

# A Persona Pilgrimage

## A Personal View by David S. Hoornstra (known in the Society for Creative Anachronism<sup>1</sup> as Baron Daibhid “Ruadh” MacLachlan)

Have you ever had the experience, six hours into an SCA event, of suddenly realizing you haven't been in persona at all this day? Looking back, you can't quite recall what happened to your intention to be in persona, but somehow it just hasn't happened the way you visualized it.

Don't feel alone. This happens to most of us, possibly more often than we'd care to admit. In fact, once I started asking around about this, it seemed that most of my friends spend almost no time in persona.

When I set out to discover why this should be so, especially in an organization which you might expect to live in persona, I found more forces working against period persona play than for it. Taken together, these forces can seem staggering. Some of them work so subtly that we're out of persona before we quite realize it, while others wall us off from areas we "aren't supposed to" play in. The result in total is that "being in persona" is perhaps the most difficult of all SCA activities.

### **Persona and the SCA**

There's no rule requiring you to be in persona at SCA events, and many SCA members do not care to "play" persona roles. In spite of this, persona is still the major defining feature of the SCA. There are plenty of history groups, re-enactment groups, theatre groups, music, dance, and craft groups that duplicate most, if not all, of the activities found in the SCA. It is the inter-active persona that sets the SCA and its spin-offs apart.

Events in persona are the central activity around which all of the SCA's rules, administrative structure, and traditions are built. The rule that events are to be attended in costume strongly implies persona. Most events include activities designed to be done in persona, like combat and quests, feasts and dancing.

The process for registering your SCA name and armorial device is designed to help in persona development. We could do heraldry much more easily without inventing our own system. The rules of the lists too are designed for use by fighters in personae. Noble titles and ranks are also pointless without a persona-playing society, although some service clubs find it useful to have Grand Masters and the like.

Whatever the function of a title in other groups may be, in the SCA it is both recognition and a valuable assist to the development of a persona.

This little jaunt though the world of the SCA persona is intended to fill in the gaps left when the SCA backed away from making clear rules for playing its primary game: being in persona at SCA events. The filling I provide is my own interpretation of the basic intent of the SCA --not merely of its founders or of its Board of Directors, but of its history, its traditions, and the direction in which these all point.

### **Persona and the individual**

Some people get a real kick out of acting out a fantasy, playing at being somebody they might have been. Having one's fantasy world populated, with living beings who more or less fit the fantasy, is a real plus. So you join a group and enter into a loose social contract that says, roughly, "I'll play a bit part in your soap opera if you play a supporting role in mine." Whatever our role in the great schema, we are the central character in our personal drama. So is everyone else from their point of view. No problem.

The problems arise when we become dissatisfied with our own or other cast members' performance. Our fantasy is undermined by modern tennis shoes in the list field, modern music or fluorescent lights at the revel, or modern rudeness in a situation that calls for chivalry. When a member seems to disregard what we think of as the rules of the social contract, we feel ill-used and tend to blame other members.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a publication of the Society for Creative Anachronism, Inc., nor does it officially delineate that corporation's policies. Any further disclaimer would suggest that it was an SCA publication. As a commentary, however, it does indeed hope to achieve accuracy.

The real fact is that we are ill served by the organization, which lives or dies by this social contract but has never dared to spell it out. It is up to us to get this worked out, and this essay is my contribution to the process.

Let us begin with a look at how persona development and play benefits individuals.

**Persona is play.** The process of developing my persona continues to stimulate me, and focus my energy on projects I never would have approached otherwise. It is no longer merely a costuming project, it is a personality development project. Had I not wanted armor appropriate to my persona, I would never have found myself so deeply inspired by the artistry of the armour of my period, nor tried to make it myself.

In developing an alternate self, a “me-that-might-have-been,” one can separate the fine elements of one’s personality from the modern-world forces that shape the modern life we’re in. We discover that personality transcends time and culture; we are the same basic person in no matter what period costume. Having discovered that, we go on to find that we can choose the elements of our personality we wish to encourage, and be what we wish to be --not, perhaps, a prince of the SCA but, perhaps, a princely personality.

Having worked through the process of choosing the kind of person we want to be, and *being it*, we sometimes find that we can transfer that person into the modern world.

Don’t think for a moment that I would sell this process to the self-improvement people. It only works because it is done for its play value, not for some modern-world reward. The bottom line of persona is that it is purely, simply, play. No matter how much effort you expend on play, it only becomes work when you do it for some purpose beyond its own self. Does the potential for genuine accomplishment imply that it is actually work? No. A victory in the lists is an accomplishment, but it is also pure play.

### **Persona as work.**

It seems to be a social fact of life that most people are more strongly influenced by social pressure than by formal rules and laws. Consequently, most of us respond to the unwritten rules of the SCA more than to the written ones. There’s no rule that says you are supposed to be in persona, but even people who don’t particularly enjoy it do it anyway *because they think most people expect it*.

Many persons believe that the educational value of the SCA is enhanced by the “medieval milieu.” Others believe that authentic re-creation is an essential goal the society should pursue. Some believe that leadership is best done by example. All these beliefs can lead to persona play as a way to serve the society’s goals while having fun and learning more about the middle ages.

Some members believe a sustainable fantasy requires consistent persona effort by everybody for sustained periods. So, such people work on being in persona – even when it isn’t fun. This is not play, but work. Good intentions, bad idea.

Work can indeed contribute to a play process, as in whitewashing the fence in Tom Sawyer. But play done as work isn’t play, but work in disguise. There is a simple test. Which is bigger: the “want to” or the “ought to?”

My advice for anyone who is doing persona because they think they should, is: don’t. Even if I told you to in my misguided youth.

Doing persona because you think you should is about as useful as having sex because you think you should. If you’re not in the mood, you are not only wasting your own time and effort; you are undermining the game for everyone else.

When I first joined, being in persona seemed no great effort, in spite of the fact that I didn’t know that much about the Middle Ages. It was so much fun I felt really on top of the world. Those rollicking great times in persona happened because others around me were heartily “in character.” It worked also because we didn’t take our performances seriously.

But as we became more knowledgeable, we got self-conscious. An Errol Flynn persona character was no longer good enough. Like probably 90% of SCA people who are still here past their fourth year, I fell back to my “SCA role” and sent my crude medieval persona backstage to work on . . . everything.

Many years have passed since then, and my “16th-century Scot” persona still isn’t ready to debut in the SCA. My critical knowledge has expanded faster than my ability to be medieval. But even if I could perform my persona to my own satisfaction, forces in the SCA have pushed aside “persona play” for many others too. This little ramble must therefore include some tilting at the windmill of those forces.

The only viable spear for this in the SCA is consensus-building. That is how social contracts are built and broken ones mended.

To those who are able to play happily without noticing the inconsistencies and anti-persona forces in the SCA, I say “stop reading here. Go back and continue to add life to the SCA with your play. Only when it palls, or you become too aware of rips in the medieval fabric, should you return to this path.”

In my personal pilgrimage through these difficulties, I have learned from many persons, most of them more learned than I in these matters. Some of their contributions are embedded in what follows. Their names are given at the end.

## 1. Differing Concepts of Persona

Most people seem to agree that a *persona* is an individual's invented medieval counterpart; a construct which includes at least a name, a nationality, and a time period. Beyond these simple items, people have widely varying concepts as to what the persona is and how it works.

### The “Generic SCA Persona” (the “non-persona”)

Having told newcomers to develop a medieval persona, we proceed to teach them, by word and example, precisely the opposite. We use standard SCA forms of address (Milord, Milady, etc.), bow to each other and observe courtesies that may or may not be correct for our medieval personae. These manners, for some, are a starting point for a persona, but in fact they're no different from the manners we put on to cope with the workplace or dinners at strangers' homes.

This is no great departure from modern reality, but we deceive ourselves that it is. For this reason, many people's effort at persona stops right there. Others are distracted by SCA Roles, which offer immediate rewards and require little or no training. I have seen individuals suddenly abandon all persona work, except the part that relates to costume, to focus on achieving SCA ranks that have no medieval counterpart.

Others abandon persona play in the belief that they can better serve the Society through official or political action (e.g. becoming seneschal or some such).

### Theatrical Fantasy Re-creation Persona

Those who enter the SCA with some theatre experience often bring theatre perspective to the persona process. For them, the persona and costume are all part of a quasi-theatrical role-playing game, with the SCA “Known World” as its setting. One's persona seeks medieval adventures in the “Current Middle Ages” where royalty anchors the cast and drives the larger plot lines.

Here, “being in persona” is often thought of as improvisational acting, with one's persona story and the current goings-on in the kingdom as an inter-active scenario within which one “ad libs.” But most of the work in this isn't really acting at all. It's merely translating one's normal reactions into those that seem right for one's persona, including bits of appropriate language. The result is performance, but not always acting.<sup>1</sup>

What *is* being performed is another level of manners, better researched and laid on thicker and in more detail.

### The persona and “total-immersion” re-creation

Some people really get serious. They strive to become, in so far as possible, the persona they are researching. They are very concerned about looking or sounding medieval, but **feeling** medieval is the real goal. They research details painstakingly and make costumes and accessories accordingly. They strive to emulate the philosophy of a person of their time and place. They camp a lot and seek ever the magic moment when it all seems real.

They have limitations. The more realistic they try to make their immediate environment, the fewer the friends that can enter their circle.

For me, acting in theatre and in the SCA always involved a bit of “losing oneself” in the role and in the spirit of the period. In theatre, the only way into that magic space is

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<sup>1</sup>Acting involves taking on some other character's, manners, dialogue, and responses. We don't really do it very often, but we borrow the term for our persona play process. Acting, as opposed to persona play, has pitfalls. People don't love actors. They feel distant from them while they're “on.” You might react to a “Ren Faire” character, but you seldom warm up to them as people. Some people insist on acting roles in the SCA, and try to impose their “script” on events. For others, this creates more disruption than adventure. Too, when you take on acting, you bring out the “theatre critic” in the people around you. Let's not be too surprised if many people shy away from this kind of exposure.

knowing your lines so well you can forget they're scripted.

This "serious magic-moment quest" has become a part of my persona play (when I really do it) that deeply affects my attitude towards the entire SCA.

### **The persona as a time/place menu.**

Some SCA members feel that persona *acting* is irrelevant. For them, the choice of a specific medieval time and place is made only to create a walking clothes-tree on which to hang one's costumes and accessories. Their interest in the SCA is related to holding offices, researching history, and making and discussing artifacts, as well as enjoying the company of others with similar interests. Their persona story exists merely to account for the variety of costumes they wear.

To these individuals, "acting medieval" is a bit silly or uncomfortable. Some point out that our event environments are hopelessly modern, and even if they were terrific, our events are too anachronistic for suspension of disbelief.

These people, while not concerned about acting out a persona, do wear costuming and use "Standard-SCA" courtesies. Thus you may not notice them until you look for in-persona reactions and period conversation. By not playing persona, they undermine the game for those deceived into thinking they *are* playing. That isn't their fault; they have every right not to play, and no obligation to help those who do.

It is the responsibility of those who do want to play to find a way to tell the players from the innocent bystanders. My own suggestion is wearing a pilgrim's shell with the letter P (for Persona) inscribed on it.

**Dropping out of the persona pursuit.** People with all the inclination in the world, and well-equipped to play persona, often drop out of the game. I believe one of the primary reasons is lack of a *sense* of interest and cooperation from others. When we hear someone speaking "modern," we either avoid the person or put persona on hold. In the latter case, we almost never get back in persona. It can be discouraging. But if there were less of this distraction, I think most of us would go at it more whole-heartedly.

### **The Written Persona Story**

The persona story, for those who create one, is one's medieval character's life history up to the point where he or she was somehow transported to "these Current Middle Ages." Its purpose often seems to be to rationalize the vast array of interests, experiences and skills some people feel a need to show off at SCA events.

For the person interested in developing a medieval persona, this type of story is a waste of time and energy. The only possible value here is where a group publishes profiles of its members so that everyone can get to know everyone else's medieval person. For that, how you got "here" is not only irrelevant; it undermines the "medievalness" of your actual persona.

What is really needed for your local Domesday Boke is not an adventure story but the kind of facts that really come up in conversation. Consider:

In the middle ages, just **who** would have known anything at all about you? **What** should a total stranger or passing acquaintance know about you? **How** would people in your period get to know anything about you? (Word of mouth, belike.)

Consider writing your persona story based on what a stanger in your area could find out about you by asking questions over ale at the local inn. Or it might be the answer to a question: "Oh c'm on now, lads: what's 'e *really* like?" What would your gossiping acquaintances say about you in a mood of fairness?

One way to get at such material might be having an acquaintance interview you and then write down what he can remember an hour later.

## **2. SCA Rules and Traditions**

The rules governing persona are few. All but two of them say only what you *must not* do. What's most important to recognize early is that while the SCA may have a medieval flavor to it, there's no rule or "mission statement" that says it has to try to be medieval in any way.

What *are* the rules and traditions?

**SCA rules** *that pertain to persona (paraphrased from various parts of Corpora and Governing and Policy Decisions, and the rules of SCA Heraldry for the registry of names):*

1. To attend an SCA costume event, you must wear *an attempt at* pre-seventeenth-century

costume (even a complete failure is acceptable). (Corpora)

2. A name used at SCA events must not:
  - a. be the same as any that are protected by the SCA (Heralds)
  - b. be the same as any prominent person of history or fiction (Heralds)
  - c. suggest rank or honors temporal or spiritual (Corpora)
3. To be registered (reserved for your exclusive use) in the SCA (not required), a name must qualify as above, plus:
  - a. be provably from the SCA's period (Heralds)
  - b. be provably from culture(s) in contact with pre-seventeenth-century Western European culture, made up of not more than 3 languages (Heralds)
  - c. avoid foul language and poor taste (Heralds)
4. You may not use any title denoting rank or honors unless it is given to you by the appropriate SCA authority, usually the monarch. (Gov & P.D.)
5. No religious ceremony may be conducted at an SCA event in such a way that it is inconvenient to avoid. (Gov & P.D.)
6. Heraldic symbols, badges or arms must not be worn at events if they:
  - a. are the same as any that are protected by the SCA (Heralds)
  - b. are the same as any prominent person of history or fiction (Heralds)
  - c. suggest rank or honors temporal or spiritual (Corpora)
7. The use of **any** hand weapons (real or fake) at SCA events and meetings is expressly forbidden, except as laid down in the rules for SCA list combats. (*Gov & P.D.*)
7. The Conventions of Combat in Midrealm, which have the force of law here, require that fighters in list combat act out wounds or "death" received. (*M. K. Marshal's Handbook*)
8. The carrying, display or use of firearms at a Middle Kingdom SCA event is expressly forbidden. (*Middle Kingdom law*)

**Traditions** *I have become aware of regarding persona play in the SCA:*

1. Most people seem to agree that you're supposed to be in persona at events (whichever version of persona you choose).
2. You should use a "medieval" name at events, different from your modern name.
3. You are supposed to be from one specific medieval time and place. (The heralds have quit letting you register an alternate persona's name or device, and your SCA membership card must have only one SCA name, but there is no rule that says you can't have a second persona and use it at events.)
4. SCA events are conducted "in persona." Some zealots hold business meetings in costume, but most people agree that your modern (hopefully rational) personality should govern your words and actions.

### **“The Great Fictions:”**

*This is my term for a body of tradition widely used in the SCA to explain away problems which arise whenever you bring together people from distant or warring cultures, let alone time travellers.*

1. Some magic permits us all to understand each other in spite of the fact that our personas' languages differ greatly (we all speak English by magic).
2. Some magic removes all intercultural and religious animosities (you can still wear religious or cultural badges (as long as they do not denote or suggest rank).
3. At SCA events, you are in a new, fictional place called the Known World. Whether it is located in Europe, on Earth, or on the far side of the sun has never been agreed on. But insofar as you act one out, your life here is that of an immigrant or colonist, rather than that of a Scot, for instance, in Scotland.
4. By some magic, all of our personae came to this fictional time and place from their various medieval times and places. (Sometimes the trip is described in the persona story.)

### **The Great Differences**

*For various strongly-felt modern social reasons, several of the characteristics most typical of western European medieval culture are deliberately omitted from the SCA's official social structure and, for that matter, from the event calendar. This creates big differences between the SCA and any known medieval culture.*

**1. Religious influences** pervaded medieval culture. If you were in the West European mainstream, whether or not you personally were spiritually-inclined, your life was circumscribed by religious symbolism and metered out in holy days. Life's significant moments, from birth to burial, were overseen by the church. The majority of all record-keeping and administrative tasks requiring education were done by “clerics” (members of the clergy). The Chancellor of a kingdom was a senior member; his office was the Chancery, where official documents were written.

In the 3/4 of the SCA's period that preceded the Reformation and Renaissance, perhaps as much as a third of the entire population had some close link to organized religion, whether by having been educated in a parish school, being employed, living on church-owned lands, or being in holy orders. Perhaps as much as another third were religious enough to make at least one pilgrimage and revere a particular patron saint. Travellers of all ranks stayed in hostleries maintained by monasteries across Europe.

All this is rich material for persona building, roles to play, and social activities. But the SCA cannot, *as an organization open to all regardless of religious preference*, prefer one religion to any other. Nor can it permit events held under its aegis to include religious-flavored activities which are inconvenient to avoid.

As a result, we pussy-foot around this huge aspect of medieval culture. All ceremonies, including Coronation, are entirely secular (*unlike nearly all medieval ones*). Clerics have no special place in the administrative structure. No chancery or chancellor, no archbishop. No see, no monasteries, no churches, no roadside shrines. Official scrolls don't come from monasteries or chanceries. We rarely have events in honor of religious holidays any more (the Flame Christmas Tourney dates from 1973).

My personal view of this (I'm a confirmed agnostic) is that it is sad that we cannot find more ways to employ and enjoy the secular aspects of the religious medieval establishments.

**2. Inheritance** was everything to a medieval person of gentle rank. It's how you got your name, your rank, your land, your wealth, and the training you needed to hold on to them. To enter a tourney during one era, you had to prove you had four knights in your lineage. Privilege was nearly always inherited, almost never earned. Even peasants inherited their position in the universe: their connection to the land they lived on.

The SCA seems to subscribe to the modern idea that personal merit *as demonstrated in the SCA* should determine status. Mundanely acquired wealth or privilege, whether inherited or earned, is not *supposed* to influence SCA status, although it can make the game easier to play. So inheritance has no *official* place in our society and no inherited titles or land are recognized.

**3. Land** was the center of medieval economics and social structure. It was the source of all

wealth, and related to nearly all titles in period, including those of the heads of monasteries and abbeys. “Knight-bachelor” was one of the few exceptions, and intended to be temporary. Only at the end of the medieval era --long after feudalism is functionally dead – do you find titles given without land.

Before that time, the name of the place was the name by which the landholder was known, as in Essex, Richmond, etc. Conversely, the term “estate” (meaning land) was borrowed to mean “condition” as in rich, poor, or of land-holding age.

But in the SCA, only three out of ten titles reflect landed-ness: Monarch, Prince/Princess, and Territorial Baron (Court Barons have no land). Dukes but no duchies, Counts but no counties, Earls with no earldoms, Knights without fees, squires without manors, and lords of nothing in particular: all these titles come without even fictitious lands attached.

It’s okay to pretend you have lands. You can make up estates and name them, people them with cows or sheep if you like, but you cannot add your estate’s name to yours as a title. You can be John of La Mancha (maybe) but even if you are entitled to be called Lord, you cannot officially be John, Lord of La Mancha. Nor can your persona use a real medieval estate’s title – *even if you can prove it really is yours now.*<sup>1</sup>

As a result, our personas are prohibited from calling each other by estate-name in the period fashion. Instead, we use the modern manner of first-naming, as in “Baron Daibhid.” (This need not be so forever. The SCA could raise considerable funds by inaugurating a “landedness registry” where SCA personages could register the names of estates much as we now register names and arms. Each rank and award could bring with it the right to register a given number of greater and/or lesser estates. Estate names would have to be researched as are personal names now, and there would be a hefty fee per estate registered. To avoid creating “award fever,” there could be a two or three year waiting period after receipt of each award before one could apply for an estate name.)

**4. Succession.** The smooth transition from one monarch to the next was relatively rare in period. This fact and its results – underage monarchs, struggles for control of crown and kingdom, and disputed successions – created much of the drama and at least half the wars of medieval history.

That type of conflict-based drama is among the things the SCA would rather not re-create. Since inheritance is out, the SCA needed another method for selection of Royalty. Rightly or wrongly, the method chosen was by competition in a tournament, usually entirely martial in nature, and judged entirely by the participants.

Now, I’m not the staunchest advocate of deciding who’s king by combat. Many of the evils of the SCA can be traced to this idea, not the least of which is the travesty of the glorious tournament we have as a result of the “winning-is-everything” attitude that may come from modern American culture but is reaffirmed in our method of choosing every meaningful noble title.

However poverty-stricken in spiritual terms this area may be in our SCA, the Crown Tourney still provides a bit of magic open to all who can qualify. Although Midrealm keeps its Crown Tourney limited to those the Crown believes worthy, in other places it is the SCA’s own version of the “sword in the stone,” the magic tournament where anyone may discover their blood is Royal.

On the down side, royal blood is more than ever a matter of determination to be the winner than of fitness to rule. The novice, pure in heart though he or she may be, stands no chance to see magic at work.

**5. Social Structure, Offices, and Rank.** For obscure reasons, the ranks and functions assigned to SCA titles do not reflect those of medieval ones. In the medieval period, the knightly class was the lowest level of gentility. Males born into it were called esquires, and became knights when they qualified by age and financial ability to carry the duties of the rank. A soldier not of gentle birth could enter this class by feats of military service, becoming an esquire. Esquires by birth or by promotion were not necessarily attached to a knight as “their personal squire.”

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<sup>1</sup>“Now” is the key word. Unless you are over 400 years old, and owned that land in period, your present-day ownership of it can’t give your *period* persona any title to it.

Barons were members of the knightly class whose families had acquired additional lands not held directly from the king, whose wealth allowed them to have knights as vassals. Earls or counts (in whatever language) were the great land-holding (and army-raising) direct vassals of the king. Dukes and duchesses were the king's closest relatives. The Peers of a realm included its top nobles: Dukes, Counts/Earls, and Barons.

In terms of political power, churchmen could hold positions in the kingdom structure (such as chancellor or archbishop) that gave them as much clout and wealth as an earl, but for our purposes we can leave them to one side for the moment.

An Order in period could be knightly, religious or both. A knightly order such as the Garter was often an in-period re-creation of the Arthurian "Knights of the Round Table" idea, but conveyed no rank per se.

In the SCA, the top three of these titles (king, count/earl, duke) are won by way of combative tournaments. Instead of rewarding service to the crown, it seems to me, these are given for serving oneself, or at best, serving one's personal view of what is good for the kingdom.

Excuse me. "Given?" No. These titles are taken by the victors. Only the combatants can judge their own defeat. The winner of each bout, including the deciding one, has alone made the key decision on every blow that has touched him.

In the SCA, Knighthood certainly vies with those three in terms of prestige. It seems to be awarded only to those who fight successfully enough to be recognized as a crown contender, but it's typical of the SCA that you cannot pin down those who decide it to exact criteria. This affects your persona ambitions quite a bit.

If you want any of these martial ranks, you must fight and win a lot.

In the SCA, Knighthood is one of three "Peerage Orders." SCA "Peers" outrank everyone except Dukes, Counts/Earls, and reigning monarchs.

The two non-knightly peerages are Pelican and Laurel, neither of which have anything like medieval counterparts. They exist to recognize service and mastery of SCA arts, but like the knights, acknowledge no exact criteria. There is a movement afoot to recognize these orders as specialized orders of knighthood, partly to rectify the period-counterpart problem.

In the meantime, the person in a period-based persona has no reason to be interested in these non-period orders, but is supposed to respect their members all the same.

The SCA has two Baronial ranks: Territorial and Court Baron. They are quite different. A territorial Baron(ess) is in effect chosen by the Barony to be the titular head of the group. As such, Territorial Baron is the only long-term territorial title in the SCA. Baron of the Court, on the other hand, is only a title, given at will by the monarch. (Former Territorial Barons receive it automatically.) Since both are addressed "Your Excellency" or "Baron (John)," it is easy to confuse these very different ranks. Territorial Baronies have lots of possibilities for persona activity, whereas Barons of the Court cannot hold courts at events. They, like anyone else with an award of Arms, can have households and play any game they like with them, but cannot *function* as a baron.

An Award of Arms, the lowest recognized rank in the SCA, is one of the very few that function like the medieval ones.

Esquire is not even an official rank in the SCA. Esquires do not appear as such in Orders of Precedence. One does not have to even have an Award of Arms to be taken on as a squire by a knight, allowed to wear insignia of squirehood (all unofficial, you understand). It seems to me we lose something by this. Esquire, as has been stated, was a period level of gentility having the right to bear an armorial device either by award or inheritance.

We are really stuck with poor terminology when it comes to list-field participants. The public, and most newcomers, invariably assume that all authorized fighters are knights, and we have to explain that this entry-level title of medieval nobility is reserved in the SCA for an exclusive club comprising only 5% of the SCA gentles who compete in the lists. Only another 10% are squires. That leaves the rest looking for a *nice* period word to call themselves.

So far, the standard term seems to be "fighter," which to me connotes "boxer," "violent," "barbarian," "quarreller," and "aggressive." "Warrior" implies warfare and



“killer,” whereas we compete in peaceful, nonviolent tourneys (in period usage, “justes of peace”). In researching this, the best period, non-sexist term I could find that didn’t require changing the SCA traditions was “tourneyor.”

[A small tradition change would make things more gracefully “period.” If the rank of “Esquire” were conferred upon authorization, we could use “knights and esquires” – a phrase commonly found in period to refer to those entering the tourney. The term “squire” could still be reserved to those *named squire by a knight*, and they would also be entitled to the rank designation “Esquire.” This may seem subtle, but it’s easier to understand than our two types of Baron.]

**Horses and Castles.** Two things most of us scarcely consider in our persona play, that were essentials of medieval life, are horses and castles. These two items would be the staple of any noble’s conversational diet, but we have precious little to say about them, and persona play seldom touches on them.

These Great Differences affect your persona play at several levels. You find yourself avoiding religious references, and many simply don’t bother to learn about the religious aspects of the Middle Ages because it will be of only marginal use in the SCA. The “correct” manner of addressing various nobles isn’t always correct or even period-sounding (e.g. “Excellency”) and the relationships you might expect to have with superiors (feudal) usually don’t exist.

### 3. Personae, roles and SCA events

What happens when you take your *medieval* persona into the strange world of the SCA?

#### Relating to SCA Events

Not everybody goes to an event just to do persona. Since the SCA hasn’t bothered to define events as “persona” (vs. non-persona or persona-optional), all kinds of non-persona activities are there to intrude or distract from persona play. If you have the idea that you’re going to do much persona at an event, it might pay to arm yourself in advance to fend off the temptations that will pull you away from your purpose.

There are lots of things you can do *in persona* at some events:

- Have a adventures, meet new friends, "show off" in an appropriate setting, indulge in the art of conversation.
- Enter or marshal tourneys, compete in other athletics and games.
- See *her* or *him*.
- Spend quality time with your ‘significant other’ (as long as he/she plays persona)

On the other hand, there are lots of *side-trips out of persona* at events:

- Combat authorizations. This is a *modern* process done right there in the middle of the event. Since it is usually done before the tourney, it prevents most tourneys from actually starting on schedule. So, don’t make a date of seeing the tourney begin.
- SCA business. If you are an officer or active in event planning or any of the many mundane, *backstage* aspects of the SCA, you might wind up talking to people about these matters instead of being in persona.
- Arts and Sciences. SCA arts and sciences contests, displays, and judgings are *modern activities*. You can possibly drop off a contest entry without too much deviation from your persona, but the judging and appreciating are entirely modern. The research process can be left home, but the results (documentation) need to be offered at the event.
- Classes and workshops. Persona play can work if the class is taught “in persona,” with period equipment. (But watching a slide show of museum artifacts simply makes me aware how out-of-place my costume is.)

Borderline cases:

- To conduct SCA role business - taking a squire, etc. *can* be persona activities.
- To do a lot of dancing (fine for your “Standard SCA” persona, but may not fit your *medieval* persona. Several “standard” SCA dances are post-1600)

Thus, to do persona well, it behooves one to avoid SCA business, such as judging A & S

contests, officer communications and reports, and taking modern classes at events. If you need to deliver a report or discuss modern SCA business with a superior officer, I suggest you hand over the envelope in the parking lot or take a few minutes outside the medieval environment.

### The “Generic SCA” Persona

The SCA event situation seldom demands persona responses of you, but when it does, what it really wants is **standard responses**: “My Lord”/MiLady/Your Majesty”.

Your SCA interactions are usually with Kingdom, Principality, or local group officials. In their role as officers, regardless of their personae, their nationality is *Middlish*. Their period is A.S. Twenty-Something. Because official SCA business never has anything to do with an individual’s period or nationality, your own persona’s national or period characteristics are irrelevant to what is going on.

Our response to these social forces is to develop a **generic SCA persona** – the set of reflexes to bow, say “Good Day, my lord,” keep an eye out for SCA ranks with standard courtesies in mind – in short, a whole system of actions. Some of these *might in fact be non-period, like saying “Your excellency,” or alien to your persona’s style*.

The **Generic SCA Persona** *really can’t afford to care* about exact period authenticity, since you constantly run into people hundreds of years off in either direction. The Generic SCA Persona dances all the dances regardless of their period, fights in tourneys whether or not they existed in one’s own period, goes to events whatever the period, and takes offices and awards that didn’t exist in one’s time. Some SCA offices and awards would not have existed in *any* European medieval society, and for such personae as Early Celt or Viking, almost none of our SCA ranks is valid.

What all this points out is that, to most people in the SCA, the *Society* is more important than the *Creative*, and the *Creative* is much more important than the *Anachronism*. For many people, particularly those new to the SCA, “anachronism” itself is the most refreshing, entertaining thing the SC offers.

**Celebrating Anachronism.** It may surprise some who know me to hear this, but for years I was a devotee of anachronisms in almost every form. You didn’t have to be a science fiction fan to be tickled by that Analog cover from about 1966 that showed a group of Vikings splashing ashore from their longship at sunrise, perfect in every detail, --except, of course, for the box of Wheaties carried by the leader. I always enjoyed the juxtaposition of rapiers and rocketships, of old-fashioned values carried into the present and beyond, and, yes, of modern excellence applied to medieval situations.

At some point, you realize that the modern item you’re using is no longer a creative anachronism to tickle your friends’ humour, but a simple convenience for your own comfort. At this point, excellence is consciously sacrificed for convenience.

I’m not criticising anachronism itself; I’m merely pointing out that time spent on the standard persona, or on anachronism, for that matter, is time not spent on a medieval persona., and that such efforts do not contribute to a medieval atmosphere.

Many SCA people consider the benefits of such efforts worth the compromises they entail. Compromises with modern social concerns such as equal rights and religious tolerance are necessary for the health of the SCA. It’s one thing to accept necessary modern compromise, and another to run with it well beyond what is necessary. If we let them, modern forces can literally obliterate our feeble attempts at medievalism. Examples follow.

### You are what you speak

Most of the actions that define your persona to others around you really boil down to spoken words. The people around you get little information from observing you. Unless you are outrageously attractive, outrageously dressed, or their opposites, nobody’s going to look at you long enough to get much persona information. Unless you carry your personality, accomplishments and knowledge visibly on your person, it’s your speech that shapes you in the minds of your audience. Thus one might say that, at an event, “you are what you speak.”

If you speak French, you are French. If you speak mediievally, you are medieval. If you speak honorably (and your actions do not contradict you), you are honorable. If you speak foolishly, you are a fool. But if you speak in modern terms, you are simply modern.

## SCA Jargon

Every specialized field has its jargon. This stuff exists for two reasons: one is to save time when speaking of familiar concepts. The other is the unconscious desire to create “in-groups.” In the SCA, jargon does more harm than good: we have enough differencing characteristics and far too much in-grouping as it is. Worse, persona play is undermined by a whole catalogue of modern SCA terms like “live steel”, “feast-o-crat”, “crash space”, “Troll”, etc. These terms don’t save any time, don’t display your intelligence to advantage, and seriously detract from our medieval atmosphere.

We inherited our addiction to jargon, with our other least-authentic habits, from science fiction “fandom” (now there’s a piece of jargon). Fandom got it, properly enough, from NASA and the scientific/technical world that gave us the PC I’m using to say this. But *we can only blame ourselves* for letting it detract from our play.

It all started innocently enough. But using “far-speaker” to avoid “telephone” is rather like spelling out “candy” in front of young children: we’re not, and it doesn’t work. Then there are phrases like “magic jongleur” which suggests that technology is to be accepted in persona as “magic,” and that we, therefore, are all supposed to be superstitious. I don’t accept that any more than I would accept an imposed religion.

The next step was fantasy re-naming for things that didn’t need them: “dragon” for car in order to sound medieval is silly. “Car” is a medieval word, but “dragon” is fairy tale/fantasy usage. “Dragonriders” is all very well and good, but we haven’t all agreed to accept this fantasy (or any other fiction) as a prototype for SCA events. Try *cart*, *chariot*, *litter*, *horse* – or to describe your travelling situation, *entourage*.

SCA jargon comes in three varieties:

- **Acronyms**, the genuine shortcuts that try to make initialism pronounceable: “scah” for “S.C.A.” for “Society for Creative Anachronism.” Such usages, including “RUM” for our distinguished and glorious University, are the *duct tape* of our speech. Like duct tape, they *are* quick – and very tacky.

We use acronyms in the modern world for two reasons:

1. We need them to convey a lot of data in a hurry. *But in persona, we’re supposed to be medieval people with no particular need to hurry.*

2. We use them as part of a rapid-speech strategy used to cope with modern rude people who will interrupt you if you slow down. *In our society, this should not be a problem. Where it is a problem, our ideals are not working.*

Acronyms are useful, but so is a saber saw. Cultivating a preference for saying out the whole word will enrich our period atmosphere, and your persona performance. *Roll out* important words with the importance they deserve: “Ro-oyal Universitee of Mid Realm,” or better still, say it in Latin: “Reg-num Uuuniversitatis Mediter-ranee.” (Ignoring the bad Latin can be an opportunity to practice courtesy.)

Since acronyms are even more modern than technology, we should avoid them. It’s one thing to force pronunciation onto existing acronyms, but quite another to incorrectly name SCA institutions so as to create a humorous word, such as “R.U.M.”

- **Hip terms.** If fantasy names betray our science fiction fantasy background, terms like “crash space,” “burnout,” “laid-back, and “generic” suggest our origins in the “hip” 1960s. So while they may have been spawned by creative minds at play, they are not the work of the S. for Creative A. There is no reason to grant this usage special status as an “SCA tradition.” It’s just plain modern American.

- **“Scah” terms.** You know you’re in trouble when the Medieval organization uses a term like “Feast-o-Crat.” It’s based on “Autocrat,” which is just as Medieval as “car” (but means something different in our usage), but what it echoes is 1950s brand-naming like “Automat” and “Veg-a-Matic.” “Autocrat” is such an old SCA-ism that the Board of Directors is considering – reluctantly – writing it into the rules.

The Middle Ages were full of words. Take your pick. You are what you speak.

## What Jargon does to us as a group

Every group – not just the SCA – is distinguished by its own special jargon and

terminology. New people joining any group quickly try to learn the terms in use so they'll feel and sound as if they're "in the know" and belong.

But in the SCA, newcomers are distracted from medievalism by learning these irrelevant terms in order to fit in. *Any sense of belonging that comes this easy is probably false, but newcomers will take what they can get.* They, in turn, reinforce these usages as they practice using and showing off their new knowledge.

Terms only get cachet if they are thrown around by veterans in the group. So if we want new people to avoid picking it up, old-timers have to quit using jargon. If for no other reason, the less jargon we all use, the better.

**Speaking Modernish.** Acronyms and most other jargon items are entirely modern artifacts. They say "modern" quicker than duct tape, and the traces are harder to remove. They are the push-buttons of our speech, and they're habit-forming in the extreme. Fighting habits –yours and other people's – makes being in persona difficult.

### The Solution

Try to keep jargon out of both persona and modern situations, and be considerate of new people when throwing terms around. Think about what the habit *really* says about you, and encourage your friends not to use it.

But "don't's" are really difficult. To stop a habit, you've got to have the replacement response for whatever triggers the habit. Many people have proposed replacement words that sound medieval but don't work too well in the modern world. Such terms create a need to be "bi-lingual" in the same language: use one word for a thing at the meeting and another at the event. We need words we can use well in both environments.

Here's my list of a few of the most needed replacement phrases for SCA jargon:

SCA or "scah"	the Society, our society, the known world, our world, in this sphere
Crash	sleep, take thy bed
Crash site, space	Hostel, lodgings, inn
Crash-o-crat	quartermaster, lodging steward, chamberlain
Feast-o-crat	cook, chef, chief cook, kitchen supervisor
Autocrat	Event steward, host(ess), steward
Fighter practice	Practice at arms, arms practice
Fighters	Tourneyors, knights and esquires (see below)
Seneschal's Flyer	Event Letter, Letter of proclamation, announcement,
Newbies	Immigrants, new arrivals, beginners
In the Middle Ages	In our times, these days, in our age, in our ancestors' time, in my grandfather's time

### Official acronyms

Under the new rules extracted from them by the Board of Directors, the heralds have replaced the period-sounding "point of difference" with the very modern term "Clear Visual Difference." Not only does the system frequently fail, but the heralds constantly use the acronym "CVD." This has placed a conspicuous modernism in what I had come to regard as the SCA's greatest stronghold of authentic practice.

### The Big Letdown: Medieval Persona vs. SCA Role

Usually, we tell newcomers that it's customary to develop a medieval persona, name, costume, and all. Dutifully, they concentrate on them **until they notice how little most people really care** what country, century, or culture they've chosen.

Similarly, it dawns on them that of all the things they know about about the old-timers in the group, the much-vaunted persona isn't one of them. What they do know about them is the SCA office they hold or the art or service they do in the SCA. They realize that *SCA roles* (offices, awards, being known for arts, crafts, or SCA martial expertise) are the easiest way to *be somebody* -- to have a place in the order of things in the SCA.

You could build a perfect medieval persona, but the SCA won't give you a place to plug it in. You could, for instance, be a stonemason or a master builder, but the SCA can't use you since they aren't building any castles.

**The worst part**, for me, is that newcomers conclude that *our advice* to build a persona, and *our talk* about the SCA being a medieval society, *wasn't worth much*.

But new people **really have a need to fit in** with any group they join. Fitting *precisely* into a defined social order was *an obsession* with medievals. Everyone had a place in the great schema. But in the SCA, persona isn't how you make yourself fit in — it's how you make yourself different.

One of the SCA's problems in re-creation is that it doesn't offer medieval slots for new people to fall into. But it does offer plenty of non-medieval roles.

Feudal society was divided, say historians, into "those who work, those who pray, and those who fight."<sup>1</sup> The SCA is divided, but not like that.

- You can do a fantastic job of being a beggar, peasant, or other low-life, but the SCA will rarely recognize you for it. We're set up to be of *gentle* birth.
- You can become a monk or priest by persona, but the SCA cannot organize a religious group for you to fit into, and couldn't officially recognize one if it existed.
- You can't join the chivalry; you can only become a "fighter" (a medieval enough term, but not the one we associate with tourneys or chivalric ideals).

Since the doors to the best medieval roles seem to the SCA newcomer either closed or heavily barricaded, most of us settle for SCA roles.

I'm no exception. I was well on my way to developing my Scottish Highlander persona – I had my seven yards of good wool, an excellent sword, and had clambered all over my persona's ancestral castle – the very year I became a seneschal. What do you suppose got all my effort and attention? Being a seneschal is more *immediate* than being a Scot, because it involves *real live people* in your face.

Doing SCA roles involve other people and *their* problems, which are usually more fun to deal with than one's own. How can persona compete with forces like that?

It's easy to understand why persona gets left on "cruise control," either because it seems less important or because we assume it's too easy to be worth any effort. Don't you believe it would be easy if you only bothered with it. Even if you could perform your persona perfectly on demand, you would still have problems performing it in the SCA.

## **Tripping over the Light Fantastique**

Even without competition from SCA roles, and even disregarding the language problem, the perfect medieval persona would have serious difficulty trying to operate in the SCA.

**The Anachronism problem.** In a typical SCA event situation there isn't much point in exactly replicating the behavior patterns of the medieval character you've chosen. Interaction would be possible only with those from your time/place neighborhood. No one else would understand your customs and manners. Medieval personas from different centuries cannot have normal *in-persona* interactions with each other. They cannot have normal discussions of contemporary politics, fashion, farming and castle technology, or anything else time-based. No, the Middle Ages were *not* all the same. Each century saw considerable evolution and development. Historians have swung round to seeing the entire medieval period not as a changeless Dark Age but as a time of dramatic technological development. Only from a distance like 500 years does it seem to be a period of generic iron-age culture.

- To the late-period persona, the early one is hopelessly out of date; of interest only as a curiosity. Who wants to be a curiosity object?

- To the early persona, the late-period person is *science fiction!*

What can they do in character – watch each other act out their roles? Such a scenario is no

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bloch in Feudal Society

more medieval than a stage play, and not as much fun. Even if you could get it exactly right, you'd be a living wax sculpture. You may as well stay behind the velvet rope.

Because of these factors, the typical attempt at medieval persona play between two individuals consists of each telling the other his persona story. The result is not medieval. At worst, it's an ego contest; at best, it's a short, **modern** conversation – and out of character at that.

You could, of course, get *really good* at telling it in persona. Then, of course, you're still committing a timeless social faux pas. . . merely talking about yourself.

You can't do much with somebody else's different-period persona in conversation other than comment on it. As conversation, *that wears pretty thin, and is modern to boot*.

What's meaningful and less superficial in conversation is what you're doing in the SCA. If you can do it in a medieval manner, great. But before we know it, we usually find ourselves speaking in modern, casual tones. Worse, we'll use SCA jargon to do it.

**The need to be real.** There is also a positive, genuine need to be real at times. Too often, a genuine, heartfelt compliment is taken as just another piece of persona play. How to get our real feelings across? If our persona play blocks our attempt to sincerely communicate, we are forced to fall back into modern speech, breaking the spell with the best of intentions.

The only solution is to make a policy and habit of always being sincere, in persona or out. Don't allow persona courtesies to sound like "just an act," or they'll play you false and communicate what you don't believe.

### **In search of solutions**

There's no single solution to all this. We all have our individual ideas. But as we add our individual spices to the vast soup of the SCA, it behooves us to keep an eye on the overall flavor. It's a lot easier to add spices than to take them out again. The SCA already shows the seams of patchwork problem-solving.

I have a notion that helps me achieve both my SCA Role goals and my medieval persona goals. I think of it as a golden rule of persona and event problem-solving:

## **ALWAYS SEEK THE MEDIEVAL SOLUTION.**

We in the SCA have a tendency to re-invent the wheel. From the structure of the noble ranks to the design of events, tourneys, and our combat scoring system, many aspects of the SCA reflect this kind of re-invention. For this reason, many of our problems can be traced to the fact that when we re-invented a particular wheel, we guessed wrong. There are plenty of right parts, but they don't mesh well with the many other wrong parts.

Why do we do it? Ignorance. In spite of the pride we have in our knowledge of times past, we've all been brought up to believe that we live in the best of times, that our nutrition makes us taller, stronger, and smarter than medievals, and therefore we don't really expect to find the solution to anything in medieval sources.

When it isn't right in front of us, we tend to assume that there isn't a medieval model available. I assumed for years that there were no good medieval models for awards of arms, or wooden swords in the list-field, simply because the SCA people I expected to know such things *didn't*. But, lo and behold! there *are*.

The SCA does not systematically teach or even represent the Middle Ages. It doesn't say anywhere that it is supposed to even try. Thus you cannot assume that an SCA artifact is a good example of workmanship, let alone research, nor that an article by an SCA authority is in fact reliable. It's no one's fault. There's no one in charge of that department.

The Middle Ages is a vast study. Go to the libraries and museums yourself. *Look for medieval models WITH DETERMINATION! THEY'RE THERE!*

One caution: when you find a medieval solution, and wish to apply it, you'll sometimes get resistance from "established" SCA members, whether in office or not. It may be that they resent a newer or lower-ranking person telling them something they feel they should have known, or it may be the years they have vested in doing it the "SCA way." (They've also made those assumptions we spoke of, and *simply don't believe you* when you mention some fact about the way the "medievals" did it.)

So when you find one of these gems, arm yourself with scholarship. Write it down, including

where you got it, who said it first, when published, etc. Not everything in print is true, after all. You could be misled. But then again, you might just have something there.

### The Atmosphere Problem

- The problem with the SCA's atmosphere is that the SCA's purpose is "in the ozone." Some events are specifically made for persona play. They provide themes, a scenario, maybe even a historical period. Others are less clearly a place to do persona. The tourney might allow "fighters" to be in persona situations while on the field, but the rest of the event might not have much atmosphere, or might even have strong SCA business orientation. Still others, like some workshops, offer no room for persona.

In spite of the Corpora Preamble's airy suggestion that events have medieval "atmosphere", there's really no rule that says events have to provide it. In fact, there are plenty of forces against event organizers limiting events to a single historical period or any other atmosphere-creating style item.

While it would be difficult to write a rule mandating events to have period atmosphere, it need not be difficult for individuals to know which events encourage persona and period.

The solution is for event organizers to define and label their events as "Strong persona events," "Semi-Persona," "Persona Activities Provided," or frankly "Personae non Gratae." This will save people beating their personas' heads against an unwelcoming wall, and allow all of us to be more "into" whatever the event is --clearly-- about.

- Part of what makes persona play so difficult is that most events don't provide much of a *medieval setting* for it. *If* the event has a period and nationality to it, chances are it won't match yours. Most groups have all they can do to get the feast right without trying to make a modern gym look medieval. The solution is neither quick nor easy – it's to help your group and others make events seem more atmospheric.

The "medieval solution" stems from the fact that they had decoration problems in period, too. The use of set pieces and lots of bright fabric was a standard solution to uninspiring sites for medieval tourney organizers. Use them.

Medieval tourney organizers had the same problems with event themes and non-fighter interest that we do. Read up on what they did about it (see Bibliography).

Don't hesitate to tell other groups' organizers what you prefer. Events are often designed (if at all) based on the organizers' personal preference simply because they have no idea what the populace wants. Make your preference, as a paying customer, heard.

- It's not only the *physical* stage we lack for persona play. The biggest opportunity to let the persona come out and play – the quest – usually turns out to be no more than a game of Trivial Pursuit played standing up. Even team quests usually deal in terms of SCA roles – fighter, non-fighter, herald, etc. – instead of asking for a French knight, an English artisan, an Italian philosopher, a Celtic bard, or the Pursuivant to a Count.

Take a page from the late-period Passages of Arms or even from the Troubadour period. They went in for fantasy role-playing. Everybody (who *was* anybody) got to play a role, usually heroic, romantic, or (late-period) allegorical. Read up, then talk about it.

- We don't recognize persona play as an art form (it's not on the A & S listing), and events seldom provide any audience focus on it.

But the arts of speech were much prized in pre-literate societies. Next time you're involved in event planning, suggest sponsoring debates, discussions or even Courts of Love, *in character* with prizes. Recognition for the arts of speech and dramatic arts can go a long way toward encouraging **medieval** role playing.

When sponsoring a discussion, pose a specific question, preferably one that will pique interest. For instance, from Andreas Capellanus, "Are men, or women, better at love?"

### 4. Building Persona In The SCA

With all these forces in the SCA world marshalled against *medieval* role-playing, it's no wonder most of us fall back to our SCA roles. You can play your SCA role at *any* event that doesn't specifically ask for medieval personas. It's so easy, it's practically mundane. But it contributes nothing to the medieval flavor of the event, for those around you, or for you.

## Making a name (and device) for yourself

People's names and heraldry, like costumes, are parts of the SCA environment that is always in our faces. But unlike costumes, once selected, they are rarely replaced by a better edition next Twelfth Night. (But don't be afraid to change. I upgraded my name four times before submitting my current one, and I also replaced the device I carried in the list field for eight years.) To make a good name for yourself in any society is not easy. Here are a few pitfalls to avoid.

- Do not use two or three languages in your name. There are lots of other ways to proclaim your (or more likely your parents') wide travels and experience.
- Do not mix genders in one name (believe it or not, people do this out of ignorance). Get the language right: people in period did. If you can't find the name, used the way you want to use it (patronymic, forename, surname, etc.) in one of the recommended sources, don't ask the heralds to waste their time. (Fiction isn't a recommended source.)
- Do not try to depict all your hobbies and interests on your shield. A device is not a picture; it's a symbol, possibly a totem, but definitely not a resume. Like a corporate logo, the simpler, the more memorable. The more medieval, the more it improves our atmosphere.
- Do not try to tell your life story on your shield. While many notable period devices involve an item from a notable incident in the person's life (usually the incident that got him the arms), it's nearly always a single item, whether alone or repeated in a pattern.
- Do not try to sneak modern imagery through. Sneaky isn't a mark of nobility, and modern isn't what we're here to remind each other of.
- Don't plaster a half-dozen different things (no matter how elegant individually) on your shield. (Six of the same thing is great.) People need to identify your shield at a *glance*, not after a five-minute read.

## How a persona story can “work” for others

Under typical SCA conditions, it's difficult for most people to get to know your persona well.

Modern people seldom cultivate memory skills, so they don't remember what you tell them. You can tell people over and over what your lifestyle is and drop hints about your period, but this is really backstage work. After a while it gets old, and you'd rather be having a real conversation.

In our shire, we have an annual “Domesday Book” that lists members' names, addresses, and phones, but also lets each place a copy of his/her arms or device and their “persona story” if they care to write one out. This lets people study *before* going into the persona situation, so they can relax and enjoy.

But most persona stories are narrative. Some seem like an attempt to place the person in a fantasy-novel setting, and don't help you get to know the persona. Perhaps what is needed is more a like persona sketch, aimed at helping others get a feel for your appearance, position in the scheme of things, and personality. Concentrate on what others need to know about you in order to interact, and build on that. (See also page 3, The Persona Story.)

## Personas of the Rich and Famous

If Robin Leach were to do a segment on your persona character's lifestyle, what would he find? How many rooms are there in your castle? How many hunting-dogs? What's the name of your favorite (and their keeper, if you remember his name)? Likewise, your favorite high-performance falcon (peregrine or gerfalcon?). What did he last bring down?

How many estates do you control? Where are they? Do they thrive? Are you well-connected, dynastically? What is your persona character's net worth (rounded to the nearest thousand ducats or so)?

Get the name of wherever you're from that is right for your period. If you're from Bordeaux, saying “France” wasn't always correct. It wasn't always part of France.

You could really have fun with this. Have an artist sketch your castle. People it with servants, retainers, friends, animals, and equipment. Add farms to support it. Where is the



nearest village? (Often right outside the walls.) If you're not a castle-dweller, consider the same project with a shop and/or house in a town or city.

### Researching your persona

Without trying to be exhaustive, I'd like to point out a few good sources you might not otherwise notice.

**Early persona:** In Search of the Dark Ages, by Michael Wood. He goes looking for Boudica, Arthur, and others. Excellent source on what is known. A must for anyone considering a pre-700 AD persona.

**14th Century:** Barbara Tuchman is recognized as a "serious" historian, but her study of the 14th century (A Distant Mirror) is terrific reading. By focusing on a specific lord of a prominent castle, it brings persona information to the front.

**Chaucerian (Late 14th C):** Dr. Jeffrey Singman (Geoffrey the Tapster) has been working with colleagues to create a guide to re-creating elements of Chaucer's period for a high-quality persona-oriented SCA event. This guide is on its way to a commercial publisher and should be out by Spring 1995.

**Elizabethan:** Tillyard's The Elizabethan World Picture presents the political and philosophical orientation of the English in the last half of the 16C. (Not easy reading.)

The Elizabethan Handbook, just republished by Vox Clamantis, and edited by Jeffrey Singman, is a guide to the re-creation of an evening in an Elizabethan tavern, including costume, accessories, conversation, customs, etc. in goodly detail. It is also a handbook for the "Southwark Trayn'd Bands," an Elizabethan militia unit whose period encampment may be seen at Pennsic.

Elizabethan Swordplay, by Soper and Turner, gives backgrounding of the "rapier culture" of Elizabethan England.

**General:** The SCA, through its national Chronicler's office, is planning a pamphlet series entitled "In Period," each of which will attempt to be a guide to the customs, costumes, accessories, etc. of a bracketed SCA period and culture. As of late 1994, I do not know the status of the project.

Items in the Bibliography marked \* are my recommended titles. \*\* means *especially* so.

### Staging-managing your persona

**Your costuming** should tell the knowledgeable observer approximately where and when you come from. If it doesn't, it will still say "foreigner," and that's okay, too. Telling a person where you came from isn't out of period, *but mentioning when you come from makes you a science-fictional artifact.*

**Accessories are even better.** They can provide conversation pieces that tell about you. Don't overdo it. Concentrate on what was reasonable to carry around. If you hold an office, wear its badge or carry its staff of office, if it happens to be medieval in style.

#### **Master your period clothing instead of being its prisoner.**

Period clothes take practice and attention to the details of attachment, stretch, and support, as in points, belts, and scabbards.

When you get a pair of period hosen, don't expect to just put them on like jeans. Learn the fastening system of your period and place. Make sure the costume can move with you; if not, you'll be uncomfortable, and that will cut into every other aspect of your fun.

**Master your accessories.** Sword scabbards are not supposed to swing out of control; practice controlling your sword with subtle hip movement as you walk. Sudden turns with a sword on the hip require as much advance preparation as when turning on a bicycle. The end of a loaded scabbard can inflict pain on the shins of your friends. Don't wear a sword without a scabbard.

I have an outfit based on a painting of Henry VIII. I can tell you from experience why he's clutching that dagger. It's attached by a chain to his belt and is virtually uncontrollable. He's holding it to keep it from bouncing like a pike on a line into phallically suggestive positions. The moral is: if you want to look like a picture, be prepared to stand or sit like one.

**Your Medieval "hobbies."** Way back in my first couple of years in the SCA, the first

time I noticed the bloom going off the rose, it occurred to me “Hey – I”m an artist. I can do something at these events, like sit down and draw what’s around me.” I’ll never forget the results. I totally forgot my self (but not my persona), fell in love, and had a wonderful time.

If you’re a Scot by persona, and a calligrapher by hobby, it sorta follows that you’ll be doing a lot of knotwork and uncial. But most of us are also attracted to things not central to our personae. I’m attracted to Burgundian and Flemish art. No problem: the medievals were fascinated by anything foreign; in fact a taste for the exotic was a mark of nobility. At the same time, don’t forget consistency. The image you project, event after event, is one of the things that makes your persona acting believable. People develop confidence in it.

### **Beyond simple persona: personality**

No *professional* actor could do convincing portrayal of a period character from a 1-page persona story. I hope you have more than that.

Think of your persona as having as many different facets as you have yourself. You are a complex person. Too often when we read history, the characters don’t come through as living, breathing individuals with age, health problems, specific money problems, and interpersonal difficulties.

The goal isn’t to create a superperson you can’t live up to, but – as far as your SCA audience is concerned – to create a character that is not only *believably medieval*, but *believably human*. That is what makes it a contribution to everyone else’s sense of being in a medieval time.

- One tendency, in starting out, is to create a persona that doesn’t have the problems you have. That’s a sure way to get an unreal character. Pick a character you yourself might well be chosen to play on stage. That takes a bit of knowing, but you can reduce the chance of disbelief by sticking close to your own age and physical abilities.

- You aren’t the only one developing your personality. An SCA persona is a bit like a soap opera character, evolving from week to week, revealing different aspects of the personality bit by bit. But any given member of your audience gets very few glimpses of you compared to the soap audience, so consistency is a very important element in your image-building process.

### **Learning speech patterns**

Vis-a-vis reading period speech, it’s worth noting that we tend to learn to speak by hearing, not by reading. If you’ve ever had a role in a play, you know how easy it is to learn everybody else’s lines before your own! The easiest method is to listen (not read) some well-performed Shakespeare or other period material, such as poetry, documents, or chronicles. If you can’t find it on a tape or record, make your own.

Another angle on this is that it is far easier to **replace** a verbal expression than to simply say nothing. So in your struggle to “remove modern usages from your speech,” give yourself a break by having a replacement ready.

### **Courtesy**

- Courtesy not only sets the SCA apart in the modern world; it also sets apart the romantic notion of the Middle Ages. Whether or not it is absolutely correct for your persona to be elaborately courteous, it does offer a way to distance your manners and demeanor from the modern and the mundane.

### **The inner benefits of persona**

As your persona research gets really deep into one area or another, you may discover enjoyments your mundane friends simply cannot share or understand. You may get a bit detached from the mainstream of society the same way a specialized scientist does.

Your persona choice is a bit like choosing a course of study. It doesn’t keep you from discovering things in other areas, but it helps you focus. In a small way, you become the expert in the specialized field of your persona’s time and place.

As you learn more about the real middle ages, keep a scholar’s perspective. You have something there to share with people; jewels to share that are part of the riches of your life that none can take away.

## 5. Taking Your Persona to an SCA Event

### Making an entrance

Many of our best plans for being in persona come crashing down right at the door of the event site itself. That's because we forget to manage the most impressive (for better or worse) display most of us will make all day: entering the hall for the first time.

While you're dragging your gear into a hall full of costumed people, wearing modern clothes and carrying modern bags, the last thing you're ready for is a persona conversation. But it's guaranteed that you'll run into six of your best out-of-town friends. Are you going to pretend you don't see them in order to get the mundanity over with? Of course not. Here, too, the Society is more important than the Anachronism, so be Creative.

Once again the solution is a medieval one. Make medieval chests and cases for the things you'll bring into the hall. Keep your eye out for wooden hangers – or make some – and keep them with your medieval clothes. Take turns helping carry things so no one ends up carrying huge, unmanageable, ungraceful, bundles.

Choose or make a floor-length cloak to wear over your modern clothing while bringing in your stuff. (Or make some comfortable traveling clothes which do not scream twentieth-century.) Put on a hat: it reduces the impact of glasses, modern hair arrangements, and modern collars protruding from the cloak. This reduces your need for haste and lets you comfortably stop and make an appointment to talk later --once you've settled in.

### Now that you're here

Most events are more likely to be in the character of a fair or tourney, usually held at or near a town. What would your persona do at a fair?

- List the character traits you want your persona to have. Take a mental list of five of these to each event, and make a point of exercising each of the traits.
- Imagine you're going to give someone a gift at the event. This means, of course, that you need to know something about that person. When you see the persona at an event, ask questions that tell you what would bring special delight. Ask others about him.
- Take a benevolent attitude. Observe the merchants, their wares, and their helpers. Praise the worthy; ignore the rest. Tell amusing tales, quote the learned, learn tasteful period humour.

### Play it for the smiles.

Personality is stronger than nationality. Unless you speak with a European accent naturally, your personality will have more impact on people than your nationality. Be careful. It's normal for people to want to improve themselves in persona, but if you over-act, what you'll communicate is the fact that you're acting (being fake), not the medieval effect you were after. Then, no one will *care* what your real personality is like.

If you are going to imitate a movie character, pick one that knows what he's doing. Not, for instance, Kevin Costner failing to be Robin Hood. Olivier doing Shakespeare might be more like it.

There is nothing wrong with acting-based persona play, as long as you're not forcing anyone to listen to you or play along with you. There are many SCA members – myself too often included – whose personas aren't enough fun to make anyone else smile. If you do accomplish that, you will have contributed something worthwhile.

### Aspects of Silliness

Silly can be good or not-so-good. Comedy *really is* the most difficult form of theatre. When you set out to be funny, you need to consider whether your audience will laugh with you, at you, or at all.

“Silly” is what most people seem to fall back on when they are unable to create the truly entertaining. There seems to be an idea that “serious” equals “not fun,” and that therefore “silly” will guarantee fun if nothing else works. I don't agree. Some of those who groan at puns really don't like them. And just because some people will always laugh the hundredth time someone replays some bit from Monty Python, there's no reason to think most people

enjoy the amateur repetition.

The real genius of comedy is the unexpected, and nobody at an SCA event is going to be surprised by anything from M. P. *including* the Spanish Inquisition. What would be truly unexpected is some medieval comedy, well-researched, well-rehearsed (timing is everything) and well-staged.

And just because someone isn't smiling doesn't mean they aren't having a great time.

### **Performing your Persona**

**Conversations.** What do modern people talk about at cocktail parties besides the weather? Their artifacts: cars, computers, games, houses, gardens. Their friends: weaknesses, habits, faults, likeable qualities, things they've just done. Their lives: their miseries, their jobs, their significant others, their joys, their problems, their vacations, their relationships.

Translate these into medieval terms: Artifacts: Horses, stables, scribes, artists working for them, castles, gardens, farms and retainers. Friends: same. Lives: same, but add: their lord, their vassals, the justices, the sheriffs, the king, their pilgrimages and travels to war or following a lord.

When talking about these things, stick to the larger themes. If you start showing off your detailed knowledge of your own period, next thing you know you'll be talking about the latest technology of 1490, and you'll be forcing an anachronism on your conversation partner.

The sample dialogues in [The Elizabethan Handbook](#) may be helpful, as they deal with everyday matter.

**What you bring to the table.** The feast is a choice opportunity to perform persona. There you are, lit only by flattering candlelight. No one can tell whether your fabric is synthetic or natural. Some of your audience will be more forgiving due to their choice of beverage.

If you are one of the few who took the trouble to look closely at the menu beforehand, and look up the background of each dish, you will never be without something relevant, fashionable, and period-concerned to say.

It is nearly always graceful to bring a beverage that reflects your persona, but not always graceful to push it on people who have different tastes. But if you bring enough, sharing it is another vehicle you can use.

If you make a point of looking at your daytime activities as an adventure, you'll have stories to tell. Save some time to draw stories out of others, though.

**Interacting is more than acting.** We all know people who talk, talk, talk about themselves, selves, selves. That not only fails to make a conversation, it fails to win respect or even a social interaction. If your conversation shows your interest in other people and their concerns, the people you're interacting with will be more interested.

No matter how supportive people are, you still need to have more to your conversation than a series of fantasy-novel "facts" about yourself. So far, we've only gotten as far as acting in a manner that might seem believable to your audience, or work well in the SCA situation. But you may find it worthwhile to go deeper .

What does your medieval character want out of life? Look around your persona's world. Who was alive and making things happen when you left in Fourteen-whatever?

What are your persona's values? Money? Power? Love? . . . Dynasty? Feudalism?

### **Tactics for making persona play easier in the SCA**

Working by yourself, you'll always be fighting the noisy majority who will talk about stereos and motorcycles while you are trying to be in another century. If you're going to be successful, you'll be interacting with others in any case. Get their help.

**Persona on the "buddy" system.** The first step is finding partners to play persona with. Make a pact with someone not to break character for defined periods at an event, like two hours at a time. If you stay together, your conversation can inspire others, or at the

least alert them that persona is the game you're playing and that you'd rather they didn't break it up.

The partner you choose for this need not (perhaps *should* not) be someone you know well. Too much knowledge of the partner can create overwhelming need to lapse into modern language to discuss something you both know about mundanely. It can also eliminate the freshness of discovering something about someone you don't know well.

At this point you're entering the world of courteous conversation. Conversation is itself a medieval art that somehow never gets into the Arts and Sciences competitions. Read Baldesare Castiglione's The Courtier for a start into this enjoyable art.

**Persona Guilds.** The obvious next step is to get a larger group doing persona for longer periods. You could even start a guild. This isn't exactly a new idea. You could devise **symbols or tokens** to wear that say "I'm in persona; please co-operate." You might borrow the pilgrim's shell to indicate you're on pilgrimage into the middle ages.

**Persona Camps.** Duke Cariodoc of the Bow has long been a proponent of creating spaces where all who enter must remain in persona while there. This method works because it eliminates one of the biggest difficulties of being in persona: the fact that most SCA people usually **aren't**. In Cariodoc's Enchanted Ground, you won't be dragged out of persona into a modern conversation.

(This is a good spot in which to thank His Grace for his helpful commentaries on this document in its previous draft as well as his eminent contributions to the art of persona throughout the Known World. Thank you, Your Grace upon whom may Allah continue to smile.)

### Specific-Period Activities

**Period-specific Groups.** A variation on Enchanted Ground is a specific-period camp at a large event like the Pennsic War. The "Trayn'd Band" is an Elizabethan militia unit which camps in a specific-period style, and requires all in camp to stay in persona continuously. All who live there dress from the period 1588-1603. Jeffrey Singman, General Editor of The Elizabethan Handbook, is involved with this group.

**Century Camps.** Another idea, which I have not heard of being done but which may yet be done, is a "Century Camp" open only to those within a given period. A group of like-minded souls could share a camp and place leaflets and notices at the gate. Possibilities that come to mind are Early Period, High Middle Ages, 14th-Century, 15th-century, Tudor, and Elizabethan campsites.

**Theatricals.** Our group staged a series of Elizabethan public dinners set in the year 1580. Our actors stayed among the guests, drawing them into period conversation. Studying this particular year and practicing persona gave us an amazing common ground that made interaction much easier. Simply being able to add "current events" to the list of possible topics helped. Knowing that we all knew the same customs and recent history helped too.

Our drills and practices, aimed at helping us keep the public from getting us out of persona, made us resourceful and creative. Perhaps best of all, it gave us a reason to stay totally in persona for 2 or 3 hour periods. Just knowing you can do it is a major discovery.

### Persona by easy stages

In his Royal University of Midrealm persona workshop, Duke Eliahu ben Itzhak concentrated on developing persona behavior by easy stages, mastering a level at a time. Its emphasis was on habits of speech, but by extension it can be applied to other phases of persona development as well.

Most of this section is based on his outline, which he was kind enough to share.

1. Your language is the most conspicuous part of you. Start by removing modernities from your speech.
  - a. Remove references to modern artifacts, persons, countries, situations and conditions that are facts of post-1600 life.
  - b. Reduce or eliminate your use of styles of speech that sound modern.

For some of us, this effort alone will cost us 50% of our vocabulary. Once this step is becoming a reflex:

2. Add “medieval” elements to your language and behavior:
  - a. Speak only of medieval subject matter.
  - b. Speak from the medieval point of view.
  - c. Add words from Latin (if appropriate) and your persona’s language.
  - d. Add items from your persona research in literature and history.
3. Learn the standard SCA terms of respect (e.g. “your grace” for a duke) and use them even where your research shows better. Memorize the symbols of rank so these terms will always be at the tip of your tongue. Read medieval sources for variations; the SCA customary terms are not all there are.
4. Learn and use theatrical techniques.
  - a. Graceful movement and speech. Stand erect, walk with grace, keep your chin up, shoulders back or at least relaxed. Look people right in the eye when speaking or listening. Take dancing, fencing and/or riding lessons; the side effects are great. Learn the correct way to kneel (not sit) before a superior.
  - b. Graceful speech. Speak slowly and clearly. A polite conversation is audible by all who are in the conversational circle. It is rude to force listeners to ask you to repeat. It is also rude to interrupt. Wait it out and be a good listener. Memory is one of the medieval person’s most valued assets. Avoid situations where a failure of your memory will become obvious. Use your memory to store topics and points as various persons speak, then address each of them in turn, when it’s your turn. Read “The Courtier” by what’s-his-name Castiglione.

This is a good spot to thank His Grace Duke Eliahu ben Itzhak for his contribution in this area. He is one of those who has contributed over the long term to this project. Thank you, Your Grace.



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\* = recommended title

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