

# Two's Company - Part II

An introduction to the use of the cloak in Italian rapier play

Presented by Phil Marshall , The School of the Sword  
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*“Among the defensive weapons, one must not overlook the cloak, for, although it may not be designed to be a weapon, it nevertheless has great benefits for defence.”*

Francesco Alfieri

Three of the major extant rapier treatises from the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Capo Ferro, Fabris and Alfieri) include substantial sections dealing with the use of the sword with a companion weapon. The greater part of this material is focused on the use of the dagger. However each author also covers, to varying degrees, the use of the cloak as a defensive, and occasionally offensive, weapon. As Alfieri states, one must not overlook the benefits of the cloak. Not least of these is the fact that the dagger was made illegal in several states, rendering the study of it as a weapon quite useless. The cloak, however, was not subject to such restrictions and so it was worth learning how it could be employed.

The aim of this workshop (and these notes) is to give you an introduction to the use of the cloak. The material is based upon the work of Capo Ferro<sup>1</sup>, Fabris<sup>2</sup> and our own work on Alfieri. I have chosen examples of the use of the cloak from each system in order to better demonstrate some of the key principles and to compare their applications in different situations. If you want to avoid a “hybrid” style, then please pick out the core ideas and specific techniques as is appropriate to your training.

It is worth noting that the cloak, like any companion weapon, is supposed to be used to support the sword, not replace it. The sword remains the primary weapon for both defence and offence and you should really understand the single sword before you try to introduce the cloak. Therefore these notes contain references to techniques that may or may not be familiar to you, depending upon your background with the rapier. If you are new to the weapon, focus on the key principles; if the rapier is familiar to you, work with the more detailed concepts as appropriate to your training. In particular, attack and defend using the same principles as your single sword training and use whatever methods you would normally to create an opening or gain a tempo, such as finding the sword, counter posture etc.

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Caroline Stewart  
Dr Oliver Barker  
Simon Alford  
Olivier Barbeau  
Tom Leoni  
Jonathan Miller

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<sup>1</sup> KIRBY, Jared. (2004) *Italian Rapier Combat*. London: Greenhill Books.

<sup>2</sup> LEONI, Tommaso. (2005) *The Art of Dueling*. Texas: The Chivalry Bookshelf.

## General principles

The cloak is used mainly as a defensive weapon as follows;

- To cover secondary lines of attack while the primary parry is made with the sword (to guard against a feint)
- To control your opponent's blade, or remain covered after a parry while countering (two tempi)
- To parry a cut or thrust directly. In this case you would usually counter attack in the same tempo

The reason the cloak is useful in these roles is its size. The cloak can cover both the high and low lines, whereas a dagger can cover only one. Because of its size, it is much harder to cavzione [disengage] around the cloak. However, its size and weight make it slow to manoeuvre and harder to control. The cloak can also be used offensively, to impede your opponent's sword and block his vision... but you must avoid inflicting these on yourself!

With the sword and cloak joined [held close together with no gap between them], you can parry tutta coperta or "totally covered", covering all the lines of attack available to your opponent.

However, if your weapons become separated, you will leave an opening for you opponent and you will require larger motions to protect yourself. This is more likely to lead to a loss of control of the cloak, or fatigue from the extra effort of wielding it.

Therefore, it is important to remember the following while using the cloak:

- Try to keep the cloak joined to the sword, either near the debole or near the hilt
- Use small motions, at most from the elbow, to defend
- Support any defence with the cloak with a movement of the feet and/or body

Do not become fixated on the cloak. If it distracts you opponent, then this is a bonus, but do not expend too much effort moving the cloak around. Focus on using your sword correctly and use the cloak when necessary.

## Holding the cloak

- The width of the cloak should cover from your hand to your elbow.
- The length should be enough to cover the low line, with your hand held high enough to cover your head. However, the cloak must not be so long that it will drag on the floor if your arm should tire.
- In general the cloak should be held high and extended to parry far away from your body, so that if the cloak gives slightly you will not be wounded\*. Make sure you can still see!
- The cloak should not be held square to your opponent, as they may be able to thrust through the material. Instead, you should hold the edge towards you opponent's sword. The edge is used to parry cuts because it is the width of the cloak that the blade must pass through. Thrusts are easily deflected to either side.

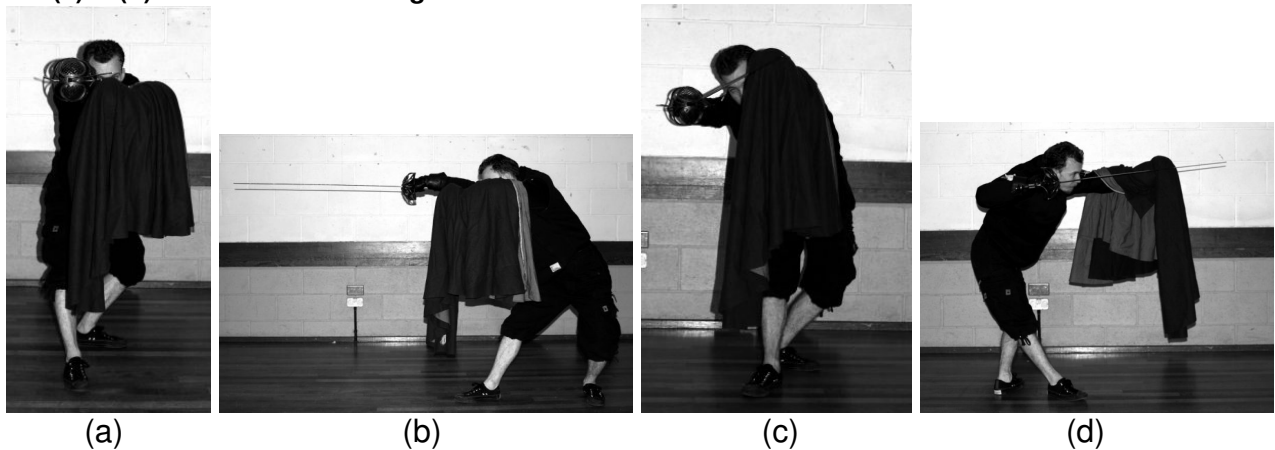
\*Remember that the cloak is flexible – it will give slightly when you parry. You must parry further from your body and also accompany the parry with a movement of the feet/body. It is often safer to parry with the sword and use the cloak in support.

The cloak is worn hanging from the left shoulder. You should practice taking the cloak into your left hand into a guard position in one movement. One effective way is to grasp the cloak at the edge behind your left shoulder, just below the collar, and bring the hand forward in a semi-circular manner. This gives you the momentum to wrap the cloak around your arm if needed, or throw the cloak directly at your enemy (see later). Alternatively, you can grab the cloak under the collar from the inside and let it fall onto your arm.

## Guards

### *Seconda*

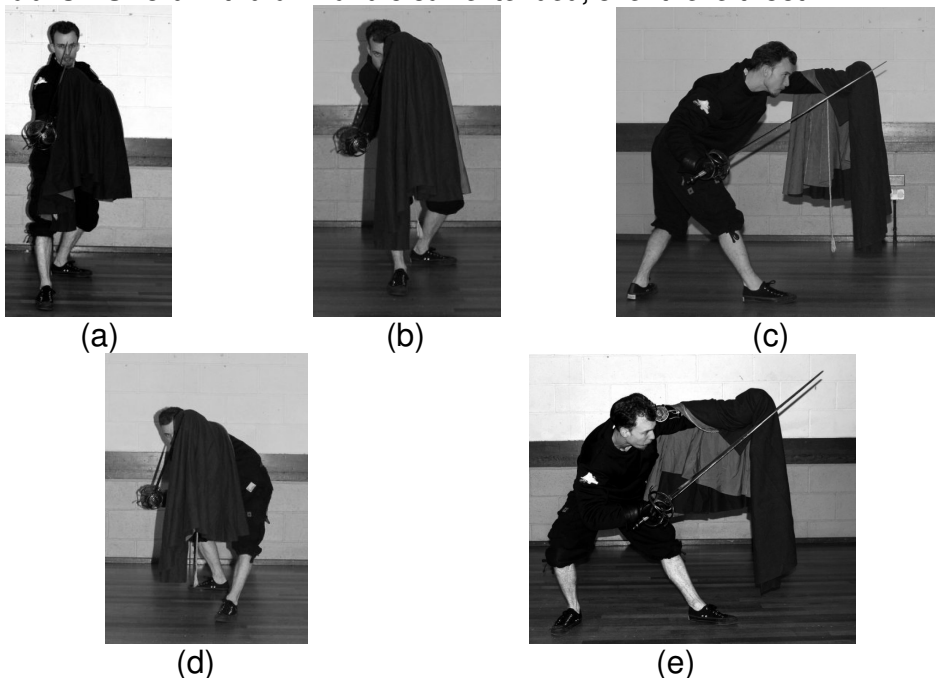
- (a) & (b) Alfieri – extended guardia seconda
- (c) & (d) Fabris – withdrawn guardia seconda



Guardia seconda is formed as shown in the pictures. In the Alfieri guard, the step is longer than in Fabris. As a guide, in Alfieri the body is bent forwards as much as when you extend in the lunge. In Fabris, the right foot points to your opponent's left to help keep that side of your body withdrawn. The sword is extended in Alfieri, with the cloak joined to the hilt; in Fabris the sword is withdrawn. In both cases the cloak is held high and extended to protect the head.

### *Terza*

- (a) Capo Ferro – Sword extended and cloak withdrawn, over the right foot
- (b) & (c) Alfieri – Sword withdrawn and cloak extended, over the right foot
- (d) & (e) Fabris – Sword withdrawn and cloak extended, over the left foot



Guardia terza is Capo Ferro's favoured guard, and is shown with the sword extended and the cloak withdrawn. This is useful if your cloak arm becomes tired and similar guards are shown in both Alfieri and Fabris.

Alfieri shows a guardia terza over the right foot but with the sword withdrawn and the debole joined to the cloak hand. Fabris also shows a withdrawn terza, but over the left foot. In each case one must ensure there is no gap between the weapons. One can even rest the sword against the cape hand to protect the hand and also fortify the debole. Fabris states that this is the best guardia in sword and cloak.

#### Fabris - Seconda tutta coperta



Although a discussion of how to use this guard correctly is outside the scope of these notes, I have included this guardia seconda from Fabris as it can be called tutta coperta – totally covered. This is only really effective in sword and cloak, because the hanging cloak defends the low line in a manner that a dagger never can.

#### Guardia mista

(a) to (c) Alfieri – Guardia mista

(d) Alfieri – High guardia mista (contra guardia)



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Alfieri discusses his guardia mista (mixed guard) at some length. Here is shown the mixed guard and one of his two counter guards, which can be used to prevent your opponent finding your sword.

#### Selected Techniques

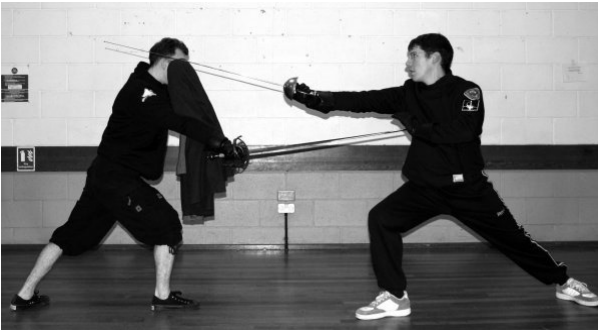
Given that the cloak is an unwieldy weapon and requires practice to handle effectively, I do not want to introduce to wide a variety of techniques at this stage. Rather I want to present a selection of core techniques that demonstrate the principles of using the cloak along with some drills to help you become more familiar with its use.

A number of the techniques shown begin by offering your opponent an invitation, often an opening over the cape. (Alfieri Cap 34, Fabris plate 102) To draw an attack, stand in a guardia terza or guardia mista and lower you cape hand towards the hilt, creating the opening. You are aiming to provoke your opponent into separating his weapons as he attacks with a thrust or a cut.

Against a straight thrust in seconda, parry by raising the cape hand – always small motions – and counter with a thrust in quarta under the arm. Turning into quarta will help you to avoid his cloak and prevent him from bringing his sword back into line. Traverse as appropriate to find a good line to counter and force your opponent's sword out of presence.



In guardia mista you can also offer your opponent an opening to the outside. Against a thrust to the outside, parry with the cape by moving your left hand across your body, all the way above your head if needs be. Use an angled terza to counter, to keep your sword away from your opponent's cloak. You may pass or traverse to find a better angle for your counter if necessary.



*In the basic exercises, the patient steps into measure with their cape lowered towards their hilt. The agent attacks into the opening above the cape as required, while the patient practises the technique.*

*After each parry and counter, the patient should step out of measure into a good guard. As yet, the agent should not defend against the counter.*

Against a thrust between the weapons, parry across your body as you would for a thrust to the outside. As you do so, turn your sword into seconda and counter. Turning into seconda helps create space for you to move the cape. You may find yourself in this situation if your weapons become separated, or you can offer another invitation.



Here is the invitation between the weapons, in this case a cavazione to the inside as your opponent finds your sword to on the outside. The second figure shows the parry and counter in seconda.

Against a mandritto you have several options:

- Step in such a way that you can parry the forte with the cape as you thrust, in terza or quarta. This is risky and must be timed correctly.



- Parry tutta coperta and then counter with a mandritto to the head or leg. This is similar to a parry “incrociando la armi” [crossing the weapons] with sword and dagger. The parry is made with the sword in prima and the cape hand coming up to meet your opponent’s sword where it crosses yours. In this position the cape will stop your opponent’s sword if your initial parry fails. You can also maintain control of your opponent’s sword with the cloak, freeing your sword for a counter. You can even disarm your opponent.



- Use Alfieri's first defence against the cut – a counter thrust in quarta – using the cloak to cover you left flank in case the initial movement is a feint or your thrust does not completely halt the cut.



Against a *riverso*, parry *tutta coperta* in *prima* and counter with a thrust in *prima* or *seconda*, maintaining contact with your opponent's blade with the sword and cloak. Alternatively, control you opponent's blade with your cloak and counter with a *riverso* on the pass.



*Practise several repetitions of each variation separately and then allow the agent to choose their attack. The patient must respond correctly.*

*Once you are happy with the “static” exercise, introduce some movement. The agent and the patient should assume a normal fencing measure – in our case on the edge of *misura larga* [wide measure]. When the agent sees the patient close the measure they should attack into any opening. Again, the patient must respond correctly.*

### **Developing the counter**

When you counter, you must avoid your opponent's cloak. If you have successfully provoked your opponent into separating their weapons, then there may be an opening between the sword and cape, particularly under the sword arm. However, you may feint above their sword and then thrust below, or feint and then throw a cut to the leg, such as a *riverso* on the pass.

*Repeat the previous exercise (or return to the static versions) but now the agent can attempt to parry the counter. The patient must ensure that they control the agent's weapon, or make use of a feint. Slow down the pace of this exercise as necessary. Whether your counter hits or not, remember to fly out to a safe distance and return to guard.*



## Using the cloak to defend against a feint

One of the benefits of the cape is that you can cover secondary lines of attack.

*In this exercise the agent has more freedom. When the patient steps in to measure, the agent may attack any opening they can see. They may also feint and attack elsewhere. The patient must try to parry in such a way that the agent has nowhere to attack. Counter as before.*

## Throwing the cloak

One of the more unusual techniques seen with the cloak is the throw. Throwing your cloak at your opponent can be a very effective tactic due to its unexpected nature. However, it is not without risk, as you are momentarily obscuring your target and you are effectively disarming yourself. You have two targets at which to throw the cloak – your opponent's sword, or their face.

Your cloak is quite heavy and your opponent's sword is a large lever. If you can throw or drop your cloak onto their sword, it will impede its motion, and carry the point towards the ground. You can use the tempo of the sword going out of line (and your opponent trying to free it) to wound them. However, you must ensure that the cloak covers the sword towards the hilt, so that your opponent cannot free it too easily. This can be achieved most easily from a guard with the cloak extended, such as a terza over the left foot, as the cloak is already close to your opponent's sword.

Alternatively, you can throw your cloak at your opponent's face. This is a good tactic, as the cloak will impede their vision and the sudden movement towards their face often provokes an instinctive "flinch", giving you a good tempo to wound. However, be wary of an opponent who instinctively thrusts out their sword when threatened – don't walk onto their point!

For maximum surprise, you can throw the cloak directly off your shoulder. If your cloak is long enough, you can hold onto the collar or bottom edge so that you can retrieve the cloak after you have thrown it.



*Return to the measure exercise. The agent is looking for a tempo to attack, while the patient follows the movement and defends as appropriate. The patient may also initiate the attack by throwing the cloak.*

Remember that the size and weight of the cloak make it difficult to control, so you must practise with it until it forms a natural part of your fighting style, always supporting the sword.

Good luck in your training!

Phil Marshall, The School of the Sword.