

## CONTRIBUTOR

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# FIGHT LIKE A GIRL! AN INVESTIGATION INTO FEMALE MARTIAL PRACTICES FROM THE 14<sup>TH</sup> TO THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY DANIEL JAQUET

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## ABSTRACT

Women appear in fight books as practitioners in the late Middle Ages. They then disappear completely, only to reappear at the dawn of the twentieth century. How are they represented therein? What discourses of gender and violence are present within the corpus of European fight books? In this article, the representation of women in the fight books of the late Middle Ages is analysed, with a focus on female martial practices in legal procedures. The absence of women (their 'invisibilisation') from fight books in the modern period is compensated by exploring other types of sources relating to female martial arts, including transgender fighters. The final part highlights different martial practices at the dawn of the twentieth century and the reintroduction of women onto the pages of fight books.

Women have always taken part in conflict. This fact may have displeased the men who wrote history, who by various means made women invisible in such contexts. In European societies built on Judeo-Christian religious values and Greek philosophy, men have evidently long sought every means to keep women out of interpersonal violence situations. However, many women, by choice or necessity, have fallen through the cracks of the net that sought to 'protect' them, with or without their consent.

Among the many works on the cultural history of violence in Europe, increasing attention is being given to gendered violence [Fox 2013; Rouse 2019]. This present article does not seek to analyse these works, nor does it aim to define violence against – or committed by [Poirson 2020] – women [Krantz and Garcia-Moreno 2005]. Instead, it investigates the place of women in a specific literary genre: the fight books [Jaquet 2018]. This technical literature represents a heterogeneous corpus of sources, appearing in Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century and whose production continues today. With the help of texts, images or a combination of both, the authors of these books attempt to put on the page the body movements belonging to the different traditions of European martial arts. In the end, they represent discourses about martial arts. This collection of documents has many forms and functions, and includes both manuscripts and prints. They have different purposes, but all are limited by their imperfect format – the two-dimensional static page – for a transmission of embodied knowledge, which is spread in time and space [Burkart 2016].

Indeed, as with dance, this kind of knowledge is transmitted between bodies and through words in a situation involving the expert and the learner face to face, requiring demonstration, imitation and correction. The role of the written word in this process has primarily a memorial purpose or a promotional one, but not necessarily a didactic one. The corpus includes personal notes by students or teachers, presentation works, didactic manuals, theoretical works, copies or translations of the latter; and these are often corrupted [Bauer 2014]. Thus, we encounter cryptic statements (inaccessible to non-students of the author), attempts to translate knowledge from the body to paper, and content that has been altered in unknown ways during its passage between languages and successive copies (often copies of copies). But all in all, the majority of these works are written by men and depict martial practices that often seem fogged with an exaggerated virility. Against this backdrop, how do martial arts experts or practitioners represent women in these documents throughout the ages? Are women seen to be capable of fighting like a man?

The starting point for the investigations behind this article is a surprising observation: women appear in these books as practitioners

in the late Middle Ages, then they disappear completely, only to reappear at the dawn of the twentieth century. Accordingly, in this article, first, the presence of women will be analysed and categorised in the fight books of the late Middle Ages, with a focus on female martial practices in legal procedures. The second part compensates for the 'invisibilisation' of women in the modern period<sup>1</sup> by exploring other types of sources relating to female martial arts, with a focus on androgynous fighters. The last part highlights different martial practices at the dawn of the twentieth century and the reintroduction of women on the fight books' pages.

## 1 WOMEN AT THE TURN OF THE PAGE

The first book of the corpus is an exception in many ways. The anonymous master at the very beginning of the fourteenth century writes down a system of fighting with a sword and a buckler (i.e., a small round shield), using seven guards. The master is depicted as a tonsured priest (*sacerdos*) teaching his disciples (*discipuli*) and a woman, who is not only illustrated with her dress and hair, but also named in the text (Figure 1 overleaf).<sup>2</sup> The treatise contains all the features of a scholastic scripta, typical of academic circles. Written in Latin, the text borrows from Middle High German for technical terms. This is one of the clues to its origin: a town in southern Germany. The type of fighting in question corresponds to an art of self-defence that was taught in the vicinity of universities, but which was also practised in competitive forms in urban environments. The presence of a woman here is surprising, because not only were women not welcome on university benches, but it is even more exceptional to find them among the disciples of a master-at-arms. This is all the more so because she is treated as an equal to the men. The four techniques she performs are located in the last quire of the manuscript, following the other disciples.

1 The 'invisibilisation' of women in fight books is here understood according to its meaning in poststructuralist discourse, in which visibility goes beyond the empirical sense to the dimension of political discourse. On this issue and its roots in authoritative works in the field, see the discussion of Rey Chow's views in Bowman [2013: 77-8].

2 Anonymous, *Liber de arte dimicatoria*, 1305 [Leeds, Royal Armouries, Fecht 01, fol. 32v]: *Ex hiis super[ioribus] allegacionibus Walpurgis recipit schiltslac, quia erat superior & prius parata* (From the abovementioned bindings Walpurgis gets a Schield-Strike, because she was above and the first to be ready [Forgeng 2018: 161]). Regarding material aspects of women fighting, see Gräf [2017]. Regarding symbolism and allegories see Eads and Garber [2014].



Figure 1:  
Anonyme, *Liber de arte dimicatoria*, 1305.  
Leeds, Royal Armouries, *Fecht1*, fol. 32r.  
© Royal Armouries – OA.

Other representations of women in medieval fight books are of a different nature. There are some isolated representations, where sex is probably used for allegorical or at least symbolic purposes. The anonymous anthology compiled in the years 1465-85 includes several martial disciplines from various traditions, with or without illustrations, as well as representations from a treatise on the art of siege warfare.<sup>3</sup> Often, for presentation works such as this one, the manuscripts are produced in several stages, and some contents from other sources are included. For the illustrated parts, the project leader of the commissioned manuscript, who would not necessarily be a martial arts expert, would define the plan and have the illustrations done in a workshop before the text was added, for which a portion of the page is left blank. It was at this stage that the production of this manuscript was interrupted. The numerous repentances that can be spotted on the

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, untitled [*altes Fecht-, Kampf- und Ringbuch*], 1465-80. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.2 Aug. 2° - Heinemann-Nr. 2769). No studies about this manuscript is currently published. A description (codicological note) of the manuscript is available in Leng [2008: 32-4].



Figure 2:  
Anonymous, untitled [*altes Fecht-, Kampf- und Ringbuch*], 1465-80.  
Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.2 Aug. 2° -  
Heinemann-Nr. 2769, fol. 2r.  
© HAB Wolfenbüttel [diglib.hab.de/mss/78-2-aug-2f/start.htm](http://diglib.hab.de/mss/78-2-aug-2f/start.htm)

sheets suggest, however, that the artists' work required corrections, or even that it did not fit at all. This may be why this one, like others, was left unfinished. Nevertheless, in the first quire, which includes a section dedicated to the handling of the longsword in civilian clothes (i.e., without armour), the depiction of a naked woman armed with a sword facing a fighter piercing her heart is placed at the beginning of the iconographic programme (Figure 2 above).

In the absence of a text beneath this image and the lack of information on the context of its production, it is only possible to guess at the interpretation of this image. It is likely, however, that it is an allegory of Lust, often depicted in northern Europe by images of naked women with flowing hair. The fact that this woman is armed is surprising, however, but it could serve as a reminder of chivalric and Christian values: after all, Lust is being fought and defeated here.

Apart from the *Liber de arte dimicatoria* and the rare, isolated representations of women in the medieval and pre-modern corpus, there is an important category of representation of women in the fight books: the judicial duel between men and women.



## 2 WOMEN ON FULL PAGE

'Here, he neutralized the blow and captured the arm'. 'Here the woman attempts a final technique'.<sup>4</sup> These techniques (Figure 3) are gendered in the sense that they are designed to be performed by either the woman or the man. The woman is therefore, in the same way as the man, able to receive the teachings of the master-at-arms in this specific context. This section of the manuscript contains more than nine illustrated female combat techniques.

This is not a fictional representation of combat between the two sexes, as would be the case, for example, in Hugues Piaucele's fabliau *Sire Hain et dame Anieuse*, composed at the end of the thirteenth century and copied in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this story depicts a couple struggling to get the 'braies' – that is, to determine who will 'wear the breeches', as the expression goes – against a backdrop of mockery of contemporary legal procedures.

From the thirteenth century onwards, all the legislative texts governing the practice of judicial duelling emphasised the need to offer equal opportunities to combatants fighting within barriers (fences), even when the sexes or status were different. From the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, however, the rule was to apply these procedures to very specific cases, with the aim of seeing them gradually disappear. In France, from the end of the thirteenth century, the customs of Beauvaisis are very clear: women do not fight, but can be represented by a champion.<sup>6</sup> However, in cases where exceptional circumstances would require the participation of a woman in a judicial procedure with combat without the use of a champion, several customs do elaborate on the practices. This is the case of the Freisinger custom, written down in 1328, which specifies that the man must then be buried up to his kidneys, in order to restore the balance of opportunity between the man and the woman [Jezler and Bussinger 2014: 190]. Several of these customs, compiled in 1346 in Ludwig von Bayern's

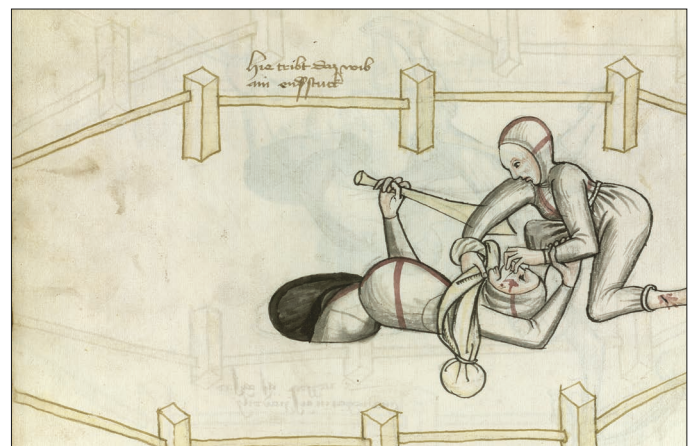


Figure 3:  
Hans Talhofer, *Alte Armatur und Ringkunst*, 1459. København, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Thott 2902, fol. 80v and 83v.  
© Det KGL Bibliotek - OA.

4 Hans Talhofer, *Alte Armatur und Ringkunst*, 1459. København, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Thott 2902, fol. 80v: Hie hat er den schlag ir entwert und dem arm gefangen; fol. 83v: Hie tribt daz wib ain endsstuck. English translation of the author.

5 Edition from the NRCF, vol. 2, number 134, quoted and commented in Ribémont (2016: 99).

6 Se fame l'a apelé et ele n'a en son appel retenu avoué; li apeaus est de nule valeur, car fame ne se puet combatre. Edition from A. Salomon [1899], quoted and commented in Ribémont [2016: 98].

Book of Law, detail in four articles how the fight between a man and a woman should be conducted. The woman, walking freely in the enclosed field, is armed with three stones wrapped in cloth. The man, buried up to his waist, has three clubs. The fight is interrupted when the woman is dragged into the hole, when the man is pulled out, when the combatants are disarmed or when one of the parties gives up and wins. Contrary to popular belief, medieval judicial duels – like ancient gladiatorial combat – do not necessarily end with the death of one of the protagonists.

These procedures provide the legal framework for the master-at-arms to be hired to prepare his clients for these public fights. In the fifteenth century, customary law also governed the possible duration of the training, six weeks [Jaquet 2017: 131-4]. This form of combat was to disappear, but still appears episodically up to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Narrative sources, such as chronicles, present them as archaic. Nevertheless, more than twelve fight books (including their copies in the first half of the sixteenth century) have sections dedicated to these gendered martial practices. The manuscripts of Hans Talhoffer, a master of arms active in the mid-fifteenth century [Burkart 2014], represent the most detailed sections. In the Munich and Copenhagen manuscripts (Fig. 3), the man is depicted with his right hand tied to his waist, probably another way of imposing an additional disadvantage to diminish his natural abilities in order to ensure equal opportunities between the sexes. Jörg Wilhalm, a hatter from Nuremberg, who is also a master of arms specialising in armoured combat and various forms of legal combat (*Kempfmeister*), illustrates this type of combat with the man trapped in a wine barrel.<sup>7</sup> Was this a form of mockery, where this archaism (in the sixteenth century) was shown in public during martial demonstrations, or was it a way of training his clients without having to dig a hole? The information contained in the manuscript does not make it possible to find out.

7 Jörg Wilhalm, kunst zu Augspurg, 1523 [München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 3711, fol. 58ar].

### 3 WOMEN MISSING FROM THE PAGE

From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, women disappeared from the pages of fight books. Does this reflect a change in mentality, or is it the result of processes of exclusion ('invisibilisation')? This period marks a profound change in the practice of interpersonal violence where matters of honour are settled with bloodshed, now away from the public eye. They passed into the private sphere to follow a codified procedure: the duel of honour [Ludwig, Krug-Richter and Schwerhoff 2012]. There are many fight books that specialise in these practices (civil fencing on foot with the sword alone, which will become the rapier, and/or with companion weapons). In the theoretical universe of legislators and thinkers of honour [Cavina 2016], women are excluded from these bloody procedures, which decimate the aristocrat as well as the bourgeois or the farm boy. Honour is gendered, for males by males. Although women disappear from the technical sources, they nevertheless keep appearing in other types of sources, particularly narrative ones, or are found in representations that often make the news in the industrial Europe. The most famous sword players are those who dress in drag. Let us look at three cases, one per century, which appear before we find women back in the pages of fight books.

#### 3.1 A sixteenth-century hermaphroditic master-at-arms

One of Charles V's chroniclers recounts an episode that marked the courts of the King of France and the Emperor [Goodwin 2015: 51-2]. After the French invasion of Milan and the siege of Pavia in 1525, following a battle that went badly wrong, the French king was captured by the imperial troops. He is escorted to Spain with other French and Spanish nobles. On his way to the palace in Madrid, the imprisoned king stops off in Valdaracete and hears about an undefeated master-at-arms in the region, called Esteban. A passage-at-arms is organised and the king's best blades fall one after the other in single combat, proving to the king the truth of the rumour. This is a very common episode in the chronicles of the time, except for the fact that Esteban was named Estefanía. In her youth, she became famous for outperforming her male competitors in a number of physical and martial games. When she reached Granada, suspicious magistrates ordered an examination of her body by trusted matrons and midwives. It turns out that Estefania was a hermaphrodite. The magistrates then asked her to choose her sex. She chose the stronger sex, so that she could practice the profession of arms. Later married at the church, Esteban became head of the family, acquiring all the rights of a male citizen. Legally, or at least administratively, Estefania had changed sex in order to practice her profession.

### 3.2 A seventeenth-century fine blade at the opera

The incredible life of Julie d'Aubigny, alias Mademoiselle de Maupin, inspired a novel by Théophile Gautier, published in 1835 (more than a century after her death in 1707). Her mythical story [Albouy 1972] is still performed on stage and on screen. Born in 1670 in Provence, she came from a lower aristocratic family in the service of the Count of Armagnac. Married young, she got rid of her husband and fled to Marseille with her lover to become an itinerant sword player and street singer. She returned to Paris as an opera singer and won several duels, including one against a knight who became her lover. She frequently dressed as a man and went to high society gala evenings, seducing both women and men. An escapade to Brussels to escape the Parisian police allowed her to frequent the social circles of high nobility and the bed of the Elector Maximilian-Emmanuel of Bavaria. Back in Paris, she shone on the opera stage and continued her duelling career, dying in oblivion at the age of thirty-seven.

### 3.3 An eighteenth-century transvestite knight

Charles Beaumont d'Éon, alias Chevalier d'Éon, spent forty-nine years presenting himself as a man and thirty-two years as a woman. His autopsy established that he was indeed a man. A French man of letters and diplomat, he is best known for his (debated) role as a spy for Louis XV. He worked in Russia and England for French foreign affairs and was a renowned swordsman. At the request of the Prince of Wales, George Augustus of Hanover, the future George IV, a public assault of arms was organised at Carlton House in 1787. The Chevalier d'Éon, dressed as a woman, confronted the Chevalier Saint-Georges, in front of an audience of French and English high society. His victory is commemorated in an oil on canvas by Alexandre-Auguste Robineau. He was wounded in a duel in 1796, but continued to cross swords, privately or publicly, until the age of 81. He died in 1810 in poverty and debt. Like Mademoiselle de Maupin, he inspired many plays and his story is still adapted to the screen today.

These androgyne fencers of the modern period are often turned into mythical figures in the nineteenth century [Steinberg 2001]. On top of this phenomenon, several developments can be observed in the realm of politics and sport in the period 1850-1945. An anti-duellist movement was spreading in Europe and was full of representations that degraded the 'weaker' sex [Spierenburg 1998]. Numerous images of bare-chested women armed with foils or duelling pistols oscillate between quasi-pornography and defiance of social norms and conventions. Fencing developed both in military instructions for the soldier and into a gentleman's sport. If the nineteenth century armies were no place for women, the beginning of sport fencing was a tiny bit more permissive.

There are several mentions of women's fencing halls from the very end of the century, but this was an ambiguous emancipation. It was often the wife of the master-at-arms who ran the hall under her husband's control.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they did not take up the pen to write treatises. Sport fencing, with the misogynous ideas of Pierre de Coubertin [Boulongne 2000] and the development of the Olympic movement, remained a man's business until the end of the twentieth century. Women's fencing appeared in foil in 1924, a weapon considered the least dangerous of the three Olympic disciplines. Women could not (officially) compete until 1996 for epee and 2004 for sabre.

## 4 THE PAGES FOR WOMEN

Post-industrial Europe confined women to the domestic sphere. However, the second half of the nineteenth century marked the advent of a 'progressive' period that saw the first female martial emancipation, which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. Numerous stories and anecdotes about women fighters were published, particularly in the nineteenth-century press, as a reaction to these attempts at female control of the public arena. It is interesting to note that the tone is often stung by the idea that a woman can outperform a man in combat, a supposedly masculine territory. Women's martial abilities are questioned.

Yet martial artists know that the weapon is used as an advantage multiplier to overcome physical and technical disadvantages. In other words, a good fighter (or indeed a good female fighter) can win an assault against a stronger opponent (or of the opposite sex), thanks to his or her use of the weapon to circumvent his or her own morphological disadvantages or lack of technical knowledge. This even goes back to the biblical stories with the image of David's fight against Goliath. It is a different story for the unarmed combat arts, the 'manly art' of boxing, wrestling, or martial practices from Asia that were imported and acculturated in Europe throughout the twentieth century. However, it is on this very terrain that women reappear in the fight books, as new champions of the art of self-defence.

Coming out of the clandestine boxing matches on the old continent against a backdrop of gambling and exacerbated virility, it was in the United States that the first female boxers entered the public eye. Anna Lewis and Hattie Stewart fought for the title of boxing champion in

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8 Communication with Julien Garry.





Figure 4:  
Mary Russell (Duchess of Bedford) and Emily Watts  
practicing Jujutsu on the grounds of Woburn Abbey,  
1905. Photograph by George Beldam. Public Domain.

1888, in a match covered by the *New York Herald* [Rouse 2019: 21-3]. In Paris, female wrestlers performed against all comers in cabarets. The press presented them as sensational, or on the contrary, sought to ridicule them. It is against this background of collective awareness of a place to be made for women's martial arts that fight books are feminised.

Women's street defence techniques developed in line with the wider uptake of Asian martial arts, in particular jujutsu (AKA jujitsu and jiu-jitsu). The first European instructor was Edward Barton-Wright (1860-1951), who published two seminal articles in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1899 and 1901. He established his new defence method, *bartitsu* (misspelled as 'Baritsu'), made famous by Arthur Conan Doyle as the martial art practised by Sherlock Holmes. Women do not yet find space in these pages, although other sources attest to Barton Wright teaching

women. It was the disciple of the Japanese master Sadakazu Uyenishi, working with Barton Wright, who became the first female author of a fight book. Emily Diana Watts (Fig. 4) published *The Fine Art of Jujutsu* in 1906, in which women's martial arts practices were given a gendered discourse [Godfrey 2012: 93]. This was already acknowledged by male authors, such as Harrie Irving Hancock in 1904, who adapted these techniques to women and children from a medical (physical) point of view [Rouse 2019: 57-8].

These practices were also associated with the suffragette movement, of which Edith Margaret Garrud (1872-1971) was the emblematic figure. The young woman taught jujutsu in London from 1908, at the Suffragettes Self-Defence Club, then later in a series of secret locations to form the Bodyguard group, a combat unit of the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) that regularly confronted the police in the street [Godfrey 2012: 101-5].

However, women were often considered inferior by men. Georges Dubois published his manual for street self-defence in 1913. Women are a central part of his discourse as practitioners, but they are still far from parity considerations when it comes to discussing their supposed martial abilities. The author therefore seeks to adapt the techniques intended for men into a series of 'recipes' for these ladies when they are called upon to defend themselves. This same phenomenon was observed thirty years later with Major Fairbairn. This British officer published a reference manual for military close combat (*Get tough!*), whose principles are still valid today. During the Second World War, he dedicated a book (*Hands off!*) to the women who would have to defend themselves without the men at the front. Both approaches, the lethal one for the military audience, as well as the non-lethal one for civilians aimed at women, are simplified adaptation of his combat techniques from his seminal work *Defendu* in 1926 [Bowman 2021: 53-4].

## 5 EXCURSUS

Women are as capable of fighting as men. Serious business (i.e., defending one's body at the risk of one's life) and less serious business (i.e., recreational, competitive or demonstration martial practices) lead to the execution of the same martial gestures, like two sides of the same coin. It is the intention and the affect that change according to the context of the application of the gesture, not the technique. These different elements lead me to think of the martial arts as non-gendered, following the theory of gender as a social construction. Of course, sexed

bodies are different from one another, but every body is different. Martial artists know that it is a matter of taking into account one's own weaknesses in the practice of martial gestures, whether they are related to one's sex, morphology or experience. For many 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, it is unthinkable to consider combat sports without weight or gender categories, because of the history behind it as sketched by this contribution. Martial artists, however, can break free from these modern conventions, outside of the institutional competition context.

By viewing women's appearance in fight books as evidence of a deliberate departure from contemporaneous gender norms, the martial arts literature has a long history of violating conventional ways of thinking about women as the weaker sex. This investigation into the corpus of fight books and the place of women in it has made it possible to rule on the exclusion of women in the corpus between the mid-sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries. This observation echoes the research done on gender studies in early modern and industrial European societies, where gender is socially constructed based on Judeo-Christian religion, Greek philosophy and the development of legal norms (Fox 2013). Other sources and representations, however, demonstrate the continuity of female martial arts practices, documented as such as early as the fourteenth century in the fight books.

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