrathful with his attack, so that he rushes first to thrust; then act earnestly as if you intended to steal his initial thrust, and get in first, so that you prompt him to rush even more with his initial thrust, but you shall not thrust first... but strike his thrust to one side with a jerk, and plant your weapon upon him in the face."⁴⁴

In the pole-arm section of his 1536 manual *Opera Nova*, the Bolognese master Achille Marozzo gives similar advice to pressure the enemy, then beat aside his attack and make a decisive thrust: "...you will go pressing [*astringere*] your enemy, that is you let the right foot push the left until he will strike at you either high or low. But first I want you to suppose that he throws a low thrust at your left leg and you will quickly hurl it inward with your haft toward your right side and there you will give him a thrust, stepping a little forward with your left foot, in the chest or in the face, never letting go of the partisan with your left hand, returning into that same guard; and there you will be patient once more."⁴⁵. These are just two examples of how a seemingly reckless

⁴² Joachim Meyer, *The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570*, translated by J. Forgeng, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 274.

⁴³ Nicoletto Giganti, *The 'Lost' Second Book of Nicoletto Giganti (1608): A Rapier Fencing Treatise*, translated by P. Terminiello and J. Pendragon (London: Fox Spirit, 2013), p. 51.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *The Art of Combat*, p. 274.

⁴⁵ Achille Marozzo, *Opera Nova* (1536), available from Wiktenauer, <http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Opera_Nova_%28Achille_Marozzo%29> [accessed 29 March 2015], pp. 81r–90r.

approach toward another man with a pole weapon can actually be a ruse to safely displace their weapon before attacking. With this context one can see Cellini's boldness as a tactical ploy, given that he described Magalotti coming forward aggressively before he landed (or nearly landed) his own blow.

VII.1.2. The Sword

Regarding the running sword fight we see in **Cellini 12**, we might assume that formal fencing training of his time would not be pertinent, focusing as it did on the realm of the salon and the formal duel. But we find many fightbooks which address all kinds of informal brawls and ambushes. For example the 17th century fencing master Allesandro Senese noted that in addition to friendly fencing in the salon, or a one-on-one duel on the street, you must also know “how to act with a sharp sword in the piazza, alone or with companions, when the encounter is unplanned, beset by possibly more than one person; considering that in the piazza the ground, air, measure, and view are not like in the salle, nor is the spirit in which you fence like in the piazza, and neither the outcome.”⁴⁶. At the end of the confrontation with the French swordsmen, Cellini brags that if he gets his big two-handed sword, he will come along with them wherever they like. Here too, he is in sync with Silver, who claims: “The two handed sword has the vantage against the sword and target, the sword and buckler, the sword and dagger, or rapier and poniard.”⁴⁷.

The Venetian master Nicoletto Giganti, in his 1608 *Liber secondo*, gives some more specific advice on how to fight while outnumbered using the type of weapons (sword and dagger) that Cellini actually had during most of that fight. Interestingly, given that he is one of the world's best known and most respected rapier masters based on his first very popular book, in his second book Giganti is a strong advocate of the cut in such situations: “I would like to teach you how to defend yourself with cuts, in cases of necessity, against two or three people. If you are attacked by two people, as often occurs, if you cut a mandritto at one, in that tempo the other will strike at you. While if you thrust at one, in that tempo you will take a thrust from the other. Therefore you will quickly find yourself dead, as has happened to many.” Without a doubt, a dangerous situation! Giganti continues:

In order to both attack and defend, I want you to keep your sword high as if to deliver a mandritto. If both thrust at you simultaneously, you should cut a mandritto into their swords, followed by a roverscio. The mandritto should be delivered so it almost wounds your enemy's neck, and finishes ready to attack again from the left.”⁴⁸. Giganti goes on to describe several more specific techniques for using cuts against

⁴⁶ Piermarco Terminiello, *Senese (2014)* translation, (personal communication in 2015)

⁴⁷ Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*, pp. 27–44.

⁴⁸ Giganti, *A Rapier Fencing Treatise*, pp. 47–48.

other types of attacks, and how to train to prepare to use this life saving method. He then notes: “In this manner anyone can parry thrusts, even from three or four opponents, while wounding and keeping the enemy at bay to the full length of their sword, by delivering long, quick, strong and wide cuts.” He writes further that “...by delivering a mandritto into the enemy’s sword as he thrusts, he will cast his enemy’s sword to the ground, and by returning his own sword forward he is able to perform not just one roverscio, but two or three, before quickly retreating back.”⁴⁹

So not only was the situation faced by Cellini known to the fencing masters, some of them considered it a common problem and advocated tactics they claimed could handle it. Furthermore the advice Giganti gives is similar in certain respects to the way Cellini described the fight. Cellini says: “and I kept on thrusting and cutting, coming near more than once to dealing a deadly blow.” Only some of his strikes are “nearly” deadly, yet he clearly portrays his role in the fight as aggressive (aggressive enough to keep three men at bay). If some of his cuts were aimed at his enemies’ swords, and others at their necks, as Giganti advises, his seemingly reckless aggression might actually have an intelligent tactical purpose. Of course we have no way of knowing that, or even if the story happened anything like the way Cellini described it, but the approach that he takes is not inconsistent with the advice of the masters.

VII.1.3. The Dagger

When Cellini plans to assassinate someone, such as his brother’s killer (**Cellini 2**); when he intends to wound or maim an enemy, such as in (**Cellini 13**); when he makes a deadly serious threat, as in (**Cellini 12**); or when he expects a very serious fight at close range, such as when the Roman police come to arrest him (**Cellini 7**), he often uses his dagger. Master Giganti notes of the dagger that “the majority of great men and captains who are killed, are slain by daggers or similar arms.”⁵⁰

VII.1.4. Wearing armor in a civilian context

We typically think of armor as something worn during wartime in a military rather than civilian context, and many fightbooks sharply differentiate between fighting in full armor and fighting completely unarmored, which the German masters call *Harnischfechten* and *Blossfechten* respectively. But when preparing for strife, Cellini often girds himself with an intermediate level of protection: he wears a shirt of mail and wears gauntlets (as in **incidents Cellini 7, 10 and 12**). When he has made threats against the life of a romantic rival, that man is also prepared with a coat of mail that saves his life (**incident Cellini 17**). The 16th–17th century English fencing master George Silver, who was notoriously contemptuous of the Italians and of their fencing systems, makes an

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 129

interesting comment about how the Italians fight: “The first mark is, they seldom fight in their own country unarmed, commonly in this sort, a pair of gauntlets upon their hands, and a good shirt of mail upon their bodies. Yet they persuade us that the cross of the rapier without hilt or gauntlet is sufficient.”⁵¹ So Cellini’s habit of wearing mail seems to have been well known to contemporary fightbook authors, and among some was cause for ethnic ridicule.

So we can see here in this admittedly superficial overview, that many of Cellini’s actions bear a certain similarity to the advice and tactics outlined in the fightbooks, and do not seem to deviate sharply from them. We can say that it is at least possible that his seemingly reckless actions could have actually been characterized as the tactics of a trained fencer.

VII.2. What Cellini and Sastrow tell us about the context of the martial arts of their time

In the past when considering the context of the fightbooks we have concentrated on either a military role, which we can arguably find in the armored fencing and much of the fencing from horseback, as well as in some of the Iberian manuals; a formalized individual combat role (including both judicial combat and illegal dueling); and a sport role, especially in the association with the German *fechtschuler* and related traditions in Flanders, France and elsewhere. As I note in the introduction, a fourth context is apparent in these texts. This is an intermediate context of social violence on the city streets or forest roads. It involves potentially dangerous confrontations, ranging from simple verbal challenges with the merest hint of the *possibility* of escalation into armed violence, to cold blooded assassinations and pitched fights between heavily armed groups of antagonists.

VII.2.1. Scaled violence and the escalating bluff

Legal and social constraints; Tlusty’s notion of scaled violence

Cellini seems to get in more trouble for threatening the pope’s grandson than for killing and wounding several other people of lower status. Undoubtedly these lesser incidents contributed to Cellini’s bad reputation as a brawler and dangerously erratic person (amusingly, Cellini puts this kind of description of himself in the mouths of his enemies in his own autobiography, implying a certain level of self-awareness and sense of irony). But his biggest problem in France and later in the court of the duke of Florence was in dealing with contradictory demands by the prince and his powerful wife, while his problems with the pope came largely due to disputes with the pope’s family, and possible theft by Cellini during the sack of Rome. Some jurisdictions, notably Milan, (**Cellini 4, Sastrow 3**) seemed much stricter about violence and the carrying of weapons than others, while Paris seemed to be particularly lawless (**Cellini 12, 13, 14**). But

⁵¹ Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*, pp. 3–12.

generally speaking, regardless of the laws as written, there seems to be considerable latitude for social violence (at least for someone of relatively high status) everywhere Cellini and Sastrow find themselves.

In his autobiography, Cellini describes numerous incidents of interpersonal violence, too many in fact to list them all here. Many of these incidents have a certain familiar pattern. This takes the form of an escalating power struggle, or confrontation between two or more individuals, in which one (typically Cellini) is attempting to assert his will without immediately turning to armed violence. A combination of a mounting physical threat with verbal threats, legal arguments, entreaties or appeals to high ideals of religion, reason or friendship, escalate until they ultimately lead to either one side backing down, or a violent armed fight potentially resulting in death or maiming.

Though a successful bluff leading to a negotiated settlement is clearly the goal of both of the antagonists, if neither party backs down lethal violence can quickly erupt. Cellini often demonstrates his immediate willingness to escalate as a means of intimidating a rival (**Cellini 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 14**). This may not be unique to Cellini or to his mostly Italian and French context. In her 2011 book *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany*, professor Ann Tlusty described numerous incidents of violence, mostly from the legal archives of Augsburg in the 16th and 17th centuries, which according to eyewitness testimony started as escalating verbal confrontations, but ended in armed violence in which one or both parties were seriously injured or killed.

We see this, for example, in the case between Caspar Rauner and Caspar Aufschlager⁵², both artisans and members of the town guard, or between Leonhard Schiller and Hans Nesser and their journeymen⁵³. Both incidents resulted in death. In an attempt to prevent such incidents, certain specific provocations were prohibited in the laws of the German towns in Tlusty's survey of records, including putting a hand on the hilt of a sword, drawing a sword, making verbal threats and so on⁵⁴. One interesting example which shows up frequently in the German legal records and ordinances was called "striking the stones" (*in die steine haven*) which Tlusty describes as "a ritual gesture" consisting of striking a sword blade "along a stone wall or a cobblestone street" sometimes with the intention of making sparks⁵⁵. Cellini describes doing exactly this when faced with the Florentine exiles (**Cellini 4**).

This kind of escalating social confrontation seems to be the most common type of encounter that Cellini describes, and it seemed to characterize most of the specific incidents described in Tlusty's records from Augsburg. It is likely that this was one of

⁵² Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic*, pp. 114–115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

the most common forms of social violence that a fencer in the time of Meyer or Marozzo, Giganti or Silver might have actually faced.

The dangerous city streets and open roads of 16th century Europe

Fights happened on the open road, the street and the piazza, the tavern, the princely court (or in the hallways just outside) and the inn. Innkeepers in the early modern period had a role as extensions of town authority and were under obligation to prevent violence⁵⁶, which we occasionally see them attempting to do in vain (Incidents **Cellini 4**, **Cellini 10** and **Sastrow 7**). We also see people become very nervous when Cellini arrives at an inn heavily armed (**Cellini 3**) and in spite of no doubt sincere warnings by the innkeeper of the potential for severe punishment by the authorities. Clearly punishments after the fact, however draconian, are not enough for people to feel safe in an inn when people show up heavily armed or start arguing.

The wild countryside seems to evoke the most fear and the most careful preparation on the part of both Cellini and Sastrow. Sastrow takes care to sew his valuables into his clothing, no doubt a precaution of limited efficacy. Both men travel armed and with companions whenever possible; Cellini makes sure to have a large weapon and both he and his apprentices wear armor.

Wounds

Our modern perception of this period is that medicine was so primitive that one could easily die of a scratch, which would inevitably become infected. This must influence our perception of how people would perceive the possibility of getting into a sword fight. Though mortality from disease, including minor infected wounds was obviously far more common in the 16th Century than today, it is interesting that in these two autobiographies expectation of the author and presumably, the reader does not seem to be one of certain death from minor injuries. Sastrow's brother has a chip of his skull cut off (**Sastrow 5**), which would be a serious wound today, but he doesn't express surprise that the surgeon was able to save him. Cellini describes himself, his friends and others receiving numerous small wounds and typically makes light of them (**Cellini 10**). He even intentionally sets out to wound some French lawyers with the explicit intention of causing maiming but not fatal injuries (**Cellini 13**). Nobody seems to perish as a result. Of course to what extent, if any, this reflects the reality of the day is beyond the scope of the paper.

Reasons why fighting takes place

Commercial disputes

In one incident we see a fight happen over the sale of butter (**Sastrow 2**). Sastrow was from a Hanseatic town and became mayor of another. The ruling class of these towns

⁵⁶ Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order*, p. 182.

were wholesale merchants, and long-distance trade in foreign ports was a routine part of their life and their world. Getting physically assaulted or attacked while in a foreign port was a common occurrence for Hanseatic merchants⁵⁷ and it was therefore something for which a man would have to prepare. Cellini sees some strife during commercial transactions (over his art and his work as a goldsmith) and it's worth noting that Florence is also a mercantile town engaged in very long distance trade.

Religious disputes

The ethnic sectarian disputes between Catholics and Protestants, and between different Protestant and quasi Protestant factions (Calvinist, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Hussite) were often deadly in the 16th century and were the cause of several wars, including the Schmalkaldic War of which Sastrow was caught in the middle. Many towns, particularly north of the Alps, remained divided for decades or even centuries by tense boundaries on class and religious lines between Catholics and Protestant communities. A religious dispute over a song, an article of clothing, a comment or a gesture could suddenly escalate into interpersonal or mob violence at a moment's notice.

Robbery

Both Cellini and Sastrow mention the potential of robbery nearly every time they travel. In both books robber bands often have names and well established reputations in certain areas, and travelers take appropriate precautions like traveling in groups, wearing armor and carrying pikes, swords and guns. Sastrow's brother is robbed (**Sastrow 5**) and Sastrow himself confronts two highwaymen in another incident which he talks his way out of.

Class disputes

Another reason for violence can be seen in the incident in which he describes his brother's mugging by highwaymen. (**Sastrow 3**) Sastrow notes that the robbers are actually nobles. He writes a brief aside about the nature of the nobility, from the point of view of townsmen such as himself, ending with an insulting epigram followed by an apology⁵⁸:

In consequence of the mild laws of repression, these gentry swarmed throughout Mecklenburg, and the names of the noblest families figured among them, which fact gave substance to the poet who wrote:

Nobilis et nebulo parvo discrimine distant,

Sic nebulo magnus nobilis esse potest.

⁵⁷ Philippe Dollinger, *The German Hansa* (Stanford: University Press, 1870), p. 188.

⁵⁸ Sastrow, *Being the Memoirs of a German Burgomaster*

[very roughly translated:

The distance between the noble and the scoundrel is not wide,
Thus, a great noble can be a knave]

Of course these lines do not apply to many honorable personages belonging to the nobility. But to return to my story.

Cellini also describes what is arguably a class-based incident, one which would ultimately cost him dearly (**Cellini 6**). When a high ranking prince of the church deals with him in a high-handed manner, Cellini responds with threats. Later on his supposedly innocent target practice is perceived in a more sinister light by the pope's family. Whereas Sastrow clearly sees himself as a burger and a member of the merchant/patrician class (in opposition to both the nobility outside the town and the lower classes within it⁵⁹), Cellini arguably sees himself as an artist and a unique class or individual, in fact this may have been part of the reason he wrote his autobiography^{60 61} but he positions himself outside of the classes or estates of his father's generation. He articulates his resentment at high-handed treatment quite eloquently in another part of the book.

Class disputes in the form of disputes between the estates were not unusual within the towns or in the countryside. The 16th century saw the German Peasant's War (1524–1525) and a variety of other peasant uprisings throughout Europe, for example in Friuli near Venice (1511), Hungary (1514), Wurttemberg (1514), Slovenia (1515), the Netherlands (1515–1523), Sweden (1534, 1542, 1596), England (1549), and Croatia (1573). Uprisings were common in the towns too; Sastrow bitterly recounts how his family was forced to leave Stralsund after an uprising there in 1527.

The formal duel

Cellini only mentions being challenged to a formal duel one time (**Cellini 16**) though he implies that he has been in other similar affairs. The result in this incident was that cooler heads prevailed and no actual fighting took place. This was typical of formal duels during Cellini's time⁶². But the other incidents Cellini describes fall into more of a gray area and tend to get settled long before any kind of formal arrangements can be made. It is a common assumption that the fightbooks, particularly in the Italian context, are designed to train their readers for a formal duel, but that may not have been the

⁵⁹ Ibid., introduction.

⁶⁰ Cellini, *The Autobiography*, p. viii.

⁶¹ Victoria C. Gardner, 'Homines non nascuntur, sed figuntur: Benvenuto Cellini's Vita and Self-Presentation of the Renaissance Artist', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28/2 (1997), pp. 447–465.

⁶² Piermarco Terminiello, 'Fencing culture, duelling and violence' (2013), available from HROARR <<http://hroarr.com/fencing-culture-duelling-and-violence/>> [accessed 29 March 2015].

most likely scenario. More recent analysis and the discovery of the second Giganti have altered this perception.

Ambush by personal enemies

In the incidents reported by both Sastrow (**Sastrow 1**) and Cellini (**Cellini 9**) personal enemies have prepared an organized attack against the protagonist (or his relative) outside of the jurisdiction where law and order are more difficult to challenge. These kinds of incidents pose a greater tactical challenge than a typical spur-of-the-moment confrontation. Knowing that enemies are making plans necessitates making preparations, as Cellini's enemy and would-be victim does when he knows the very dangerous Cellini is after him (**Cellini 17**), a precaution which saves his life. Having friends, supporters and allies is another good idea, if it can be arranged.

Premeditated assassination

On several occasions in these two books, individuals or multiple people set out to simply assassinate or maim others. In this situation there is typically no conversation (or very little) and death or serious wounds are almost inevitably the result, though not necessarily of the target. Cellini takes the role of the antagonist himself in two incidents (**Cellini 2, 13**); Sastrow's family is the victim in one (**Sastrow 1**), and thanks to quick thinking and improvisation his father turns the tables on a would-be assassin in another (**Sastrow 2**).

Random craziness

Several of the incidents fall under this broader category, which includes people falling into sudden rages or suffering from misunderstandings, drunkenness, or insanity. Nothing can possibly be more random than the rampage of the ape (**Sastrow 6**) but other more prosaic incidents include Cellini's brother's tragic misunderstanding (**Cellini 1**) and the drunken mercenaries with whom Sastrow wisely decides to drink and sing songs, rather than attempt to control (**Sastrow 7**).

VII.2.2. Unpredictability of the tactical environment

All these different places where a fight can happen under so many different circumstances make for a challenging tactical environment. We have already seen that the authors of many of the fightbooks seemed to be aware of this, and advised their readers and students to prepare for many types of chaotic situations and train with a wide variety of weapons. This helps explain the wide variety of weapons that so often show up in the fightbooks. The pike, long staff or equivalent is a useful weapon for the open road. The 16th century is a time of guns, but guns in this era only shoot once before needing to be laboriously reloaded, meaning on a practical level that hand weapons still play a very important role, not just on the battlefield but in social violence of varying scale. We see weapons falling into particular niches, with the sword used for defense in close, the gun for killing and making threats, the pike and halberd for

outdoor fights and defense in open spaces, and the two-handed sword to face multiple attackers.

One opponent or many

The default assumption of some fightbooks is of the one-on-one fight; with a few exceptions this is what is usually portrayed, and it is the basis for learning to use a weapon. But others, as we have noted, such as Giganti's second treatise, deal in depth with the realistic circumstances of being outnumbered. Social violence may range from two men arguing with the vague threat of someone pulling out a sword, to a full-fledged battle between two groups of men. It fills the wide space between the formal duel and the battlefield.

Dealing with protective gear

One interesting thing we have seen here is the use of armor, either hidden beneath civilian clothing or worn openly. Not the full head-to-toe harness of the heavy cavalryman, but partial armor including a shirt of mail and sometimes gauntlets. Interestingly a helmet isn't mentioned. The techniques Cellini describes when fighting in his armor don't seem to correlate with the special techniques for armored fencing of the fightbooks, he doesn't mention half-sword guards, striking with the cross or the pommel, or the use of throws or grappling. He simply fights as normal, i.e. what the Germans call 'Blossfechten'. We can only guess as to why, but the answer may be as simple as this: if the opponent is only partially armored, you simply fight normally and attack the unarmored areas.

Conclusion: A flexible tactical approach to dealing with violence

In the incidents of social violence that we find in these two autobiographies, we can see a much broader context for the weapons of the fightbooks. If we assume that Cellini and Sastrow are describing a world somewhat similar to the one they lived in, these are not merely oddities to be brought out in the gym or used to make the provost's exam more challenging. Each of these weapons – the dagger, the sword, the saber (or *dussack* or *messer*), the poll axe, halberd or *roncha*, the pike and the long staff, the montante or the longsword – has a specific role in the wide array of situations that could be faced by a man of the Renaissance. By examining this array, each with its own appropriate tools and tactics, we can better understand the serious personal reasons, in the sense of self defense (and perhaps, offense) that an individual from Italy or Stralsund in the time of Meyer, Marozzo, Silver, or Giganti might have on his mind when he considered learning to fence. This arguably helps us better understand the fightbooks and their authors. Conversely, familiarity with the fightbooks may help us better understand the behavior of remarkable individuals like Cellini and Sastrow in the literature of this fascinating and important period.

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