

Public Fencing Matches on the Elizabethan Stage

MARY McELROY

Kansas State University

KENT CARTWRIGHT

Kansas State University

Ceremonious processions. drama, sporting events. and feats of individual virtuosity - acrobatics. dancing. clowning. and juggling - punctuated the street life of Elizabethan London, its public squares. its inn-yards, the great halls of its great houses. Outside the old Roman walls of the city, furthermore, Londoners could go to tournaments at Smithfield. to archery matches at Newington Butts, to the bull-and-bear-baiting rings in Southwark. to various athletic events in Finsbury Field, or. after 1576. to the first permanent playhouses merging north of Bishopsgate. Organized displays of swordsmanship were part of this matrix of spectacles within and around the city. Martial entertainment. of course. grew up with the Tudor court. A half a century after Henry's entertainments to Francis I on the field of cloth of gold, Elizabeth continued to observe martial feats at Hampton Court. Greenwich. and Whitehall. Perhaps the most elaborate was a re-enactment of the massacre of the Danes performed at the famous progress to Kenilworth in 1575. where English and Danish knights, in imitation of the real battle, fought with long swords from war horses or combated singly and on foot with short swords.

Distinct from such military exercises before the queen was the public fencing contest. These matches operated under the strict regulation of the "Maisters of the Noble Science of Defense," a company first incorporated by Henry VIII in 1540 to oversee the teaching of fencing skills in England and which received continued support throughout the reign of Elizabeth. Scholars from the fencing schools competed for degrees known as "prizes" and were required to pass their qualifying rounds in public. They studied first to become a "free scholler". then a "provost", and finally a "maister"; only those earning the degree of provost or maister were allowed to teach fencing. The bouts. disputed with genuine weapons - though the edges of the blades were blunted -drew large audiences gathered to witness them in the courtyards of inns and taverns. in open fields, or at the playhouses that lay north and south of the city.

Such public fencing contests during the first half of Elizabeth's reign (1558-1583) are the subject of this paper. They occupy that broad middle ground between private game and aristocratic ritual, and. indeed, these staged bouts might be viewed emblematically as the parodic or anti-spectacles to those of the court. While public fencing contests have been little remarked by Renaissance sport historians. they constituted a regular, popular feature of the life of London and its environs and achieved a discrete and distinctive character. Because they were staged displays of physical virtuosity. furthermore, public fencing contests have an evolutionary history arising from the societal conception of swordsmanship as a class skill. on the one hand. and from the explosion of another form of entertainment - drama - on the other.



David Kammer, Lynne Emery, Jim Odenkirk and Margaret Toohey spoke on the development of sport in the American West.