Henry Deacon, Jacob. "*La posta di falcone and la porta di ferro*: Representations and receptions of historical fighting practices in medieval media and contemporary popular culture." *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*. Ed. Karl Alvestad and Robert Houghton. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 90–104. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350167452.0014>>.

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La posta di falcone and la porta di ferro

Representations and receptions of historical fighting practices in medieval media and contemporary popular culture

Jacob Henry Deacon

Introduction

In an early scene from *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), Ridley Scott's adaptation of the events surrounding the 1187 siege of Jerusalem, the blacksmith protagonist Balian is given a brief lesson in swordsmanship by Godfrey, his newfound father.¹ As part of this lesson, Balian is explicitly instructed to 'never use a low guard', and instead strike from what Godfrey calls the *posta di falcone*, the guard of the hawk, holding the sword straight above the head. Such advice runs counter to the teachings of several professional fencing masters of the Middle Ages. An early fifteenth-century manuscript produced by the Italian Fiore dei Liberi, for example, shows multiple ways of approaching an opponent in a low guard. One, which Fiore called the *porta di ferro* (iron gate), involves holding the sword low with the point facing forward: when the opponent strikes, one ought to step in and beat away their sword, leaving them open to a swift counterattack (Figure 6.1). Nevertheless, Godfrey's advice remains with Balian throughout the film, eventually helping him emerge victorious from an impromptu single combat against the disgraced Guy de Lusignan, the (then) former king of Jerusalem.

The dichotomy between representations of historical fighting practices in modern cinema and medieval sources (although it will be shown that even these sources are also only representations themselves) is at the heart of this chapter on the accuracy and authenticity of contemporary understandings of the Middle Ages. This chapter will demonstrate that while it can be difficult to establish links between modern media and pragmatic martial arts literature of the Middle Ages, comparisons to other materials such as romance may be more fruitful. This approach allows one to differentiate between four ways of discerning between violence: real fights as historical practice, fighting as part of a historical martial arts and training culture (i.e. as seen in fight books), medieval representations of real fights/embodied techniques of fighting/fictional fights

Figure 6.1 Various low guards from Fiore dei Liberi's fight book. A version of the *porta di ferro* can be seen at the top right. Fiore dei Liberi, *Il Fior di Battaglia*, c. 1410, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 24^r. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

(i.e. chronicles and romance) and modern representations of historical practice and fictional fighting.² Central to this is an understanding of the purposes of recording combat in various media. While fight books often fulfil a pragmatic or emotional need, combats in romance and modern media are more alike as they are often designed to entertain audiences.

One of the most memorable ways in which medieval fighting techniques appear on the screen is in single combat. Indeed, even battles tend to be shown as a series of brief single combats fought by the protagonist(s). Heroes like the aforementioned Balian, *Game of Thrones*'s Jon Snow, and a whole Round Table's worth of King Arthurs and

other characters from the pages of medieval romance have all impressed audiences with their martial prowess. The single combats they fight are often a key element of the narrative for films and shows set either in the Middle Ages or an analogous fantasy setting. While these combats are certainly opportunities for the development of character and advancement of the plot, they are also a lens through which one can address the subject of historical accuracy and authenticity.³ A study of modern perceptions of historical combat practices also highlights how audiences engage with and view the Middle Ages on a wider spectrum. The potential for conceptions of the practice of historical violence to inform beliefs about past societies has been noted by Hannah Skoda, who recognizes that modern perceptions of the Middle Ages are often 'haunted by the spectre of extreme violence' due to thoughtless misconceptions and poor simplifications of complex medieval attitudes.⁴ If someone believes that the theory and practice of medieval martial arts was thoughtless and barbaric, then this can influence views of the practitioners themselves and the society they inhabited. Correcting these misconceptions of historical violence can thus help challenge assumptions regarding the societies in which it occurred. A similar approach has recently been followed by Ken Mondschein in *Game of Thrones and the Medieval Art of War*. Mondschein's book relies on the overwhelming popularity of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, and its TV adaptation *Game of Thrones*, to explore several common misconceptions held by the general public regarding the Middle Ages. On the subject of combat, however, Mondschein instead focuses on the history of fencing in the Middle Ages and Renaissance instead of providing a commentary on the accuracy or authenticity of these modern depictions of combat.⁵

This chapter proposes that it is not to the pragmatic fight books that presentations of combat in the media should be compared, but rather to narratives of combat as recorded in medieval romance. In this instance, one can see strong similarities between filmmakers and historical writers such as Thomas Malory (the main romance used in this chapter); both romance and cinematic interpretations of fighting present heightened and exaggerated visions of the capabilities of combatants and their equipment. While these depictions cannot be considered accurate from a physical standpoint, it is interesting to consider that modern representations of combat are, arguably, authentic in creating the same emotional resonance as their romance counterparts. Yet although the effect is similar on these audiences separated by centuries, the subtle difference in the creation of these extreme depictions – for instance the ability of swords to penetrate the strongest parts of armour – should still be taken into account. While some romance writers likely had experience of warfare or were aware of the realities of the use of arms and armour, modern directors' interpretations are often informed by longstanding misconceptions present in popular culture surrounding the Middle Ages.⁶

This chapter also focuses on combat as it is portrayed in films and media, but this is not the only way in which the public interacts with medieval violence: more and more videogames set in the Middle Ages have attempted to incorporate an interpretation of combat influenced by fight books. Given their popularity and potential to inform players' beliefs about the Middle Ages, this line of enquiry could also produce interesting results.⁷ Furthermore, although many fight books are illustrated, these are

not the only visual depictions we have of medieval combat practices, as they are also seen in manuscript illuminations and other artwork. Aspects of these often present combat, or warfare, in a highly stylized manner, and a comparison between these illustrations and visual depictions of technique in the modern media may make for intriguing similarities.⁸ They have, however, not been assessed in this present study due to spatial limitations.

Representations of combat in fight books and on film

One of the key groups of sources for this study are a heterogeneous corpus of late medieval and early modern texts referred to as fight books (from the German *Fechtbuch*). These materials have increasingly received attention in Anglophone scholarship since the publication of *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* by Sydney Anglo.⁹ Fight books are defined by Daniel Jaquet as any text on the theory and practice of (predominantly single) combat, with or without visual depictions.¹⁰ If such a definition seems broad or vague, then it is through necessity. A wide definition is required because of the extensive range of martial content and communication strategies in these sources. Fight books describe the use of a wide curriculum of arms: the medieval material alone depicts combatants fighting unarmed or wielding two-handed swords, swords and bucklers, a variety of staff weapons and even several specialized duelling weapons.¹¹ The texts, furthermore, address fighting without armour, in harness or on horseback. Nor is their content the only differentiating factor; fight books were also produced for a diverse multitude of purposes and audiences, and often relay their pragmatic contents through complex and varied textual and visual communication strategies.¹² While the limitations of using fight books to assess historical combat will be explored later, it is at this stage important to clarify that they overwhelmingly describe combat between just two individuals, whether in a judicial, sportive or self-defence context, and that many of the techniques shown were likely unsuitable for use in a larger encounter such as on the battlefield.

Studies of historical technique informed by fight books often criticize the depictions of combat offered up by contemporary filmmakers. Rachel Kellett has stressed that the 'complexity and precision' of the fighting system of Johannes Liechtenauer, an itinerant fourteenth-century fencing master whose teachings are central to the German fight books, 'indicates that medieval fencing was very different from the depiction of medieval combat in modern theatre and film as nothing but hacking and slashing'.¹³ Stephen Atkinson has also highlighted that there are numerous differences between combat as portrayed in fight books and on the screen.¹⁴ Nor are medievalists the only scholars to show an interest in the subject, as shown by Teresa Ende and Jürgen Müller's study of early modern duelling on film.¹⁵ Such assertions from Kellett and Atkinson are correct; there are remarkably few positive comparisons that can be made between how combat is depicted by the fight book writers and modern directors/choreographers. This is emblematic of the wider treatment of the Middle Ages by filmmakers. Nikolas Haydock argues that films set in the Middle Ages 'flaunt anachronism, designed not to render faithfully their respective sources in Malory or Chaucer, but rather to appeal to

a cinematic imaginary about the Middle Ages, composed of bits and pieces drawn from film history and popular culture'.¹⁶ A similar argument can be made regarding combat, in that directors and choreographers are inspired more often by other medieval action films as opposed to historical sources: there is little to separate the physicality of single combat between Arthur and Lancelot in *Excalibur* (1981) from the fights involving the future King Edward II of England and Robert the Bruce in *Outlaw King* (2018).

Modern interpretations of historical combat on the screen also have much in common with longstanding but mistaken opinions originating with Victorian antiquarians that played a significant role in creating the image of the brutal, brawn-over-brains combat of the Middle Ages. Egerton Castle in particular advanced the notion that 'the rough untutored fighting of the Middle Ages represented faithfully the reign of brute force in social life as well as in politics'.¹⁷ According to Castle, a man's 'superiority in action depended on his power of wearing heavier armour and dealing heavier blows than his neighbour, where strength was lauded more than skill', and it was not until the use of armour began to decline that the art of fencing could thrive.¹⁸ Indeed, Castle even lauds those who had to learn how to fight without armour for being more talented, as this was a display of skill, as opposed to simple endurance.¹⁹ This latter point is certainly one echoed throughout modern depictions of medieval combat. A trial by combat in *Game of Thrones* (series 4, episode 8) sees the lithe and relatively unarmoured Oberyn Martell fight against Gregor Clegane, known as The Mountain due to his extraordinary height, who takes to the arena clad head to toe in armour. The armoured Gregor is clumsy and uncoordinated, relying on his brute strength as opposed to Oberyn's dexterous strikes. Eventually it is Oberyn's hubris that costs him his life, but the choreography still serves to illustrate prevailing notions regarding the mobility of armoured combatants. Rather, the late medieval knight was able to perform all sorts of athletic feats in his harness seemingly unhindered by the weight of his armour.²⁰ The anonymous biographer of the French knight, Jean II le Maingre, known as Boucicaut, wrote in the early fifteenth century how his master could leap on to a horse, perform a somersault, or even 'climb right to the top of the underside of a scaling ladder leaning against a wall, simply from swinging from rung to rung by his two hands', all while wearing his harness.²¹

This trope is just one of several to be found in films depicting the use of medieval arms and armour. Weapons themselves are often treated not like swords, but lightsabres capable of cutting through anything before them. Even the epitome of late medieval protection for the body, plate armour, is regularly overcome by cuts and slashes, even though such armour was designed to withstand these assaults. A striking instance of the exaggerated capabilities of weapons can be seen in *Ironclad* (2011), a story centred on a drastically altered interpretation of the 1215 siege of Rochester Castle. Defender of the castle and reluctant Templar Thomas Marshall at one point cleaves an opponent from clavicle to pelvis with a single stroke of his anachronistic two-handed sword.²² Neither the haft of his opponent's axe, his gambeson, nor even skeletal structure is enough to prevent the horrific injury from completely destroying him. Such strikes do not appear in the corpus of late medieval and early modern fight books. Admittedly, some fight books censor the violent consequences of success, but even the most graphic do not depict swords causing such destructive wounds.²³ The 1459 fight book of the

German master Hans Talhoffer can be regarded as one of the most violent of the genre: combatants decapitate opponents and dismember limbs, but nothing as destructive as Marshall's strike is depicted.²⁴ When such strikes are parried in modern film, these are often little more than static blocks, with actors often stood at a distance to make parrying unnecessary. Combatants swing their weapons back, signalling their intent, before striking another blow.²⁵ This manner of fighting runs directly against what is often described in German fight books: strikes that threaten the opponent while countering their attack. Talhoffer, in his recital of the mnemonic *Zettel* of Johannes Liechtenauer, suggests that '*wer dier Oberhowt, zorn how ortt dem trowt*', that if one's opponent cuts from above with an *oberhow*, then one should throw one's own strike, a *zornhow*, to counter this and swivel the point towards him.²⁶

There are occasionally, however, aspects of fight books that do appear on film. The aforementioned scene involving Marshall also shows him using a technique called half-swording, placing the left hand on the blade of the sword. This gives greater control over the sword's point, allowing for more accurate thrusts aimed at the weaker parts of an opponent's armour. It also results in more powerful thrusts and makes it easier to use the sword as a lever and control the opponent's body in close-quarter grappling. Cinematic protagonists are sometimes aware of similar principles: in the fencing lesson between Balian and Godfrey, Balian is swiftly taught that 'the blade isn't the only part of a sword' when he finds his father's pommel threatening to pummel his face. Marshall also wields his sword with both hands on the blade to execute a *Morttschlag*, or murder-strike, a blow aimed at an opponent's head with the quillons or pommel of a sword. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the inclusion of techniques is, by far, the exception to the rule in cinema.

With that said, the fight books provide, at best, a highly flawed framework for researching historical technique. On an epistemological level, a close reading of them encourages scholars to thus distinguish between real fights as historical practice and fighting as part of a martial arts and training culture: the second of these is what is depicted in the fight books. Eric Burkart has noted several problems inherent in using the fight books as a record of historical embodied technique, the most significant of these being how the act of interpretation is informed by modern rather than historical cultures of movement.²⁷ Drawing on the work of Ben Spatz and his discussion of technique and practice (technique is defined as bodily knowledge which can inform practice, while practice is a singular, unrepeatable moment of utilizing technique), Burkart has shown that a historical culture of fighting informed by cultural techniques, real practices and a didactic concept of technique has been replaced by a modern culture of fighting informed by different cultural techniques, modern fighting practices, and thus only a possible concept of what individual techniques may have been.²⁸ This distinction further creates a divide between the record of combat in fight books and in modern film (indeed, the former can be categorized as a modern image of real fights as historical practice), but also between such sources and the ability of the historian to fully comprehend them.

Another issue relates to how well the fight books represent the totality of fighting knowledge from the Middle Ages. Only one fight book manuscript, describing the use of sword and buckler, can be dated to the fourteenth century with any certainty, and it

is only from the fifteenth century onwards that these texts began to appear regularly.²⁹ Fencing masters and professional instructors were certainly active long before this. There are, for instance, examples of individuals training students for judicial combat in England from the twelfth century onwards, but no trace of their teachings remain.³⁰ Given the evolution of arms and armour over the Middle Ages, however, and the impact of technology on the way in which people fought, it is readily apparent that these later works cannot fully represent the practices of earlier centuries.³¹

A further important consideration is how representative the fight books are of medieval practices, not only from an epistemological perspective but one pertaining to their actual content and audiences. Writers were keen to stress that their contents should remain secret. Fiore dei Liberi claimed that a close relative of his pupil would only be admitted to observe the class after swearing to secrecy.³² The writer of a later fight book heavily influenced by one of Fiore's works, Filippo Vadi, went as far as espousing what sorts of people he believed should be allowed to learn the contents of his manuscript: 'never, by any means, [should] this art and doctrine fall into the hands of unrefined and low born men. Because Heaven did not generate these men, unrefined and without wit or skill, and without any agility, but they were rather generated as unreasonable animals, only able to bear burdens and to do vile and unrefined works.'³³ Rather, Vadi argued that only those of 'perspicacious talent and lovely limbs', that is to say courtiers, scholars, barons, princes, dukes and kings were among those who should learn how to fight.³⁴ Given the privileged audiences of many of the fight books, one wonders how well the genre represents general martial practices of the Middle Ages. Jeffrey Forgeng has taken this argument further, questioning how much the skills of already experienced practitioners would have been influenced by the possession of such books.³⁵

Yet despite these limitations, fight books remain among the least problematic materials for engaging with the subject of historical combat. One potential source of information regarding the conduct of combatants in combat is the extensive corpus of chronicles, some of which contain detailed accounts of hand-to-hand fighting in different contexts, whether during war, trial by battle, or tournament. Sydney Anglo, however, has illustrated the caution that must be exercised in dealing with narrative sources that face the difficulty of trying to record technical and subtle movements in written text, and which often directly contradict each other when recorded by multiple eyewitnesses. To illustrate this point Anglo gives the example of a series of single combats held in 1467 between Antoine de Bourgogne, Bastard of Burgundy, and Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers.³⁶ Even though there were four eyewitnesses to the combat they all disagree on how the action unfolded. They are unable to establish a consensus as to how or when the Bastard's horse died, let alone which combatant came out on top in the subsequent pollaxe combat. Chris Given-Wilson has explored similar themes for a joust that occurred while King Edward III was campaigning in France. According to Walsingham's chronicle, one Thomas Colville rode across the River Somme to joust with a French knight who had insulted the king and consequently slew him. The *Eulogium historiarum*, however, and the *Anonimale Chronicle*, offer alternative interpretations: in the former neither party is injured, and in the latter they even departed as friends.³⁷ As such, even though chronicles can contain detailed

accounts of how combats were fought, they should be used only with utmost caution in assessing the physicality of medieval combats, and more, in a manner similar to romance, an idealized depiction of the way writers believed that combats should be fought. Indeed, Joanna Bellis and Megan G. Leitch have shown how romance, *chansons de geste*, and historical chronicles alike draw on similar chivalric themes, especially in how they 'reflected, and reflected on, their society and its ideals'.³⁸ Key to this understanding is that 'what was important about stories focusing on the wars and quests of kings and knights was not always their factual truth-value, but the moral or instrumental truth they conveyed'.³⁹

Representations of combat in Middle English romance

In turning from fight books towards late medieval romance the similarities between historical and modern representations of combat become more frequent. One such example is the aforementioned theme of protagonists dealing blows capable of rending and sundering armour and wearer alike. Perhaps the most visceral example of this is to be seen in the mortal duel between Arthur and Mordred at the climax of Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

And there Kyng Arthur smote Sir Mordred undir the shyld, with a foyne of hys speare, thorowoute the body more than a fadom. And whan Sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounde he threste hymselff with the myght that he had up to the burre of Kynge Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote his fadir, Kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And therewith Mordred daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe.⁴⁰

Both Arthur and Mordred deal blows that render their armour superfluous for anything but indicating their noble status. Arthur's spear pierces through Mordred's harness front and back, while a cut from Mordred's sword cleaves through Arthur's helmet.⁴¹ This is far from an unusual theme in the text, as several of the most memorable strikes in the *Morte Darthur* are devastating cuts. Indeed, it could be claimed that they are so memorable because they are so impossible.⁴² Arthur performs similar deeds in his earlier combat with the Emperor Lucius, striking him so that 'frome the creste of his helme unto the bare pappys hit wente adoune, and so ended the emperour'.⁴³ Atkinson has commented how 'slashing cuts are virtually unknown' in Malory, yet they emerge as some of the most memorable strikes in the whole text.⁴⁴ Other knights perform similar feats. Gareth cleaves one knight from helmet to shoulders, splitting his head open in the process, while the brothers Balyn and Balan unknowingly duel one another until stripped entirely of their harnesses.⁴⁵ Robert Maslen has also considered the implications of 'armour that doesn't work' in Middle English literature and how the failings of harness serve to create suspense when it either breaks or a combatant must do without.⁴⁶ The ease with which armour can be destroyed in romance and on screen is thus another way in which one can demonstrate the emotional authenticity of

medieval representations of combat. The performers of such deeds are transformed by their annihilation of armours into 'medieval supermen' capable of performing feats of arms unobtainable by, but aspirational for real knights.⁴⁷ Whilst it has been argued that 'readers (or listeners) would not envision [...] great slashing wounds but a refined, deft set of techniques, their own raised to an extraordinary level of expertise', I would argue that it is not increased expertise but instead exaggerated physical capabilities which have been bestowed upon the protagonists, allowing them to perform techniques impossible for other fighters, and create a more entertaining narrative.⁴⁸ Similar conclusions are shared by Abels in that the exaggeration of violence in manuscript illustrations likely 'added to the enjoyment' of its audience.⁴⁹

Nor is this an uncommon trope in films depicting the Middle Ages and medieval-inspired worlds. In a judicial combat between Sandor Clegane and Berric Dondarrion in *Game of Thrones*, the former delivers a blow comparable to that of Arthur's in his combat with Lucius. Clegane strikes at his opponent with a descending cut that first cleaves through Dondarrion's raised sword, and then through his steel pauldrons, becoming embedded in his chest before Dondarrion keels over. Examples such as this demonstrate how a comparison of modern media with romance is far more apt than one with the seemingly didactic fight books. That is not to say, however, that romance are completely analogous with historical combat practices. At the very least, there is occasionally an overlap of the terminology for certain techniques, but this often refers to basic techniques. In the fight between Tristram and Nabone, Malory describes how the two knights 'fought longe on foote, trasynge and transversynge, smytynge and foynynge longe withoute ony reste'.⁵⁰ Foining (Malory's 'foynynge') appears frequently in Middle English fight books to describe thrusts.⁵¹ The appearance of this terminology in the *Morte Darthur* is, however, more limited than the propensity for combatants' blows to cave in helmets and cause other exaggerated wounds, and must be considered an exception in the genre. Malory is thus arguably conceiving of combat in his work not as a record of a real fight as historical practice but simply as a representation of a fictional fight. Such a distinction would limit what can be gained by seeking to compare fight books and romance to gain a more complete understanding of historical technique.⁵²

Another observable trope in both romance and film is the popularity of depicting protagonists as engaging in single combat during battles and sieges, occasionally to decide the outcome of the encounter and thus acting as a form of judicial combat.⁵³ This trope has previously been commented on by Lynch, who noted that 'Malory's ideal of a perfectly informed and universally acceptable fighting narrative is a patent fantasy, if one thinks of the babble of conflicting accounts succeeding a real late-medieval battle', and that he tends to treat all fights as a series of single combats.⁵⁴ Other romances also employ single combat in the form of a judicial duel as a means of resolving political conflict. The anonymous fourteenth-century romance *Sir Tryamour* has the eponymous protagonist duel with the emperor's champion, the giant Moradas, in a bid to prevent further bloodshed between the armies of King Arduus of Aragon, and the Holy Roman Emperor.⁵⁵ The reasoning behind the propensity for engagements to be decided by single combat has been commented upon by Lee Ramsey, who notes that audiences were 'less interested in armies fighting armies than in one man

sallying out against the world and subduing it by force.⁵⁶ One could even argue that the same principal is the reason why fight books so overwhelmingly focus on combat between only two individuals. The desire of audiences, both medieval and modern, to engage with the arc of a single protagonist may also be why combat in romance and films rarely ends with the medieval practice of ransom, which Michele Poellinger notes is almost unheard of in the genre: the request of one knight to be ransomed in *Kingdom of Heaven*, for example, is met with a swift strike to the back of the head with a warhammer.⁵⁷

Lynch's assessment that single combat represents an ideal form of fighting for the writers of romance can certainly be seen on a much wider scale as something that real knights and men-at-arms often aspired to. Although there is no record of a war in the late Middle Ages being resolved by single combat, several chronicles record them taking place before battle.⁵⁸ The fourteenth-century English chronicler Geoffrey le Baker gives two such instances. The first of these is a single combat fought before the battle of Halidon Hill in 1333. Le Baker records how an enormous Scottish champion called Turnbull, 'a second Goliath', stood between the English and Scottish armies and challenged any Englishman to fight with him.⁵⁹ The challenge was answered by Robert Benhale, who first dispatched Turnbull's dog before cutting off his left hand, and then his head.⁶⁰ The second relates to how, at the battle of Poitiers in 1356, the French army was preceded by jousters 'as was the custom', who were in turn met by English knights from the vanguard who were 'especially chosen' to take part in the jousts.⁶¹ Opportunities to compete like this were not to be missed: Robert Jones argues that brave deeds not only had to be done but also needed to be 'seen to be done' in order to satisfy the performative nature of chivalry.⁶² Due to the strong streak of individualism in this chivalric ethos, single combat provided participants a good chance to distinguish and make a name for themselves.⁶³ Despite single combat featuring as a common literary trope in romance, historical narratives show that knights and men-at-arms never actually crossed blades in order to settle the fate of a battle or a siege. That is not to say that such challenges were not issued. Both King Edward III and King Henry V of England are recorded as having sent challenges to single combat to King Philippe VI and Prince Louis of France.⁶⁴ These challenges, however, appear to have been issued as clever pieces of propaganda which their issuers knew would go unanswered, allowing them to claim the moral high ground by submitting themselves to the judgement of God and acting to prevent further unnecessary death.

The occurrence of single combat to resolve conflict is, however, a frequent narrative device in films depicting the Middle Ages. At the end of *Ironclad*, Thomas Marshall and the leader of the Danish mercenaries engage in single combat. The defeat of the Danish captain is the final nail in the coffin for King John's siege. Likewise, as the battle for Camelot rages around them in *First Knight* (1995), Lancelot and Maleagant lock eyes and cross swords. It is only once Lancelot reclaims Excalibur that he defeats Maleagant and the scene cuts to the warlord's army fleeing the city after his demise. Ramsey's comments about the preferment of romance audiences to focus on the actions of the individual as opposed to the narrative of a battle as a whole can again be seen here.⁶⁵ Indeed, even in large battles the emphasis often remains on one or a few protagonists as opposed to the deeds of the numerous warriors surrounding them. For example, *Game of Thrones's* Jon

Snow remains the focal point of the climactic Battle of the Bastards around which all the action is centred until the arrival of an allied army (series 6, episode 9).

The similarities between medieval romance and modern visual media are thus clear to see. In addressing questions of accuracy and authenticity, this comparison is certainly an interesting one to make, and arguably more fruitful than a comparison to fight books. Unlike the fight books, which often fulfil a pragmatic function, combat in both romance and modern visual media are present primarily to entertain an audience.⁶⁶ It should be noted, however, that the overall function of romance was not solely to delight audiences: Catherine Nall, for example, has shown how Malory's rhetoric of war, particularly in relation to Arthur's conflict with Rome, can be read as an argument for expansionism.⁶⁷ Martha Driver suggests that to a modern audience, film 'provides immediacy and simultaneously appeals to the imagination, engaging the viewer in the past and involving him emotionally and imaginatively in the action on screen.'⁶⁸ To modern audiences, such combats do not have to look accurate, but rather only need to feel authentic.

Conclusion

Medieval arms and armour are often depicted and used in ways that bear little resemblance to what is depicted in fight books, or what can be learned today from wearing armour, as combatants weighed down by their harnesses hack and slash at each other using largely ineffectual strikes. This chapter has demonstrated, however, that the issue is not as black and white as it may first appear. Fight books are not the sole body of literature to which modern interpretations of historical technique can be compared; moreover, the fight books themselves offer only an imperfect record of these historical techniques. At the same time, scholars such as Kellet and Atkinson are not wrong to suggest that the physicality of combat representations in film is lacking. In this regard there is much room for improvement, as presenting combatants and their martial arts as barbaric can create a damaging portrayal of the Middle Ages.

Popular culture relating to the Middle Ages, however, is rarely designed to be an accurate reflection of the medieval past, but rather is meant to entertain. As such, it is more fitting to compare these modern interpretations to other historical materials that are also designed to entertain, such as romance. When this comparison is made far more similarities become apparent, especially in comparison to the exaggerated wounds and destruction of armour. Similar contexts for these conflicts can also be established given the popularity of the trope of single combat to determine the outcome of an engagement in both romance and film. Interacting with such forms of popular culture offers scholars the chance to critique and challenge modern interpretations of the Middle Ages, and also to reassess their own notions of accuracy and authenticity.

Notes

- 1 The author would like to offer his thanks to the kind improvements offered by the anonymous reviewer, Eric Burkart, Trevor Russell Smith and Karen Watts.

- 2 A similar typology of violences has been proposed in Eric Burkart, 'Zweikampfpraktiken zwischen sozialer Normierung, medialer Präsentation und wissenschaftlicher Einordnung', in *Agon und Distinktion: Soziale Räume des Zweikampfs zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, ed. Uwe Israel and Christian Jaser (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2016), 4–14.
- 3 The subject of accuracy and authenticity in popular presentations of medieval combat and warfare is one which has attracted increasing attention outside of academia. Key scholars of medieval military history such as Kelly DeVries have given interviews commenting on the historicity of warfare in the popular *Game of Thrones* series. Tom Barnes, "'Game of Thrones': We Talked to Historians and a Military Expert about Who Will Win the Iron Throne", *Mic*, 21 July 2017, <https://mic.com/articles/182474/game-of-thrones-we-talked-to-historians-and-a-military-expert-about-who-will-win-the-iron-throne>, accessed 9 September 2019.
- 4 Hannah Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270–1330* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.
- 5 Ken Mondschein, *Game of Thrones and the Medieval Art of War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 75–104.
- 6 P. J. C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 65.
- 7 A similar framework was recently adopted by Victoria Cooper, who explores attitudes to race and identity play in the game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). Victoria Elizabeth Cooper, 'Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in Skyrim', Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2016. While at first glance, it might seem that because video games are designed primarily to entertain consumers and thus depictions of medieval combat serve the same purposes, there are differences in the purposes of including it and representing it in different ways. In a video game the aim of the developers is not just to show the fight, add tension, and advance the narrative, but also to make the player feel as if they are the protagonist (or antagonist!) and as if they belong in that world. For this reason, developers have in recent years become more interested in attempting to use fight books and other sources in order to create a more 'realistic' interpretation of combat. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), a game set in fifteenth-century Bohemia, even released a documentary about the influence of fight books on their creation of the game: *Fechtbuch: The Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come* (2019).
- 8 For some approaches to the presentation of war in medieval artwork, see the following: Richard Abels, 'Cultural Representations of Warfare in the High Middle Ages: The Morgan Picture Bible', in *Crusading and Warfare in the Middle Ages: Realities and Representations. Essays in Honour of John France*, ed. Simon John and Nicholas Morton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 13–35; John R. Hale, *Artists and Warfare in the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Pamela Porter, *Medieval Warfare in Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2000).
- 9 Sydney Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 10 Daniel Jaquet, 'Combattre en armure à la fin du Moyen Âge et au début de la Renaissance d'après les livres du combat', unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Genève, 2013, 18–20.
- 11 For a recent study of duelling weapons in the fight books, see Ariella Elema, 'Tradition, Innovation, Re-enactment: Hans Talhoffer's Unusual Weapons', *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 7, no. 1 (2019): 3–25.

- 12 Jacob Henry Deacon, 'Prologues, Poetry, Prose and Portrayals: The Purposes of Fifteenth-Century Fight Books According to the Diplomatic Evidence', *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 4, no. 2 (2016): 69–90; Jeffrey L. Forgeng, 'Owning the Art: The German *Fechtbuch* Tradition', in *The Noble Art of the Sword: Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Tobias Capwell (London: Wallace Collection, 2012), 164–75; Jens Peter Kleinau, 'Visualised Motion: Iconography of Medieval and Renaissance Fencing Books', in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th–17th Centuries)*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst, and Timothy Dawson (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 88–116.
- 13 Rachel E. Kellett, "'... Vnnd schüß im vnder dem schwert den ort lang ein zû der brust': The Placement and Consequences of Sword-blows in Sigmund Ringeck's Fifteenth-Century Fencing Manual', in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 130.
- 14 Stephen Atkinson, "'They . . . toke their shyldys before them and drew oute their swerdys . . .': Inflicting and Healing Wounds in Malory's *Morte Darthur*', in *Wounds and Wound Repair*, 529.
- 15 Teresa Ende and Jürgen Müller, 'En Garde! Duelldarstellungen in der bildenden Kunst und im Film', in *Das Duell. Ehrenkämpfe vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne*, ed. Ulrike Ludwig, Barbara Krug-Richter, and Gerd Schwerhoff (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 325–47.
- 16 Nickolas A Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale*', *Studies in Medievalism XII: Film and Fiction, Reviewing the Middle Ages*, ed. Tom Shippey (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 5.
- 17 Egerton Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence, from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Bell, 1885), 5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 20 Daniel Jaquet and Vincent Deluz, 'Moving in Late Medieval Harness: Exploration of a Lost Embodied Knowledge', *Journal of Embodied Research* 1, no. 1 (2018). Available online: <https://jer.openlibhums.org/article/10.16995/jer.7/>, accessed 18 October 19.
- 21 *The Chivalric Biography of Boucicaut, Jean II Le Meingre*, trans. Craig Taylor and Jane H. M. Taylor (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016), 31.
- 22 Such weapons would not become widespread until over a century later.
- 23 Kleinau, 'Visualised Motion', 111–13.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 25 This is of course done for reasons of safety. It would be unreasonable to expect actors to put themselves at unnecessary risk.
- 26 Hans Talhoffer, 1459, Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliothek, MS Thott.290.2°, fol. 2^v.
- 27 Eric Burkart, 'Limits of Understanding in the Study of Lost Martial Arts: Epistemological Reflections on the Mediality of Historical Records of Technique and the Status of Modern (Re-)Constructions', *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 4, no. 2 (2016): 24.
- 28 Burkart, 'Limits of Understanding', 11–21; For Spatz's discussion of technique and practice, see Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London: Routledge, 2015), 40–41.
- 29 The first of these is Leeds, Royal Armouries, MS FECHT 1, often dated to the turn of the fourteenth century. The second is Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Cod. Hs. 3227a, the dating of which has proven more problematic. For the dating

- of the latter 3227a, see Eric Burkart, 'The Autograph of an Erudite Martial Artist: A Close Reading of Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a', in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, 451.
- 30 Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, 7.
- 31 For an overview of the evolution of arms and armour in the Middle Ages, see Kelly DeVries and Robert Douglas Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*, 2nd edn (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2012).
- 32 Fiore dei Liberi, *Il Fior di Battaglia*, fol. 1^v.
- 33 Filippo Vadi, *Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi: 15th-Century Swordsmanship of Master Filippo Vadi*, trans. Luca Porzio and Gregory Mele (Union City, CA: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2003), 33–4.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Forgeng, 'Owning the Art', 171.
- 36 Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, 18–19.
- 37 Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon, 2004), 106.
- 38 Joanna Bellis and Megan G. Leitch, 'Chivalric Literature', in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2019), 251.
- 39 Ibid., 252.
- 40 Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 923–24.
- 41 For the social importance attached to armour, see Shelagh Mitchell, 'The Armour of Sir Robert Salle: An Indication of Social Status?', in *Fourteenth-Century England VIII*, ed. J. S. Hamilton (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014), 83–94.
- 42 Similar conclusions have been reached by Richard Abels. In his work on depictions of warfare in the Morgan Picture Bible, Abels highlights that despite the improvements to armour in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which are carefully recorded in the illustrations, none of it offers any protection from the weapons wielded by warriors shown in the manuscript. Abels, 'Cultural Representations of Warfare in the High Middle Ages', 23.
- 43 Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 173.
- 44 Atkinson, 'They . . . toke their shyldys before them and drew oute their swerdys', 529.
- 45 Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 231; Ibid., 72.
- 46 R. W. Maslen, 'Armour That Doesn't Work: An Anti-meme in Medieval and Renaissance Romance', in *Medieval into Renaissance: Essays for Helen Cooper*, ed. Andy King and Matthew Woodcock (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 35–54.
- 47 Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 45.
- 48 Atkinson, 'They ... toke their shyldys before them and drew oute their swerdys', 543.
- 49 Abels, 'Cultural Representation of Warfare in the Middle Ages', 30.
- 50 Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 353.
- 51 London, British Library, MS Harley 3542, fols 82^v–85^v; London, British Library, MS Additional 39564. For an introduction to the terminology, see James Hester, 'The Terminology of Medieval English Fight Texts: A Brief Overview', in *'Can these Bones Come to Life?': Insights from Reconstruction, Reenactment, and Re-creation, Volume 1: Historical European Martial Arts*, ed. Ken Mondschein (Wheaton, IL: Freelance Academy Press, 2014), 70–9. As indicated by Hester's title, this chapter is only a brief introduction to the issue of terminology in these sources, and several important terms are left untreated.

- 52 This approach has recently been adopted by Brian Price, 'Yron & Steele: Chivalric Ethos, Martial Pedagogy, Equipment, and Combat Technique in the Early Fourteenth-Century Middle English Version of *Guy of Warwick*', *Journal of Medieval Military History* 16 (2018): 159–88.
- 53 For the origins of trial by battle, see Ariella Elema, 'Trial by Battle in France and England', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2012, 23–56.
- 54 Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in 'Le Morte Darthur'* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), 32, 48.
- 55 *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, ed. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), 212–13.
- 56 Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, 52.
- 57 Michele Poellinger, 'Violence in Later Middle English Arthurian Romance', Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2013, 16.
- 58 Matthew Strickland, 'Provoking or Avoiding Battle? Challenge, Judicial Duel, and Single Combat in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Warfare', in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France. Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Stamford: Watkins, 1988), 317–43.
- 59 Geoffrey le Baker, *Chronicle*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), 46.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., 126.
- 62 Robert W. Jones, *Bloodied Banners: Martial Display on the Medieval Battlefield* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 19.
- 63 Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 224.
- 64 *Chronicon de Lanercost, MCCI–MCCCXLVI*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1839), 286; *Gesta Henrici Quinti: The Deeds of Henry the Fifth*, ed. and trans. Frank Taylor and John S. Roskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 57–8.
- 65 Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, 52.
- 66 Burkart, 'Autograph of an Erudite Martial Artist', 455.
- 67 Catherine Nall, *Reading and War in Fifteenth-Century England, from Lydgate to Malory* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2012), 139–58.
- 68 Martha W. Driver, 'Historicity and Authenticity in Medieval Film', in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 19.