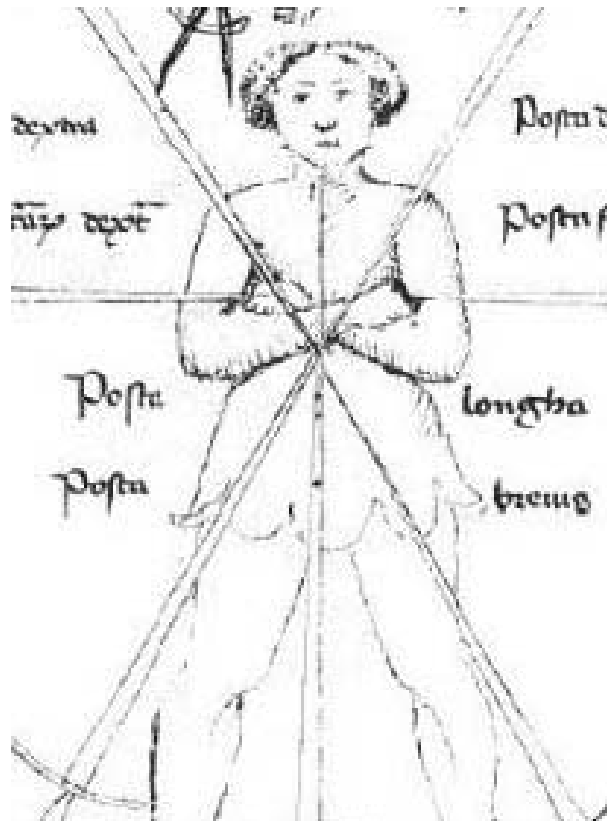


Ottawa Medieval Sword Guild

Flos Duellatorum

*The Attributes and Virtues of
a Master Fencer*

By Mathieu Ravignat



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A Fourfold Ethical System

The four classical virtues are prudence, temperance, justice, and courage (sometimes fortitude). Two of these, prudence and courage are found in dei Liberi's treatise. Another, fortitude, is drawn from the later seven virtues.

The origin of the fourfold system is traceable to Greek philosophy- other sources are earlier, but the Socratic source is the most definite. Among the reporters of Socrates, Xenophon is vague on the point; Plato in *The Republic* puts together a system of four virtues adopted later, with modifications by St. Thomas. In *The Laws*, Bk. I, 631, Plato recurs to his division: "Wisdom is the chief and leader: next follows temperance; and from the union of these two with courage springs justice. These four virtues take precedence in the class of divine goods". Aristotle, with variations of his own, describes the four virtues that Plato had sketched; but in his *Ethics* he does not put them into one system. They are treated in his general discussion, which does not aim at a complete classification of virtues, and leaves interpreters free to give different enumerations.

The Romans, as represented by Cicero, repeated Plato and Aristotle: "Each man should so conduct himself that fortitude appear in labours and dangers: temperance in foregoing pleasures: prudence in the choice between good and evil: justice in giving every man his own [*in suo cuique tribuendo*]" (*De Fin.*, V, xxiii, 67; cf. *De Offic.*, I, ii, 5). This is a departure from the idea prominent in Platonic justice, and agrees with the Scholastic definition.

However, it is St. Thomas Aquinas (born at Rocca Secca in the Kingdom of Naples 1225 or 1227; died at Fossa Nuova, 7 March, 1274) which is most responsible for bringing the four Cardinal Virtues into the medieval mind. St. Thomas gave these four cardinal virtues a common recognition and tried to give them systematic account and a logical ethical framework. Dei Liberi in his use of the four-fold system of virtues is directly indebted to his medieval predecessor St. Thomas Aquinas.

In a way, dei Liberi follows suit with Aquinas and creates the four cardinal virtues of fencing. They are: Prudence, Courage, Fortitude, and Swiftiness. Two of these "virtues" are the same as the four classical cardinal ethical virtues: Prudence and Courage and three have a moral level of meaning namely: Prudence, Courage and Fortitude.

The Use of Animals

The use of animals in a symbolic fashion to represent these virtues is well documented in extant medieval bestiaries. A cultural weight was given to each beast, mythological, ethical

and at times theological. Unlike our modern minds, the medieval use of animals was not zoological but participated more in a type of natural mythology. For example Jesus was often depicted either as a lamb or as a pelican. The pelican was held to be an animal of great virtue because it was (wrongly) believed that it pecked at its own breast to feed its children with blood.

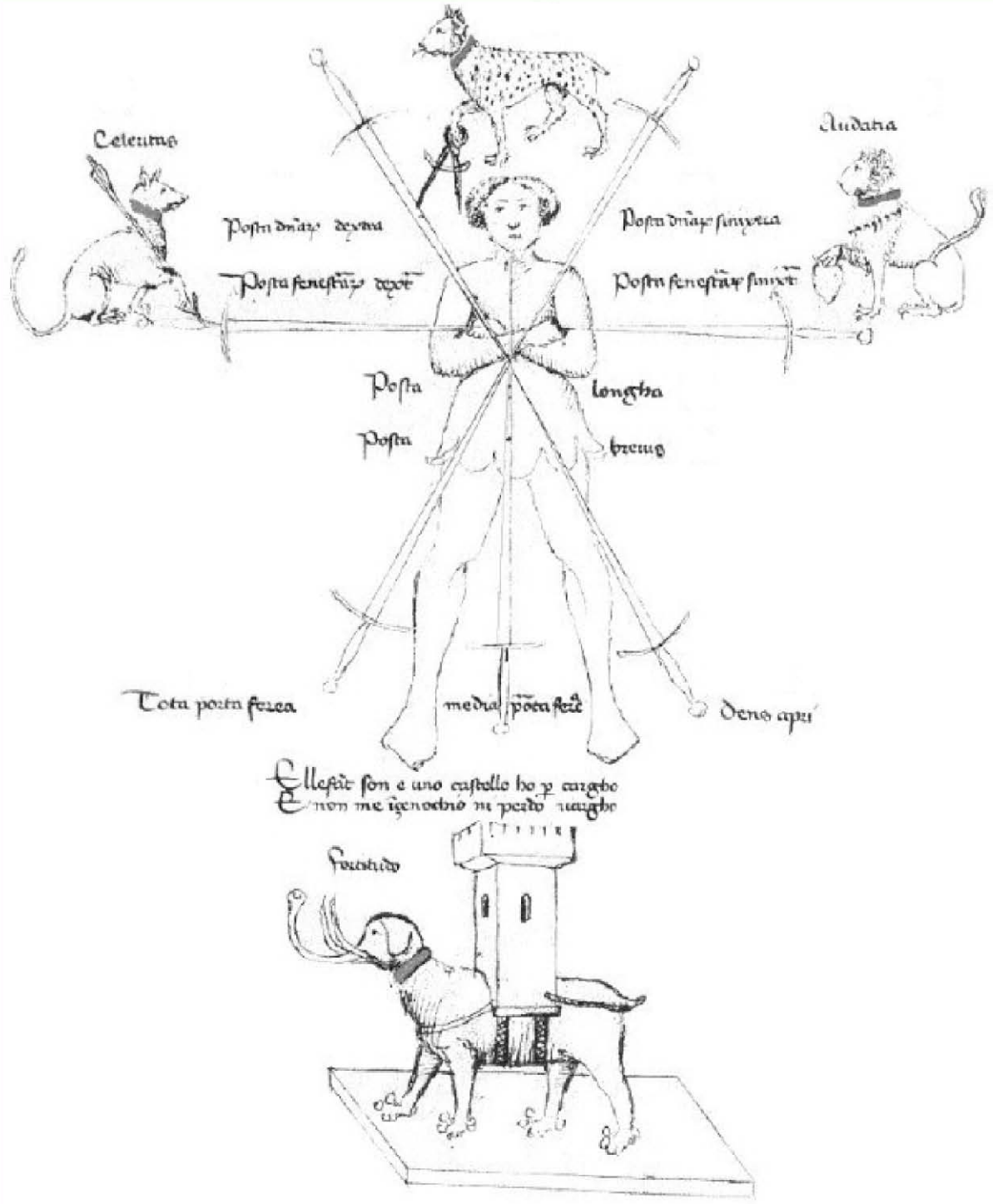
The insertion of the symbolic knowledge of the bestiary in classical education over the centuries had left an indelible imprint on the medieval psyche, including that of dei Liberi. This resulted in the ethical and practical application of the bestiary to his art of combat.

The image above, from the *Pisani-Dossi* manuscript, includes text in the dialect of Italian known as “Friuli.” The illustration is referred to as the seven swords and depicts the figure of a man with seven swords centered on the body surrounded with four stylized animals or beasts. The genius of dei Liberi is revealed in this single illustration, which effectively summarizes his entire art, both armed and unarmed, in terms that communicate the technical, physical, mental and ethical attributes of his combat system. At first glance, each of the sword angles depicts one of the seven possible offensive strikes, the six cuts and the thrust, all of which can be applied to most weapons. Positioned with the angles is the text referring to the *posta*, illustrating the optimal offensive strategy from that particular position. It also cleverly describes how a *posta* can offer both a defensive posture and offensive posture in the same instant. Beyond this level of interpretation, one can infer the most effective guard positions against opposing guard positions, a thread that surfaces numerous times in the treatise.

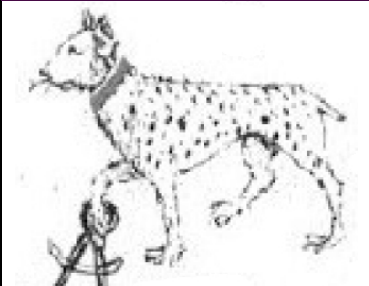
It is clear by the text that the technical attributes of fighting must be balanced with the ethical attributes. Each animal figure and its relative position with respect to the figure of the man, refers to a particular physical, mental and ethical attribute of a Master fencer. These are the ideals of dei Liberi’s system. It must be remembered here that his art was not intended for the common folk, but as it says in the prologue it was intended for the highly virtuous members of the princely classes.

It is also important note that in the illustrations each of the animals is wearing a golden collar (painted gold in the original manuscript). This colour is also used throughout the manuscript on the garters and crowns as an identification of the Master in the illustrations of the plays. This implies that these attributes are what make a true master swordsman, and that these are traits that all students must strive to embody. Therefore, it is critical that these attributes and virtues be emphasized early on in the training of every student. Not only to create the high level of skill and capabilities of a competent fighter, but also a shining virtue and moral quality. The illustration also suggests by the placement of the figures around the man, that a good and honorable fighter is one who not only possesses these attributes, but is one who is capable of measuring them in order to strike an optimal balance.

The Attributes of a Medieval Fencer



Proceeding clockwise from the figure of the lynx, a more detailed examination of the animals is included below.

The Lynx - Prudentia (Prudence)	
	<p>“Meio de mi'louo ceruino non uede creatura E aquello meto sepre a sesto e misura Prudentia.” “No other creature is able to look so clearly as me, the lynx And continuously by that method of the compass and measure prudence”</p>

The image of the lynx holding a compass (a tool of determining measure between two points) represents one of the four key attributes of a Master fencer. It is the ability to assess the actions of the opponent and of the self, making adjustments in response to actions taken by the opponent and using this assessment to enhance success in combat. The position of the lynx over the head of the figure shows its importance and its intellectual nature. It is also a crucial attribute, because prudent judgment maintains the critical optimal distance (the dividers and the compass) between the fencer and his opponent. It is the result of good judgment that the fencer is capable of anticipating his opponent's next attack, ensuring that the fighter will be in an optimal position in order to react to the offensive strike with speed and confidence. This can only occur as a result of the fencer's ability to control the engagement through prudence.

Though a critical skill in fighting, prudence must also be used in concert with the other attributes such as speed and strength. It rules the other attributes (or crowns them) in the sense that it determines when best to apply them in a certain way. In wrestling for example strength is not always called for, and it is judgment or prudence which will determine when to give in or be strong, and which of these is most strategic at a given time.

Being able to deliver a well-placed blow without endangering oneself is also an important consideration. Offensive strikes work when a fencer has good measure (timing and distance) as a result of effective judgment and prudence and is then able to deliver his blow cleanly.

Medieval literature often depicts the lynx as having the powers of premonition, and when applied to the fencer this translates into the master fencer's ability to read and control his opponents actions.

Ethically, prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it ("the prudent man looks where he is going;" "keep sane and sober for your prayers"). Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this

virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.

The Lion - Audatia (Courage/Audacity)



“Piu de mi lione non porta cor ardito Pero de bataia faço a zaschaduno inuito Audatia. » “None can bring a more daring heart than me, a lion And I challenge anyone to battle Courage.”

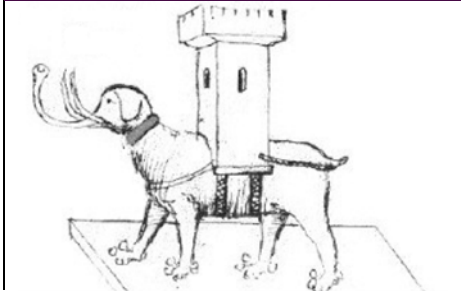
The lion figures prominently in the medieval period, especially in heraldry. Courage has long been held as one of the four cardinal virtues since classical times. The lion represents the ability to take risks when needed and the ability to face the fear of combat.

The lion is placed at the left of the figure. It is represented as supporting a heart with its right paw. The heart was often believed to be the measure of a man, and the centre of his emotions, including that of fear and hope. The heart is also representative of love, the sacred heart of Jesus being the most important medieval icon of this kind. Therefore, in the medieval period, courage was tempered with mercy and the ethics of Christianity.

In combat, however, courage must be balanced with prudence. This balance creates the right combination allowing the fencer to avoid over confidence, brashness and bellicosity which may lead ultimately to failure. More subtly, it provides the impetuous to take advantage of that moment of opportunity when a blow must be risked to defeat the opponent. In this way it is essential to the use of proper timing.

In ethics, courage is the trait of persisting in or going after what is good or right in the face of difficulty (danger of harm or loss, toil, or suffering). To the Christian medieval mind courage was the ability and readiness to undergo suffering or risk danger for the sake of doing God's will or of reaching some spiritual good.

The Elephant - Fortitudo (Fortitude)



“Ellefant son e uno castello hoper cargho E non me inçenochio ni perdo uargho.” “I am the elephant and I have a castle for a burden And never do I kneel down nor do I loose my true place.”

The figure of an elephant, illustrated with a tower on its back, is positioned below the figure of the man and denotes stability and endurance. In historical representations the elephant is rarely depicted without a tower on his back. This representation may derive from the Indian war elephant, or even to the war elephants of the legendary Hannibal, the conqueror of the Roman Empire.

The figure of an elephant, coupled with the text, highlights the importance of strength, the foundation on which a fencer builds his skill and technique. This is referred to periodically in dei Liberi's manuscript and is particularly mentioned in the wrestling, or *abrazare*, section. The application of strength comes into play in a variety of situations, such as the strength of cuts, the leveraging of wrestling holds and throws. Prudence and judgment should dictate the amount of strength needed in a given situation. Unbalanced with the other Master attributes, the fencer would rely too heavily on his strength to the detriment of his intelligence and speed. He may then be easily tricked by a smarter fencer or may encounter someone even stronger or faster than he is, and thus be defeated.

The illustration also suggests the critical need for solid well-rooted footwork, ensuring balance and equilibrium. It is interesting to note that dei Liberi does not privilege ground fighting in his manuscript, and therefore it is crucially important for the fencer to have a good sense of balance and rooted legs so that he may not be thrown to the ground. This preference for upright fighting may be indicated by the lack of knee joints on the illustration of the elephant.

But fortitude is also that ability to take punishment. It is that strength of mind to keep on fighting even against seemingly insurmountable odds. It is a form of willpower backed by a resistant and enduring body. Never kneeling down may also refer to this quality of never giving up to another man. It is also the ability to accept pain and continue fighting.

In training, it is clearly important to develop both muscular and cardiovascular endurance as well as toughness all aspect of fortitude.

Ethically, fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of

death, and to face trials and persecutions. It even disposes one to renounce and sacrifice his life in defence of a just cause.

The Tiger - Celeritas (Swiftiness)



“Yo tigro tanto son presto a corer e uoltare Che la sagita del cello non me po auancare.” “I am the tiger, I am very quick to run and turn That the arrow in the sky cannot overcome me.”

The fourth animals we consider is the figure of the tiger. The heraldic tiger was not zoologically correct but was more of the order of a mythological beast to the medieval Italians. It is therefore depicted here in its non-natural heraldic form. It is depicted similar to the lion and grasping an arrow referred to as sagita in the text. Sagita is the star of Sagittarius, the Centaur Archer. Therefore, it also implies the speed of the celestial horse.

The attribute of swiftiness figures highly in the manuscript, especially in the *abrazare* section, in which speed and strength are referred to as the top two of the seven important requirements for wrestling. It is clear that speed in its physical form is of crucial importance in fighting. Speed will often determine a successful strike and it is a truism that it is the faster hand, which carries the sword, which usually wins the day.

But there is also a different kind of speed implied by the figure. In his plays, dei Liberi often implies more than one kind of speed: the physical speed of the technique but also the intellectual swiftiness of the chosen counter or remedy. Mentally, swiftiness is the minds ability to assess a particular changing situation and the quickness of the minds response to that situation. Therefore, physical swiftiness is represented here as the actual tiger, whereas the mental form is represented by the cosmic principle of Sagittarius, the arrow, as the symbol of the quickness of human thought.

Summary: The Ideal Swordsman

It is clear in the manuscript that Liberi believes that it is the possession of the proper combination of these four virtues which makes the "ideal swodsman:"

We are the four animals with these traits, He who wants to battle should measure with us, And he who has a good portion of our virtues, He will have honour in battle, according to this art.

Therefore, the Master fencer possesses the necessary judgment and prudence to ensure tactical supremacy, the courage to face combat and take advantage of opportunities created by his judgment, the fortitude to keep fighting and the swiftiness of body and mind to deliver his techniques.

The body of a master fencer must possess muscular strength and speed, nimbleness, and endurance both muscular and cardiovascular. The mind of a master must possess a strong willpower, be quick witted and intelligent. Ethically, a master should be prudent in his speech and actions, courageous in his morals and principles, and intelligent in his opinions.

With these lofty goals in mind we move onto the technical aspects of his art, always keeping in mind the highest summit of its realization.