

Persona II

Returning from the *Pilgrimage*

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January, 1994

NOTE: this essay started life as a 1-hour Persona Workshop given in Cynnabar. It lived with the history of my own long essay *Persona Pilgrimage*, then about 8 years old and read by more than a few people in my area. Its burden was that if you wanted the Medieval in the SCA, you'd best bring it with you. It certainly provided a few recipes, but it was heavy with what the SCA could not, would not, never will provide.

This essay is more of a conversation; there is an interaction. It was written after the workshop was given, and benefits from that fact.

We needed a fresh start. Something more positive. Having mulled it over for eight *more* years, I wrote these words on the blackboard:

PERSONA INTIMACY FUN INDULGENCE
ROMANCE

After nearly 20 years in the SCA, having tried virtually every activity the SCA has to offer, and some it doesn't ---from embroidery to combat, soldiering to stonemasonry, publishing to politics, fencing to far-being, armorial display to amorous display ---I recently crashed on the rocks of either the most difficult – or the most easy – of all of them: persona play.

I thought I was a bit of an expert. I studied it from every angle, I discussed it with some of the recognized SCA experts, like Duke Cariodoc, and even wrote a 20-page diatribe about it. (pointing to a copy of *Persona Pilgrimage*) But wait. Don't throw away *Persona Pilgrimage* just yet. The useful stuff in there is not really connected to what we're talking about here.

The reason I "crashed" is simply that several people I respect highly, and whose contribution to the SCA is beyond estimate, simply don't do persona, have no use for persona playing as I have come to know it.

Guichart de Chadenac, who has a degree in metalwork, is an excellent armourer, researcher, and one of the most period-knowledgeable people I know, stays away from persona play because he doesn't want to spend time in meaningless, artificial conversations.

Dr. Geoffrey Singman, Ph.D, (now Forgeng) an editor of the Middle English Dictionary who does role re-creation with the Southwark Trayn'd Band, says he doesn't want to struggle with the obvious anachronisms involved when SCA people from different periods try to work around their different time origins.

Ms. Aureliane Rioghail, whose major was theatre and who was founding baroness, values the arts and crafts and genuine heraldry we can do and enjoy with our friends, but doesn't find persona play interesting.

When these people demonstrate is that great knowledge of period information or even theatre does not bring you closer to persona. It may have moved these people *away* from it. But they are not alone. When you arrive at an event, you find that not everyone is in persona, and it's hard to know who is.

Persona and Events

In the SCA's earlier days, I believe there was a broad assumption about persona play: that everybody did it and everybody was expected to do it. Persona play was the whole reason to have medieval events in costume, and at first, they were the only events we had.

Because our concept of medieval behavior was little, if anything above Errol Flynn's Robin Hood, we were not that picky about what constituted being in persona. "Forsooth speech" was considered the thing to do. And because we had no "universities" or symposia, we had no need to distinguish between a "medieval" event and a modern one. *All* SCA events were considered as medieval as any other (that is to say, not very).

As the SCA has developed, more and more members are able to look very medieval. And as we've added modern classroom activities to our event concept, we've also added confusion about when to be in persona. Since it is clear that many SCA event situations don't call for persona, more and more people are spending less and less time in persona, even at clearly "medieval" events.

The basic assumptions that everyone else is in persona,, and that that is what events are all about, has disintegrated. But these days, you can't assume either one. A perfectly medieval-looking person, wearing a Laurel medallion, may have zero interest in persona.

Officially, the SCA has not yet recognized that persona exists as an optional activity like tourneying or dancing. As a result, no one has defined levels of persona play or types of event relative to persona. Nor does the SCA event itself provide a clear signal when and where persona play is either expected or not desirable. In this --deciding to be in persona, and knowing when and with whom it is appropriate to interact -- you are on your own.

It is probably time for people who want to do persona play to agree on a symbol of that interest, one that can be displayed on one's costume to signal to others "persona on board." Event organizers could take the hint, too, and designate areas where persona is encouraged or at least where non-period intrusions are discouraged.

Persona dead ends

There are usually three tunnels people dig, so to speak, in search of the magic of persona play. While it is possible to enjoy some aspects of persona by following any of them, I believe that two of these tunnels are blocked off somewhat below the treasure-room.

The first of these is fantasy. Often, it's based on period-drama movies. We all learn our first language by hearing it; only later do we learn about structure. I believe the same is true of historical fantasy. To this day I get a tremendous kick out of repeating particularly pithy lines from movies like *The Lion In Winter* or *Robin Hood* (the authorized Errol Flynn version, please). There is no harm in this or other fantasy-based behaviors, if you can ignore the cold responses of those digging in the third tunnel. We'll come back to them later.

In the second tunnel are those who are striving to reach it by way of theatrical means. I'll never forget my college production of *Twelfth Night*, with elegant sets and costumes. When the final curtain closed off the audience from us and we turned inward to each other, my thought was "please, let this magic never cease!" The SCA has seldom provided as powerful a persona magic as that soaking in Shakespeare.

I'm not saying that you cannot have great fun with a theatrical persona. The hazard is that if you don't do it well enough, you end up with dry performance with no magic; meaningless, constructed conversations and interactions. The play-acting may be adequate to avoid creating a modern atmosphere, but the mere avoidance does not amount to a good time. The costume you put on your body, and the language-costume you put on your words and manners are not wasted, but they are not the game, the pleasure, the thrill, or even the pathway to it.

If you do it really well, you'll no doubt be injecting Shakespearean phrases into your conversation as the moviegoer uses *Lion In Winter* phrases (which of course are entirely modern and sometimes anachronistic). So far, I have met very few who do it well.

If you don't do it well, all you get is a costumed cocktail party conversation. Thrilling.

The third tunnel is that of historical research. While it can contribute immensely to persona play, and is eminently worth while on its own, it leads away from, not towards, the persona play treasure room itself. It may be that a sizeable segment of the SCA is in this tunnel, and others, like Geoffrey Singman, have come out the other end. That other end is not even in the SCA as we know it.

Although that tunnel passes very close by the treasure room, it is extremely difficult to dig through the intervening rock. Because the more you learn about any SCA period, the more critical of everyone's re-creative attempts you become, and the harder it is to suspend your disbelief and to engage the mechanisms we shall speak of later.

The rock in your way is called Self-consciousness, and the more you learn about history, the more self-conscious your attempts to play at it. This is a narrow drainpipe indeed to crawl into if you're trying to reach the holy grail of FUN in Persona.

The essence of fantasy

Believe it or not, the first road may turn out to be the best for many of us. Fantasy is a concept that seems to be attached to persona play. Can it help you? Only if you choose

the right version. Fantasy 1.1 is only a piece of imaginative meandering, too vague to be useful. Fantasy 2.9, however, is you, being somewhat magnificent in the setting of your choice. Good start. Being magnificent can be just sitting there in this wonderful place, in the costume of someone whose place you'd like to take --on a good day. Or it can be the 4.2 version, having the adventures and activities of that person, complete with conquests (of whatever variety you choose), witty "zingers" delivered with perfect timing, and the approbation of all you meet.

So far, so good. It's fun to be what you want to be, do what you want to do. But many of the fun things don't work if you're the only one involved. So you gather up some other people: the SCA. Trouble is, each of those other people has a movie script too, and guess who gets top billing in those other movies? Not you. So how do you do the things you want to do?

Well, you can engage in any of the activities the SCA lets you, but as far as winning and being successful in your activities, that's up to you. So, there's a compromise in the fantasy. In the SCA, you may not always conquer, and your zingers may not always earn applause. But there are factors you can control which bring your experience a bit closer to that 4.2 level. To discuss these, let's come at it from the direction of the SCA's culture.

The SCA's special characteristics

The SCA may not be a convincing middle-ages movie set. It will not provide the visual cues to set a realistic environment for your fantasy.

But when it comes to persona play, the SCA's emotional environment is actually more important than the visual one. This special environment supports interactions between people the way a playing field supports athletes, or an operating system supports programs. It supports them by way of shared understandings that amount to an approval or permission system.

The SCA --the society itself, the people-- has a clear-cut traditional preference for honesty, courtesy, and a set of moral codes that accept certain types of activity and reject others. So if you want to play at being honest, courageous, courteous, flamboyant --well, you came to the right place.

Wait a minute. Who's talking about playing? these are real qualities, qualities that may be exaggerated but not false.

Very good. You're getting the idea. There's more. The SCA's support process works the same way as several other . . .special situations.

For instance, how many of you have ever experienced opera? That is, not simply heard the music and seen the sets, but felt the emotion expressed by the singers? An emotion exaggerated, perhaps, but not false? Emotions rendered as peak experiences? Ah. I see a few of you have. And when the tenor sang so tragically as to rip the heart from the bosom, did you laugh? No. No one did. Because opera is a special situation that permits and accepts, nay, approves fantasy being played out to the limit and beyond. (Or is it actually real-life experience, but amplified?)

Another example, a little different perhaps. How many of you have ever experienced a nude beach? Not so many, I see. Did you notice how embarrassed you were until you, too, were dressed the same as everyone else? Again, a special situation created between people, where unusual conditions are created that might provoke laughter elsewhere but not here, where everyone indulges everyone else's whim to be different for a time.

Another example of a special situation between humans is sexual intimacy. No, I'm not going to ask. . . The point is that all three of these special situations, created by people between themselves, have a couple of important things in common with the SCA persona-play situation: an approving environment for specific types of behavior.

Childhood itself is such a special situation, understood by children and some adults. Children who are close friends or relatives accept each other's silliness without question during play. In the process, they learn the social processes of constructing and destroying support systems for each other.

Cutting through the hard rock of embarrassment

Most of us have grafted a penalty onto our behaviors and responses; a stressful discomfort called embarrassment that *in everyday society* prevents us from singing our hearts' feelings, taking off our clothes, playing like children, having sex in public, or dressing up in funny clothes. That embarrassment is an artifact of everyday society. Sub-societies like the SCA (or a nudist colony) have unwritten social contracts that, when fully understood and accepted by the individual, cancels the embarrassment reflex normally felt when wearing odd costumes or acting out fantasies.

There are several points common to all of these social contracts:

The first point is INDULGENCE. Within each of these special situations, all the participants indulge each other, forgive errors or imperfections of person or performance for the sake of something more important. In each of these situations, we agree not to laugh at each other's romantic susceptibility, one's silliness, one's nakedness, one's vulnerability.

The second point is INTIMACY. In these special situations, we permit ourselves to reveal parts of ourselves that are normally kept private, again for the sake of something that is, at least for the moment, more important. (But just because we feel free to reveal doesn't mean anyone is obliged to look, or respond.)

Intimacy allows you to be cute, silly, outrageous, loving, affectionate, outspoken, even courageous in ways you would never do at the office. BUT intimacy can grant permission to be honest in ways you wouldn't be at the office either. Mature persons do not expect their lovers to conceal from them concerned, critical thoughts. Rule of thumb: if the degree of honesty you're using doesn't work for sex, it probably doesn't work for persona.

These two things, indulgence and intimacy, are very important, if not absolutely essential, catalysts that allow fantasy to take place, not only in one person's mind, but among groups of people.

In the presence of these two catalysts, the third major ingredient can come to life: PLAY. Play is action, interaction, give-and-take; process with result, like mock combat;

process within a program, like dancing; process with a script; like court. But play is also for fun, optional, not work, not required for ordinary life. (Winning and losing can be involved in play, but they are not the point of it. If you cannot play without needing to win, you are actually at work to accomplish something that is distracting you from play.)

Putting it all together

With all these elements -- Fantasy, Indulgence, Intimacy, and Play, we can make the specific magic we are after: SCA persona play. To do that, we take those elements into the specific SCA setting, which provides some programming, some limits, but one thing it does not limit is your essential character.

What the SCA provides is a time and space --an SCA event -- complete with indulgence for all our faults, foibles and fantasies, complete permission for intimacy, and full encouragement of play. What you bring is yourself, costumed more or less appropriately, emotionally ready for play, and possibly even equipped with a medieval persona, but *not necessarily*.

As suggested earlier, a detailed medieval persona is mostly unnecessary and can even get in the way of play. Forcing yourself to “be authentic” can ruin the fantasy. I suggest developing the authentic medieval part of your persona in the background while you exercise your fantasy life on the surface at events. It can take years, but no matter. Reveal bits and pieces of your medieval persona lore, references to items in your character’s life, only when they are so familiar to you that they come out naturally. Don’t rush it. There’s no deadline. ENJOY it.

The SCA provides something else, too. As mentioned earlier, the SCA has developed traditions of respect for honor, chivalry, and courtesy such that, at an SCA event, it is virtually impossible to display enough honor, courtesy, flowery speech and generous actions to provoke derision or disdain. There is also an ample amount of room given to the playful expression of “medieval” emotions: masculine, brotherly affection, mock-violent defense of the weak, and romantic love and affection displayed in a wide variety of exaggerated manners.

These traditions create “spaces” in which your fantasies can come to life and run rampant.

Being real

The SCA also values genuine-ness and sincerity in its participants. Intimacy and indulgence do not imply dishonesty or concealment of the truth. Intimacy allows honest interchange, even criticism, but only with good intent. Indulgence means we allow others their fantasy while encouraging their honesty. You are expected to be, at core, yourself. Thus, persona is in no way expected to be fakery and play-acting; At its best, it is your real personality amplified in the direction you prefer, and no doubt flavored in the direction of your favorite medieval romantic settings and characters. Even that is your personality coming through.

Do not, for instance, use acting skills to seduce someone you do not actually wish involvement with. If you do not really value honor, courtesy, and romance, perhaps the SCA is not the right place for you.

Bigger than life

Truthfulness of basic information does not preclude exaggeration of manner. While fantasy life does not have to be fiction, it does allow you to be a trifle bigger, stronger, freer in action and expression than modern life would allow.

In many ways, you can actually discover that, in persona at an SCA event, you are more the person you want to be than you allow yourself in modern life.

Margarete, from the back of the room: That's definitely true in my case. What I am finding, over the years, is that my real-life persona is getting closer to my SCA persona - and that's an improvement!

For this reason, many SCA members consider their SCA participation the best thing they can do for their mental health.

With all of that said, then, we can make a few key points about persona play:

1. It is play and therefore optional. If it becomes too work or goal oriented, it will not be enjoyable.
2. It is play, but IT IS NOT A GAME. Do not do it to win. Do it in order to enjoy.
3. Persona Play is REAL. It is intimate; we would never speak to people at the office this way.
4. Persona play is not a smaller, more limited version of life. IT IS A BIGGER, MORE ROMANTIC version of your real life.

From all that, we can offer some advice about doing persona play based on this fantasy-priority model:

1. Make a point of enjoying yourself. Pick a persona you can enjoy right away, regardless of the event. Remember that persona is over 80% personality and only 10% period clothing and 10% period-specific socialization.
2. Make a point of enjoying your appearance. Be proud of what you wear; wear only what you will enjoy.
3. Make a point of enjoying your accessories. I have a goblet --you've probably seen it-- that is a delight to the eye although probably not correct for my persona. Simply having it near me is a delight, and I keep it constantly available. It delights others too.
4. Make a point of enjoying the things you really know. Avoid the embarrassment of speaking of things of which you are relatively ignorant. A quiet personality is no less a personality than a vociferous one. And a quiet person, no matter what he knows, is always more respected than one who speaks much but knows little.

From the audience: How do you deal with personae from different periods?

You may notice that the emphasis is on your personality, which as far as anyone can possibly tell does not vary so much from century to century. A large part of your personality will have to do with your social class and which sex you are more than which century. The parts of your personality that would be most affected by your

specific time period would be catastrophic, society-wide events like the Black Death if it happens to be going on in your persona's formative years.

Naturally, culture differences existed then as now, but these are again larger than century differences.

What about persona play based on historical, medieval role-playing?

It is fairly certain that the very best of us fall seriously short when we try to re-create even the easiest persona for modern Americans: late Elizabethan English personae. This is the period selected by the Southwark Trayn'd Bands. Even given the advantages that they spoke English (more or less), that we have surviving clothing and artifacts in abundance from the period, even conversational primers, we have a difficult time recreating the daily outlook and emotional expectations of such people. People whose marriages were arranged for financial advantage, who lived on very familiar terms with horses and other animals, who used less than a quarter of the hygiene we can't get along without, and whose personal habits we would regard as somewhere between uncouth and filthy.

The vast majority of SCA folk are urban, very few with experience of any sort of rural life. But the vast majority of the people who lived in the SCA's period span were rural. Urban attitudes could only have been held by a tiny minority of the population, and most of those developed in the last century of our periods. Southwark, of course, is a rural area.

Feudal nobles could, in the second half-millennium of the SCA's period, have some notion of urban life, but still spent the vast majority of their time on rural manors or in camp conditions.

I suppose that in a long-term camping event, you could begin to approach some of the conditions of pre-1600 life (if your neighbors allowed it), and this is where the Southwark Trayn'd Bands put their energy at Pennsic. But to begin to create the whole picture, you would need to create an entire Elizabethan farmstead or village and live in it. But at a typical upper-midwestern indoor event, you are in costume for only a matter of hours in a rather modern building. Such innocent items as bloodied swords, throwing acquaintances into a midden, or urinating in a pot in the corner of the hall would not be approved, I fear. Serious realism is a little out of reach.

I do not wish to discourage this area of persona research and development, but as I said, there is no rush to get it on stage immediately. The rest of us will be perfectly happy interacting with your fantasy persona (as described above) almost forever.

Combining the fantasy-priority approach with historical research

Most of us, rather than push for feeling a real sense of what it was like to live in medieval conditions, advance our non-fantasy persona work first along the lines of costuming and accessories to delight the eye of others. Then we work on learning SCA or period manners, SCA or period games (like combat and fencing) and period crafts, so we can make more artifacts or enjoy dancing, music and the other arts and activities.

If you add these items of realism and information to an established personality-having-fun persona base, you will save having to change your whole approach two or

three times during your SCA adventure. At least, that's the theory. I've changed approaches enough.

Much more information and advice on these nuts-and-bolts add-ons to persona development is available elsewhere, particularly in *The Elizabethan Handbook*, edited by Jeffrey Singman, my *Persona Pilgrimage* and *Cariodoc and Elizabeth's Miscellany*.

Event organizers could make things easier for persona players by stating in the event advertising materials what level of persona is desired, and putting up signs at the event to indicate more persona-intense areas of event sites.