

# Two's Company

An introduction to the use of the dagger in Italian rapier according to Francesco Alfieri

Presented by Phil Marshall , The School of the Sword  
At the Royal Gunpowder Mills - Waltham Abbey 07/07/07

## **Two's Company – The use of Companion weapons in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Swordplay**

These notes are written to support the workshop “Two’s Company” at The Royal Gunpowder Mills 7/7/07. They are designed to help you remember the key points of the techniques you have practiced and also to provide some extra detail and context. If you would like to study this weapon further, I am more than happy to discuss this workshop or any other facet of our rapier work.

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Further details of our training can be found on our website: [www.schoolofthesword.com](http://www.schoolofthesword.com)

And you would be more than welcome at a lesson!

The author assumes no liability for anyone practising these techniques. Practitioners assume all responsibility for training undertaken outside the School of the Sword and you are advised to use correct safety equipment while training.

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This workshop is an introduction to the use of the dagger according to Francesco Alfieri. In it we will cover some basic principles on the use of the dagger, how to use the dagger defensively and how to use the dagger to support an offensive motion.

Usually a student would become proficient with the single sword before starting to learn to use the sword and dagger together. Thus the student would already have a good understanding of the foundations of rapier play, including concepts such as movement, measure, tempo and obedience. I will explain elements of these concepts as needed, but please remember that the techniques shown here form part of a wider whole.

Each chapter of Alfieri tends to include several variations on the core technique being taught, for example: showing different lines that could be chosen for a counter attack after a defensive action. The aim of the workshop and these notes is to give an introduction to the principles of dagger play, rather than explore every variation in minute detail. Therefore the notes are simplified to focus on the core technique and may only touch upon (or ignore) the other possible actions or applications. If you find yourself in the classic “Ah, but what if...” situation, then this may be covered in the full description of the technique.

### **Basic concepts**

It was common for a 17<sup>th</sup> century gentleman to wear a dagger and therefore it makes sense that the dagger would be used in a fight. You would take any advantage you could get!

However, the sword remains the primary weapon and is used for the major offensive and defensive actions, while the dagger is used to support the sword. The dagger can be used to wound your opponent, but this is an opportunistic attack only.

Conceptually there is little difference between fighting with one weapon and fighting with two. However, the second weapon can prove more of a distraction than an aid. You must be wary of over-using the dagger at the expense of the sword, or merely holding the dagger and not using it which will stop you using your left hand in defence and may even impede your sword work. The two weapons must be used together in harmony.

In general, the dagger is held so that the point of the dagger is near the point of the sword and the points are focused towards your opponent’s throat. The sword and dagger form two sides of a “cone of defence”. Where this would be an unnatural position, the dagger can be brought back close to the hilt of the sword to guard the hand and the left side of your body.

Avoid leaving a large gap between the sword and dagger, or your “cone of defence” will become a “funnel of attack” for your opponent!

## The Guards

The five main guards are formed as shown in the photographs.

In each case you are aiming to find a comfortable, balanced position from which you can move, attack and defend easily. While some of the positions may feel unusual at first, you should not be tense as this will slow down your response time. It is important to maintain a lateral separation between the feet to enable you to step easily.



### **Guardia Mista: The “mixed” guard of Francesco Alfieri**

Guardia mista [mixed guard] is a guard that is unique to Alfieri. It is designed to be a compromise between terza [third] and quarta [fourth] (shown below). While there are open lines to both sides of the sword, you are not wide spaced in the same way that you are in other guards. The sword is held in the centre of the body, with the blade vertical. The point should be aimed at your opponent’s throat. The dagger is held relaxed and near the hilt of the sword, with the thumb lying along the back of the blade. The body is tilted slightly forwards at the waist and the weight is roughly central.

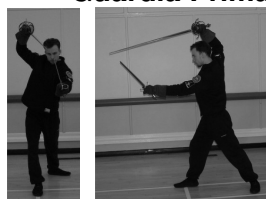
Terza is a common guard to use. The sword is withdrawn, but not so far that it catches on the leg. The dagger is extended forwards, but the arm should not be tense. The point of the dagger should be close to the point of the sword so that your opponent cannot attack between the weapons.

Prima [first] is similar to terza, with the sword carried higher. In both prima and terza the body is tilted forwards.

In seconda [second] and quarta the body is more upright and the dagger is held to protect the hand.

The basic guard positions can be varied by moving the vita [essentially the centre of gravity]

#### **Guardia Prima**



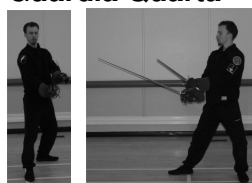
#### **Guardia Seconda**



#### **Guardia Terza**



#### **Guardia Quarta**



## Defending with the dagger

The dagger is generally used to augment the primary defence, which may be a parry with the sword, a void with the body or a counter attack in contratempo [using your opponent's attack as a tempo to make your own attack, or defending and countering in a single tempo].

The dagger can also be used to parry a thrust or a cut directly, but this carries certain risks. A full speed cut can push through a dagger parry unless you get the blade alignment and timing exactly right to deflect the blow. A thrust can be set aside more easily, but it is possible to cavazione [disengaging around your opponent's weapon with a V shape or semi-circular movement] around the dagger because of its shorter length. In certain circumstances, such as when returning to guard after an attack, the direct dagger defence may be your easiest (or only) option. But, all else being equal, the dagger defence should be part of a greater overall whole.

The main ways in which the dagger can support a defensive movement are as follows:

- Closing a line of attack so your opponent has fewer options and cannot feint as easily.
- Strengthening a parry, for example against a particularly strong cut.
- Controlling your opponent's sword after a parry or void so that they cannot continue their attack. (You may also be able to create an opening for a counter attack)

### Technique 1: Porta la vita fuor di presenza

Porta la vita fuor di presenza [carrying the vita or the body off the line of attack], commonly called the girata or volte, is a void made by moving the body off the line of a thrust and to the inside of your opponent's weapon. It is used against a thrust in seconda aimed towards your left shoulder. The aim is to move the body and step off line with the left foot. The amount you move/step will vary, but a rough guide is to finish with the left foot in line with your right heel and perpendicular to your starting line. Moving off line is the primary defence and also opens a line for a counter thrust. By engaging your opponent's sword with your dagger you can prevent them from tracking you as you step and also slow down their recovery into guard.



Carrying the body off the line of the attack



### **Key points:**

- The sword and the dagger support the void – do not engage the sword with the dagger and then void.
- Make sure you actually step off the line of attack and do not just rotate on the spot.
- The counter thrust is given with the hand in quarta.
- Do not anticipate the technique and stand in guard with your left foot already behind your right. Your opponent will be able to aim where you intend to step, and your void will be less effective.
- Think about where your counter thrust is aimed – you must avoid their dagger, so either aim over it or under it.
- If you are in motion when you are attacked, the direction you are already moving will affect how easily you can use this technique.

### **Technique 2: Passing to the outside**

This technique is a combination of a void to the outside of the blade and using the dagger to take the blade off line. It is used against a thrust in seconda aimed at the centre of your chest or throat. The pass places you outside your opponent's blade in a position where you are beyond their point and relatively safe (owing to the lateral separation of your feet in guard). You are also in a strong position to control their blade and you have prevented your opponent from bringing their dagger into play. In the variation taught in the seminar, you make the initial parry with the dagger as you step, leaving your sword free to counter. Alternatively, you can make the initial parry with the sword and then use the dagger to control your opponent's sword releasing your own to counter. If you pass and make the parry with the sword, you are also in a position to stab your opponent with the dagger directly.



### **Key points:**

- The pass and the parry must be made at the same time. If you step without parrying then you run the risk of walking on to your opponent's point.
- The parry is made from left to right across your body – if you try to do this without passing, then you run the risk of getting your weapons tangled and you are vulnerable to a cavazione.
- You must use the dagger to carry your opponent's blade to the right and slightly down, in order to create an opening for your counter. The counter thrust is made with the hand held quite high, and is given in second.
- The dagger should not be held too vertically; otherwise you may take your own sword off line.
- The timing of this technique is crucial to ensure that you do not get tangled up in your own dagger!

### **Technique 3: Parrying a cut**

This technique is used against a mandritto squalembro [diagonal cut from your opponent's right hand side] aimed at the left side of your neck. The primary defence is a parry in prima. The dagger is used to strengthen the parry and to control your opponent's weapon after the initial contact so that you can counter safely. There are many possible counters from this position, including a thrust while maintaining contact with your opponent's blade with both your sword and dagger. Alternatively, you can release your sword and cut to your opponent's head or their right leg.



The basic parry



Parry and thrust to chest



Parry and cut to head/neck

Parry and cut to leg

**Key points:**

- The primary defence is a parry with the sword. Do not try to make the parry with the dagger.
- The dagger should come into contact with your opponent's blade at the same time as, or fractionally after your sword does. Do not bring the dagger up first.
- The sword and dagger meet at the point of contact. Do not cross the weapons and then raise them.
- The parry in prima is made with the right hand above the right shoulder. The blade should be pointing roughly towards your opponent's right shoulder.
- All three weapons cross at the same point. Avoid lateral separation between your sword and dagger along your opponent's blade, which will allow your opponent to release their weapon or even force the cut through the gap between your sword and dagger.
- Do not push the hilt of your dagger right up to your sword; otherwise you may not be able to release your sword to counter. Four inches from the hilt of your dagger to the point of contact should be enough.
- You may need to traverse slightly with the right foot if you choose to counter with a cut. The leg cut may be preferable if your opponent also has a dagger.

## Using the dagger to support an offensive technique

The dagger can be used to support an offensive action simply by limiting your opponent's ability to hit in contratempo. At worst, even if they stop your attack, you may survive their counter. Alternatively, they may have to choose a more defensive or obedient reaction, because your dagger prevents them from using their "favoured" counters. If you manage to engage your opponent's sword with your dagger, then you can take their point off line, control their weapon and thrust into the opening. A simple example follows.

Your opponent is stood in guard, but has left an opening between their weapons. You thrust in *seconda* between their sword and dagger, but push forward your own dagger close to the hilt of your sword. As your dagger passes the point of their sword, you engage their blade with your dagger and force it off line to your left, while finishing the thrust to the torso. You can traverse slightly to the left with your right foot to get a better angle for your thrust and to avoid their dagger.



In practice, from a static guard position, it is difficult to execute this technique in this simple form. Unless the initial thrust puts your opponent into obedience [responding to your action in the manner you want them to, often with a predictable, defensive motion], you are likely to end up in stalemate, each engaging the other's sword with your dagger.

However, if you use this technique as your opponent recovers into guard, as they are starting an attack or as they give you another tempo, then you are far more likely to be successful. You can also use various feints to avoid your opponent's dagger.

You must be wary of trying to engage your opponent's sword with your dagger before you have started your thrust (if they are static). If you can reach your opponent's blade with your dagger while stood in guard, then the measure is probably close enough for your opponent to hit you quite easily. Your dagger hand is also an easy target. The initial thrust should force your opponent to make an instinctive, defensive movement that you can negate with your dagger.

## Final thoughts

Like any form of combat, if you "play" for a particular technique, or focus on only one aspect of your fighting style, then it will be ineffective and you will not be able to defend yourself. The dagger must become a natural part of your defence, always held ready to be used quickly but not driving your fighting style. You should be able to respond quickly to any attack by your opponent and use the dagger to control your opponent's weapon *if the opportunity arises*. Used badly, the dagger will spoil your natural single sword work. Used well, the dagger will strengthen your defence and open up many new possibilities for counter attacks.