

The Arte of the Defensive Dagger

by Duncan Kieran

Traditionally, a dagger in society rapier combat is held with knuckles forward, point toward the sky, or with knuckles down, point toward your opponent. However, there is a second method of using the dagger, which I will refer to as "defensive dagger." My use with the defensive dagger began a few years ago during a practice with a relatively new fencer. He wasn't using his off hand for defense, and tended to leave it at his side. Typically, I will give a fencer a roll of duct tape, a large glove, or some other object to hold in order to "remind" him to use his off hand. In this situation, however, I had none of the aforementioned objects. I handed him my boat sail main gauche, and because I didn't want him to stick me with it accidentally, I had him reverse his grip on it, aligning the blade with his forearm. My intention was that the weight of the dagger would remind him to use his parry hand.

What happened however, was particularly exhilarating. The fighter went from blocking hesitantly to blocking aggressively almost immediately, and understood that if he missed the block with the guard, he still had the length of the blade to protect his arm.

Afterwards, I began using the dagger this way to work out its pros and cons. I would often use the defensive dagger when fighting an opponent armed with a single rapier. It would allow me a slightly more defensive position, while not gaining the typical offensive position—something especially important when facing new fencers. However, I found a definite trade-off: although you gain power, you lose speed. With an offensive dagger, you can quickly move your wrist to turn an attack to the side.

If using defensive dagger, you must turn your elbow and forearm, taking more time for the movement. When you sweep the blade to the outside using defensive dagger, however, it is much more difficult for your opponent to "push" his way through your guard as the leverage is to your advantage. I have found that the trade of speed for strength is not always a good one, especially when facing a foil blade. Unless your opponent is particularly slow or relatively new, you will find yourself extremely pressed to use the defensive dagger to your advantage. This holds true similarly when facing an epee, but not to the same degree. If your opponent is using a medium- to heavy-weight guard, you will see where the defensive dagger's strengths lie with a bit of practice. It is not difficult to see then, that the defensive dagger is most practical when facing an opponent using a schlager.

In practice, there are four moves that are most often used, though you will find many variations and subtle changes are available from the classical dagger style. I will describe these moves using my boat sail main gauche as a reference, which is much better suited than a cross hilt dagger in this style, and from the right-handed point of view.

High Ward:

Hold the dagger in front on you, knuckles forward, pommel up, and blade parallel to your forearm. When an attack is made, step forward, presenting your guard and/or fort  against your opponent's blade with an upward movement, drawing it off-line. Depending on your proximity to your opponent, you can follow with an attack to the body, or a cut to your opponent's forearm during your retreat. When applied correctly, you will leave your opponent's right side and underarm especially vulnerable. This move is also particularly effective when you are pressed. Apply the same upward movement while dropping to one knee. A follow-up draw cut to the belly can be extremely devastating here. The high line attack is not without its own counter. Instead of bringing your dagger straight up to catch the attack on your guard, bring your arm to the right, knuckles to the right, and blade straight up, taking the blade against your fort  and quillon. Make sure that you have caught your opponent's blade well before continuing, as a mistake here leaves your head wide open for attack. You can immediately draw cut on the way out, or step forward to engage your opponent (one of the most effective maneuvers if done correctly). At the same time reverse your arm back to the left and outside, applying a modified high ward and locking your opponent. Your lock with the quillons should be in the lower half of the blade, making it nearly impossible to disengage without retreating, and setting yourself up for a very open inside attack.

Outside Ward:

Again, hold the dagger reversed. The outside ward is used both in response to an attack, or as a lead in for an attack. The block can be delivered one of two ways: either as a leftward movement with your forearm perpendicular to the ground, or parallel to it. In either case, you are attempting to lock your opponent's blade by catching it between your quillon and fort . Follow with a slight downward turn of the guard to further ensure the lock. This ward, when properly applied, can allow you to retain control of your opponent's blade, forcing him to retreat in order to disengage. If he attempts to go under your blade, a simple downward movement will increase your defense. At most, a flaw in your block during this exchange would result in a cut to your leg, while putting you in a position for a kill.

Inside Ward:

This ward is essentially the same as the outside ward, in arm movement and intent, but is done with the inside of the blade. In order to be effective, this ward should be used en passe, your dagger arm moving from left to right, your counter attack a draw cut. It is most often used when your opponent makes an attack to your sword arm, though it can be used in the more offensive manner, if you wish to initiate an attack.

Leading Engage Ward:

This is most "offensive" of the three guards, as in the majority of situations you initiate rather than react. From the starting position bend your wrist backward, pointing your pommel towards yourself, instead of the sky. Your blade will no longer be parallel to your forearm but extend between 60o and 120o toward your opponent. With a forward step, engage your opponent's blade and turn it to the outside with an approach similar to the outside ward. Similarly, if your

opponent moves into a high guard, you can counter into the high ward, while still maintaining control. Excerpt from Vincentio Saviolo his Practise, London, 1595: As you can see below, Saviolo discusses a block similar to the leading edge ward mentioned above. The other three are natural extensions of the style.

V. The scholler must break it downward, with the point of his Dagger toward his left side, and then put a stoccata to my belly beneath my Dagger, in which time I breaking it with the pointe of my Dagger, goe a little aside toward his lefte hand, and make an imbroccata above his Dagger, and the scholler shall breake the imbroccata with his Dagger upward, parting circularly with his right foote toward my lefte side, and so thrust unto mee an imbroccata above my Dagger, in which time with the pointe of my Dagger, I will beate it outward toward my lefte side, and answere him with a stoccata in the bellye under his Dagger, parting circularly with my right foote toward his left side: and in the same time he must answere me with the like under my Dagger, breaking my stoccata outward toward his lefte side, stepping toward my lefte side with his right foote, at which time I must moove with my bodye to save my face, and breake his poynte toward my right side, answering him with a riversa to the head, and so retire with my right foote, at which time he must come forward with his left foote in the place of my right, and his Dagger high and strait, turning his swoorde hand, so that his poynte may goe directlye to my bellye, and he must take the riversa on his sworde and Dagger. L. But is it not better for the scholler to holde his Dagger with the point upward, as I have seene many doe to defend a riversa?

V. He that holdeth the point upward, is ever in danger to be hurt on the head, or to receive a fincture in the bellye or in the face, and likewise he is in jeoperdye to be hurt with a Stramazone, betweene the Rapier and the Dagger, because he closeth not his weapons: therefore remember well how to carrye your Dagger, and by exercise you shall see the Dagger, for there are many that breake the stoccata inward.

A fighter holding a dagger in this method would be inclined to draw it back and make a thrusting motion toward his opponent. Any attack made against you during this move would need to be compensated for by one of the above methods, disregarding your attack so you do not take a wound on your dagger arm. Though I don't encourage it as a primary usage, the reversed dagger can be turned inward after a block as a thrusting attack. However, one must be particularly careful, especially with stiff blades, not to bend the wrist too much. Otherwise, the same power you gain from defense will be transferred into your attack. A draw cut with the dagger reversed, once you are inside your opponent's guard, is extremely quick, because the movement is made through your waist, instead of your wrist. Facing a Defensive Dagger When facing an opponent who has chosen to use a defensive dagger style, your offensive tactics change slightly. As the attacker, you must be cautious when thrusting and making draw cuts to his dagger side, avoiding the potential lock. You should watch for an opening attack against his forearm, when he brings the dagger across his chest for a block, and neglects to keep the blade angled properly against it for defense. Secondly, a feint attack low, causing him to commit, and then a counter to a high line is particularly effective. Though the defensive dagger's speed is slower, it is often enough for the initial attack. A recovery, however, is often difficult, and can leave him defenseless.

Conclusion

Though use of the defensive dagger may feel awkward initially and doesn't lend itself to every fencer's style, I encourage you to try it. You will be pleasantly surprised by the differences and similarities to the classic dagger style. I continue to train with it and instruct others in its use, and with the increase of schlager qualified fencers in the East Kingdom, I'm sure we'll be seeing others using it as well. With practice, you'll find that the pros outweigh the cons, and that the defensive dagger is a viable alternative and addition to your repertoire.

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