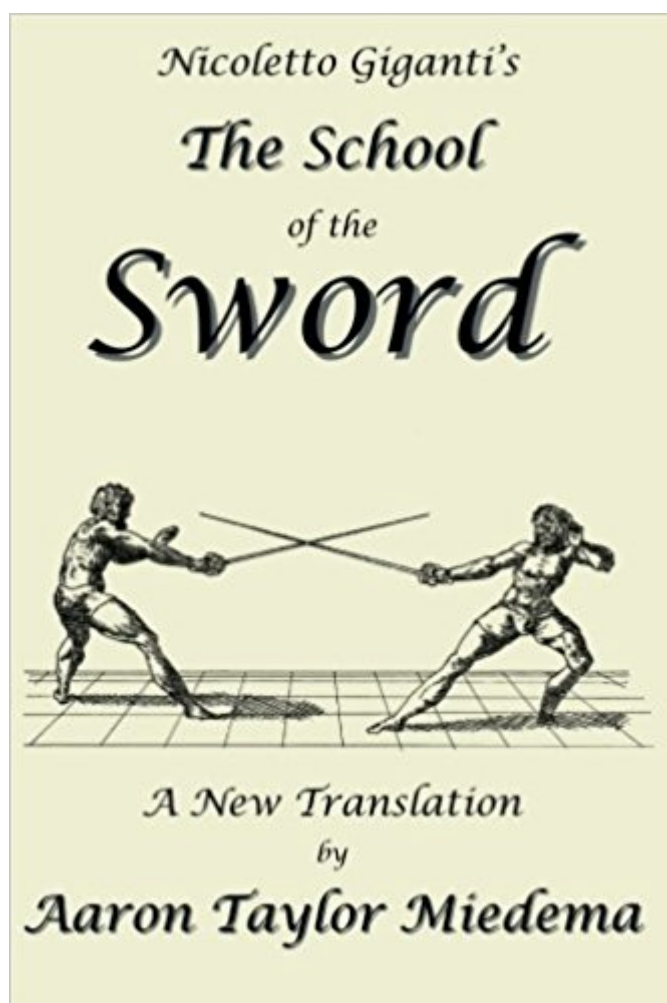


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# Nicoletto Giganti's The School Of The Sword: A New Translation By Aaron Taylor M



## Synopsis

Rapier fencing and duelling during the 16th and 17th centuries was dominated by the Italian masters, whose systems of sword fighting became increasingly sophisticated. Breaking away from this trend, Nicoletto Giganti developed something different: a frugal system of fencing that cut to the core of what a swordfight was and how to win it. Giganti's *Scola overa* Teatro, or The School of the Sword, became one of the most influential systems of fencing across Europe in the seventeenth century. In this remarkable new translation by historical fencing instructor and historian Aaron Taylor Miedema, author of *Bayonets and Blobsticks*, Giganti's work is presented fresh to the modern reader. Copiously illustrated with redrawings of dozens of Giganti's original plates, over 60 new photographs, and even a new plate, Giganti's detailed curriculum is augmented by comprehensive annotation and commentary. Regardless of whether you are a historian, a casual reader with an interest in the sword, or an accomplished swordsman, Nicoletto Giganti's *The School of the Sword* is a fascinating guide to the art of rapier fencing.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

UCLIC, University College London, UK

As an academic and long time instructor of historical Italian swordsmanship, I was hoping to see a new, worthy translation of Giganti's 1606 rapier treatise. Naturally, there is room for many translations and interpretations (I myself published one a few years ago), as swordsmanship is no different than any other discipline--the more data-points from careful researchers and translators,

the farther our discipline will go. Alas, this work by Mr. Miedema does not contribute anything besides a translation that contains numerous serious linguistic and interpretative mistakes and that reads like gibberish, plus an interpretation that shows a lack of basic knowledge of what we know of (and largely agree on) rapier fundamentals. The translation was born approximately a decade ago, and still resides largely unchanged on some historical martial arts Web sites. Rather than refining it in the intervening years, Mr. Miedema has let it go to press as amateurish, awkward to read and outdated as far as the understanding of the art. His lack of basic knowledge of the Italian language is quite transparent in such serious blunders as in plate 6, where "servendovi del tempo" is translated as "splitting the tempo" instead of "availing yourself of the tempo", and "volgendo" (turning) is confused with "volendo" (wanting). These are very simple gerunds (in the first case with a pronominal particle) of elementary Italian verbs, where even the first dictionary meaning would suffice for a decent translation; there is no reason to mistake them besides gross inexperience with the language. This gross inexperience produces inexcusable blunders in the fundamentals, starting with the guard. In the introduction, for instance, the author states that Giganti did not seek distance in the lunge but rather quickness (p. xvi), for he mistranslates "[stare in guardia] in un passo giusto, piu' presto ristretto che longo per poter crescere" as meaning that the \*lunge\* should be "more speedily brief than long," thus completely turning Giganti's words upside down. (Only a beginner using an automatic translator or a bad dictionary would not know that "piu' presto" is adverbial for "rather," and NOT a descriptive for "more quickly"!!!) Where passo=stance; giusto=moderate, measured; longo = wide; piu' presto = (adverbial) rather, preferably; ristretto = narrow; crescere = creating extension. Thus the only correct translation: [stand in guard] in a measured stance, i.e., one that is preferably narrow rather than wide, so you can extend it." A fundamental, important blunder in translation that, like countless other ones, misconstrues Giganti's whole treatise for the hapless reader. Other blunders include, for instance (p. 39) the translation of "fingete di tirargli una punta" (= imperative of "feint a thrust") as "bind with your edge a point," which is not even grammatically correct in English. Such linguistic mistakes seriously damage any technical value in this book. Also, the unreliability of the translation is made worse by the grossly lazy editing, whereby Mr. Miedema and the book's publishers have not even given their reader the courtesy of proofing the translation's \*first page\* for such basic issues as noun-verb agreement, or to put the translation through a spell check. Mr. Miedema pitches his translation by claiming that as a non-native, he is less likely to miss the nuances of 17th-century Italian than someone who was born into the language and may therefore have prejudices. First of all, 17th-century Italian is hardly something that needs rediscovering from scratch, as if it was some unknown branch of Linear-B, by someone admittedly

ignorant of the language to boot. Secondly, that knowledge would constitute a liability is patently absurd, aside from the fact that any educated Italian would have at least 5 years' advanced immersion in the Classical version of their language (13th-19th centuries) in both poetry and prose. In other words, a 15-year old Italian Lyceum student with a fair knowledge of fencing would have little or no problem grasping the contents of the Giganti. Conversely, coming to the language with little or no previous knowledge makes one inevitably fall into serious mistakes (see above, and below for examples), since every word--even the simplest one--has to be looked up in a dictionary, thereby multiplying the chances of getting something wrong, as indeed happens too often in this book. The examples I cited, incidentally, are wrong in old Italian as much as in new, also because it would be obvious to anyone with even intermediate knowledge of the language that they feature wording that is perfectly current. Less knowledge never puts one in a position of strength--and if someone claims otherwise, they should make an effort to make their translation of the basics unimpeachable (or at the very least edit it). Also, Mr. Miedema champions what he calls a "literal" approach, meaning in his case some gibberish-like "translationese" that is neither faithful to the original as far as meaning, nor is grammatical and smooth in the new language. (If this was the gold standard, I wonder what scholarly-translated works of ancient philosophy or theology would read like...) Random quote from Plate 25: "If your enemy goes [where?] to throw a cut at you to your head, you must go [again, where?] to encounter him [that would be 'it,' the cut, not 'him' the opponent] with the edge of your dagger ... It is best used for large Cuts [random capitalization], which go [where?] to kill and do not have half force." Translationese for "If the opponent attacks your head with a cut, meet his blow with the edge of your dagger ... Against a powerful cut, it would be better to do something to weaken the opponent's attack so that it only has half of its strength." Quite a difference in both reading and meaning, and one that is non-negotiable for someone who knows the language. So, why this championing of clumsy translationese? The prevailing justification is that by translating word-by-word, Babblefish-style, other "doubting Thomas" readers may find it easier to double check against the original. Apart from the lack of grammatical coherence when translating into gibberish, why anyone would buy a translation that they don't trust is beyond me--either trust the translation or read it in the original. And if you can't read it in the original, what are you going to check, besides adding another layer of misunderstanding to it all? ("A little knowledge..." as Pope's adage goes.) And how the countless mistakes in language and interpretation would be more conducive to double-checking is also beyond me, and beyond anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with basic translation standards. Incidentally, Giganti's language in Italian is quite simple and straightforward, in the plain style that was the expected rhetorical

choice for any educated writer publishing an instructional work. Knowing even the first principles of Classical "voices" would perhaps have made for a less bumpy read. Here are some other examples of curious/wrong translation decisions. Using "throw" for attacking, pushing, pulling or retreating, "circling" for cavare, "affront" for affrontare, "artificial" for artificioso, "soiling" for unsettling, "throw the point" for delivering a thrust, "quick step" for stance, "more useful, beautiful" for more useful than pretty, "holding a point" for receiving a thrust is not literal. It is quirky and wrong. Worse yet, some important phrases are not translated at all, like (among others) Giganti's "colle spade del pari" (=without either fencer having the advantage of the sword) which is a key element of the play shown with Plate 16, without which the action would not work as shown. All this, again, betrays a troubling lack of knowledge of the language and inexperience with translating and proofing even at a moderately-advanced amateur level. The whole book is a morass of such gibberish, carelessness and omissions--in which Giganti's meaning is lost (or worse, misconstrued) save for a vague sense of his words. Although I urge swordsmanship students to buy every book available, I very much caution the more trusting readers who may take Mr. Miedema at his word when he sells his translation as accurate and literal, because it is neither accurate nor literal. A true literal translation may be a clunky read, but at least the sense of grammar, syntax and semantics would be intact. If anything, his "shot in the dark" approach to Italian sets back the clock of a reader's understanding of Italian rapier to a time when we didn't know much about it and when free, better-than-nothing online amateur translations were the only things available. The countless linguistic blunders, serious interpretative mistakes, omissions and curious choice of terminology, coupled with the awkward readability of his work and inexcusable lack of basic editing, would make this translation earn a "C" at most even in my Freshmen-level 101 classes. The "interpretation" that closes the book shows a lot of effort on the part of Mr. Miedema, and would make a fair curriculum for self-taught rapierists who do not have access to a teacher or to historical swordsmanship events, although this too is quite idiosyncratic and betrays a hazy understanding of the art (no doubt influenced by the author's lack of understanding of Italian). Bottom line: a sub-par, instantly-outdated first effort, which needs a lot of work (starting with a basic rewrite) to become a contender for a lasting book on Western martial arts.

Excellent book if you are a fan of historical references or swordsmanship or both. A really great find

Fantastic books. Will purchase again!

I will begin by saying my name is Aaron Miedema and I am in fact the author of this book. I have not bothered to respond to Tom Leoni's review of my book before. The simple fact that Tom's review has been so venomous that it has actually opened doors for me. But, now that he has been advertising the review on facebook, I finally read it. While there are some of Mr. Leoni's commentary that has validity; however, the majority of Tom's claims and conclusions seriously undermine his claims to be an

academic. I'll start by giving Tom his due credit. You are correct there are errors in translation. My publisher was tremendously impatient and turned down a very kind offer by Guy Windsor to proof read and help edit the text. Being new to publishing, I relented to my publisher's demands. It is a decision I regret. So, Tom is correct, there are some errors in the translation. Two of the errors appear in the text for plate 6 (lesson 9 or page 34). Here is the text in question. "In this picture I present & show you another way of warding & wounding by the way of the counter circle. It is done in the following way. Having covered your enemy's sword, if he wants to wound you it behoves him, to circle. While he circles, I want you to circle yourself, so that your sword returns to its first place, covering that enemy's. But, the circle being done, splitting the time, throw the under hand thrust where he is uncovered, wanting your torso somewhat towards his right side. Holding the arm extended forward, when he comes thence to wound you, there you are able to wound. Having thrown the under hand thrust, you must return backwards outside of measure. In the case of *servendovi*, I transposed letters and translated it as *sever* and thus *splitting* rather than *serve*. This does change the nuance of the timing of the action, but, only slightly. The second is my translation of *wanting* in the text above, in which I misread *volgendo* which means *turning* or *twisting*. Although Tom is incorrect on the word I misread it was *vogliando* (a verb used earlier in the paragraph) and not *volando*. In spite of this last misreading, the sentence still conveys the intended meaning

*wanting* your torso to the opponent's right side does mean turning or twisting it in that direction. So, errors yes, but not ones that garble the intention of the original text beyond all recognition as Tom claims in his *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Tom's final correct catch is another case of my careless reading *fingete* which I read it seems as

"stringete, which, is admittedly a big misreading on my part. But, once again it does not completely destroy the text, there is still a point being directed at the face, and what is more the point is also in the action of a bind. Curiously, Tom at this point is less concerned by the typo and more concerned with the English grammar of my translation of: "bind a point to the face. Claiming that neither me nor my publisher had the decency to even pass the translation through a "spell check. First, we have established that my publisher did not have quality control as his first priority. Secondly, as I sit here looking at the text in question, MS word has no issue with the grammar of the sentence fragment. So yes, I did have the decency to put it through a spell check, and it was fine. Tom then seems to insinuate that there are issues on the first page of the translation itself, but, has not deemed these issues as dire as the fairly muddled complaints he has laid so far. However, at this point Tom's valid arguments come to a grinding halt. Tom takes me to task for not recognizing an Italian idiom "piu presto. I will believe Tom's conclusions of the meaning of the idiom "piu presto. The problem is that Giganti does not write "piu presto, his actual words are "piu tosto which does in fact translate as "more quickly or "more speedily. Right you are Tom, I did not recognize something that was not there. Tom then concludes that the entire text is corrupted by the countless, or rather three misread verbs, and his own mis-quoting of Giganti's own text means this book is beyond redemption. This certainly gets Tom out of having to address the actual content of the book. But, if the book is so obviously terrible, he should be able to bring my terrible mistakes in judgement to light. His silence on the actual content of the book speaks volumes indeed. Rather, Tom continues of the subject of language, claiming that I stated: "that as a non-native, he is less likely to miss the nuances of 17th-century Italian than someone who was born into the language and may therefore have prejudices. I said nothing of the sort. What I did say about linguistic pre-judices, was this: "Where possible, the literal translation of the Italian has been used, even if an acceptable fencing term could have been used. This prevents the bleeding over of terminology from one style, master, background, personal observation, etc. So now, Tom is simply inventing things, or perhaps misreading me as he has already misread Giganti. Tom then turns from this invented line of argument and addresses what I actually said I was doing.

Claiming that to dispense with Italian fencing jargon is absurd because a fifteen year old Italian student would have no problem understanding jargon written in Italian. Tom actually makes my argument for me, 100% correct Tom, and an English speaker will have no problem understanding jargon if it has been translated into English. Tom then complains about how the text is tenuous and rife with ambiguity. Of course, I said I was going to do this, citing the textual notes of my book:

“the intention of this translation was to render as clear an image of Giganti’s words as possible, permitting the expression of all of his cleverness, simplicity, and ambiguity.” But ignoring this honest declaration, Tom decides to dissect some of the text for plate 25 (page 86) in order to show the horrors of ambiguity, the square brackets are Tom commentary: “If your enemy goes [where?] to throw a cut at you to your head, you must go [again, where?] to encounter him [that would be ‘it,’ the cut, not ‘him’ the opponent] with the edge of your dagger ... It is best used for large Cuts [random capitalization], which go [where?] to kill and do not have half force.” As to the random capitalization is actually a reflection of the original 1606 text, which also capitalizes the word cut for some reason. Sorry Tom, you can’t blame me for that typo, that one is actually Giganti’s. Also to be completely clear Tom mis-quotes me at the beginning of the text, my translation reads “If your enemy comes...” Lest I get accused of mis-translating “venire.” It should seem pretty clear to most readers that the questions asked by Tom are answered in the text that immediately follows his outbursts. Admittedly, the fencers are not going to a specific place, rather, they are coming and going to accomplish intentions. It is not a normal usage of the words come and go, but, these are the words that Giganti actually used. So it becomes a call on the part of the translator, do you change the word to a modern usage or do you express the author’s words. Tom and myself differ on this subject, which is fine, and why there is room for additional translations. However, Tom, once again makes my point about sticking carefully to the words the author chose to use rather than interpreting for the sake of making a breezy read. Tom claims my translation does not correctly interpret the statement from and claims his translation is stronger: “If the opponent attacks your head with a cut, meet his blow with the edge of your dagger ... Against a powerful cut, it would be better to do something to weaken the opponent’s attack so that it only has half of its strength.” Clear intention indeed, but, Tom resorts once again to simply inventing things to make his argument work: “E meglio sarebbe per gran Coltellata, che venisse, farla morire, che non habbia la meta della forza.” (literal translation: And better it would be for grand cut, that it would come, to make it to kill, that does not have the half of the force.) There is no mention of the words



“something,” “weaken,” “only,” “opponent,” or “attack.” Tom’s translation works if you add words. But, I will argue that Giganti was really saying that this defense works best against big cuts, and not against a tentative opponent using little cuts. It is for the reader to decide. After highlighting that there are different intentions in the art of translating, Tom returns to attacking the decision to translate fencing jargon to English. Curiously, Tom lays out all of the terms that I translated into English and is incapable labelling a single one of the translations as an incorrect translation, to the contrary, they are all perfectly acceptable translations of the original Italian. The only thing Tom can muster as an argument is that it is “quirky and wrong.” What is clear, is Tom is enraged that I would have the audacity to make the choice to not use modern fencing jargon. Then Tom seems to lose track of his argument completely and makes the spurious claim that I did not bother to translate the term “colle spade del pari” in the text for Plate 16. I am quite confused by Tom’s as I never used the words in my translation. And what is more, Giganti did not use the term either. (I have staring at page 33 of the original 1606 text for twenty minutes and I cannot find these words anywhere on the page. Someone please correct me if I am wrong here, or whether Tom meant a different plate.) It is unclear what rabbit-hole Tom has chased down but he has left both the text of my book and Giganti’s original well behind him. However, once again, Tom seems to make my point for me. This is an example of what I was trying to avoid by the choice not to use modern fencing jargon. Jargon can be so prevalent as to blind us to what is actually written on the page. I am sorry that I offended you Tom by choosing not to put modern fencing terms in Giganti’s seventeenth century mouth, but, the alternative seems to be seeing things that are not actually there. It is worth mentioning the loudest silence in Tom’s review is the introduction of the work in which I made a critical review of Tom’s translation of Giganti from 2010. Like the actual content of the book, Tom’s critical review is mysteriously silent. For a book so horribly amateurish and rooted in gibberish, it would seem that these sections would have provided endless ideal fodder for criticism, and even made for a credible review. Instead, Tom brings a handful of textual errors to which he angrily adds hollow arguments, false data, and invention bordering on outright lies. Academic Indeed.

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