

Persona Collegium

What are the attributes of an SCA Persona?



- Persona playing is not role-playing.

Nor, indeed, is it live role-playing, although that is sort of closer to the truth. Personas are, broadly speaking, and within the realms and laws of the SCA, an attempt to look and act like a medieval person, with regards to both your perceptions of the world and the world's perception of you. After substantial experience with all three of the genres mentioned, it seems that besides fostering better social, costuming and hygiene standards, the main difference is that the actions of an SCA persona are relatively consequential to reality.

In a live role-playing game killing, cheating, lying and stealing are within the rules of the game, and considered normal enough behaviour. Doing these in the SCA will produce a result much the same as if you did them in reality! (As an aside, killing is a tricky point, but for our purposes let us interpret SCA combat as purely tournament fighting, and not real fighting.) However, the point is that the actions you perform in persona match far more closely to *your* actions than in either tabletop or live role-playing, and therefore ought to be less petulantly game-like.

- Commonly held assumptions of persona play.¹

[1] Existence - a persona ought to be a medieval person, who (although not a real medieval person) *could have existed*. Taking the persona of a real medieval persona - for instance, King Henry VIII - is not permitted in the SCA for obvious reasons.

¹ Derived more or less directly from the articles on persona in the Known World handbook.

[2] Nobility - In the SCA, personas are assumed to be nobles, or at least of noble birth. Common or garden nobility has to be specifically given away, rather than having to be earned. For instance, you could decide to be an artisan, or a mercenary, or a merchant, or a beggar; but noble birth, being the son or daughter of a noble family, is standard until otherwise declared.

[3] Similarity of appearance - personas tend to, but not always, have the same natural and gender preferences as their players. (For instance, what they like to eat, their preferred friends and partners, and so on.) In particular, the SCA encourages a better level of costuming and costuming research than live role-playing. If someone is dressed in C16th Spanish clothing, their persona is quite likely to be a C16th Spaniard. If someone is dressed as a lord (in male costume), then they're probably a lord.

- Personas know about themselves.

The simplest personas are flexible yet diaphanous. Start with the most important 'facts'; a name and an identity, and perhaps a description of when and where you come from. More complex personas are less flexible, but more fully rounded. When fabricating a complex persona one needs to consider that the persona ought to know who they are, where they come from, what they do, and importantly, *why* they do those things, *a la* method acting.

Historical research and cross-referencing is important. For instance, Father Stephen, my 12th Century persona, is a monk who went on the third crusade. After I read a particularly saucy item about a monk in a reasonably accurate historical novel,² I looked for records of the event in translations of primary sources. In 'The Plantaganet Chronicles' series, I found a period writer describing the same event. The monk in question was unnamed and unknown, and so my persona has conveniently taken over those actions. This instance is however rather fortuitous. It is rare to come across known yet anonymous actions which so completely matches with other 'facts' about your persona that you can simply become them.

- Suspension of disbelief; not the laws of nature.

Suspension of disbelief is best described as the conscious or willful ignorance of various aspects of reality, which in our context particularly means those things which are mundane or ahistorical.³ Problems arise where persona playing becomes so outlandish as to not only require suspension of disbelief, but also of the suspension of the

² I believe the novel was called 'Kings of Vain Intent'.

³ George Orwell, more or less, rather less charitably described this as 'doublethink'.

laws of nature, like how people don't fly, or how much beer one can safely drink, for instance.

Consequential to research, a persona can become highly individualised and record a great deal of detail. For instance, why a monk erred, and fell in with troubadours, moors and albigensians in Southern France, can be explained in purely economic terms; an aversion to the quarter tax imposed on England, on the lay and clergy alike, to pay the ransom of King Richard after his capture by the Duke of Austria in 1194.

However, it seems personas ought to conform to the 'mean of life' of the medieval ages. Excess can be as much of a problem as deficiency. For instance, travel is a common thread that allows many SCA personas to go outside the bounds of what might otherwise be a rather sheltered, even boring, existence. Yet I once knew a persona of mixed Portuguese-Italian-Scottish-Chinese descent, who had also travelled the length and breadth of the world. (Those four countries and then some!)

The person whose persona it was, was in fact all of these things in mundane life. However, it seems reasonable to consider such extravagant travelling in a medieval lifetime relatively ahistorical, especially since the fellow had done little in the way of research to back up his claims that such a person might have existed.

As it happens, in the middle of the 13th Century the Pope sent several church emissaries to Genghis Khan, all of whom not only made it there and back, but many of whom were quite aged. Father Stephen could not be one of them (we know who they were), but they also had a less well known episcopal retinue of some two dozen lesser papal churls.⁴ If I am still around, it is quite possible Stephen may become one of that retinue. Still it is a long time until I am fifty, and besides it is an outlandish tale, and I would rather do a good deal more research on it before incorporating it into my persona.

Why have a Persona?

- Is it necessary?

Some say no, some yes. For instance, Duke Cariadoc⁵ is an authoritative and fairly vehement supporter of persona. But in general, nobody actually cares whether you have much of a persona or not, as long as you respect whatever other people's decisions are. Those who play persona will seek each other out, and those who don't, won't. I do workshops on persona primarily to get other people interested, so it is fair to say that I like to play persona, but not that it is necessary.

⁴ From 'The Mongols', a BBC documentary.

⁵ One of the main organisers of the 'enchanted ground' encampment area at Pennsic War.

- Is it useful?

Persona can provide a focus for your activities. For instance, it has personally fuelled my interests in Latin, the 12th Century troubadours and the medieval Middle East. It can also provide insight into why those activities were done, not just how they were done. For instance, I opt to fight in a fully enclosed great helm as opposed to the more common SCA open grill helm, not because it is easier, but because it is more in persona. At least I now have an insight into why that style of helm was superseded!

It can also be an easy way to introduce yourself to people you don't know. For instance, since my persona has travelled to the kingdom of Jerusalem, he ought to know about how to use Arabic forms of greeting, such as "Salaam Akaam", when approaching Middle Eastern types. It is reasonable for my persona to do this, and people seem to appreciate it.

- Is it fun?

Some of the best experiences I have had in the SCA have been whilst I and others have been relatively deep into persona. For instance, at a tavern revel where one of the local mercenaries was chatting up the bar wenches in an uncouth manner, I (the tavern keeper) was asked by the ladies to throw him off the property. With a few other lords, we proceeded to do just that, but allowed him back into the tavern some time later, on a sufferance of good behaviour. An appropriate outcome was reached, in character and without mundane dissent. It could very easily have taken place five hundred years ago.



Persona Dilemmas & Some Solutions to the Same



- A Dilemma is an irresolvable problem *within* a closed system of reasoning.

Playing persona has several dilemmas, primarily because it is, in fact, impossible for us to really be medieval people. For instance:

- [A] The Current Middle Ages (CMA) vs. The Real Middle Ages (RMA) dilemma - the CMA chivalry ethic vs RMA chivalry ethic dilemma - the tourney kings vs real kings dilemma - the society ahistorical customs dilemma (alias the 'how come knights rank higher than barons?' dilemma).
- [B] The time and space anachronism dilemma - the language dilemma - the xenophobia dilemma (alias the 'why aren't you and I killing each other right now?' dilemma).
- [C] The mundane location dilemma - the mundane object dilemma - the glaring/pernicious mundane object dilemma (alias 'the can of coke' dilemma).

- Some Solutions.

Fairly common solutions, to the above dilemmas of persona play, are as follows:

- [1] Don't play persona - simple and elegant, but rather dull. If you can answer "no" to all three of the questions in the previous 'Why have a persona?' section (Is persona necessary? Is it useful? Is it fun?) then this solution is for you, but not for me.
- [2] Play persona within the society 'fairylend' - solves [A] & [B] by embracing the CMA as the 'real world' for your persona at the expense of the RMA; doublethinks [C].
- [3] Play persona as if you were a real medieval person having a dream - solves [A] & [B] by embracing the CMA as a dreamscape, allowing the RMA to be the 'real world'; also doublethinks [C].
- [4] Play persona within a household or group of like-minded, like-period individuals - avoids [A] & [B] as much as possible, solves [C] as much as can be

agreed upon. As an aside, I believe one of the aims of period encampment is to eliminate suspension of disbelief altogether, but as things are, one cannot avoid at least some form of suspension of disbelief. For example, how many of us can *think* in Latin, Old French or Middle English, let alone speak them?

Conclusions

- From my own experiences, I can provide the following recommendations:
- Play persona most with the people you know the best, and play persona only as much as those with whom you are playing want to.
- Try starting out with your persona being much the same as you are, but diverging where appropriate. (For instance, Stefano, my Italian late-15th C. persona is a committed gambler, whereas I am not!)
- Try to talk about what medieval stuff you actually know about. For instance, if you are an artisan, talk about your specific art; if a fighter, the art of fighting.
- Avoid talking about mundane topics. For instance, in my household, each person has in the past picked three specific medieval topics that they will talk about, and three specific mundane topics that they will try *not* to talk about during Rowany Festival.
- If someone engages you in a mundane conversation, for instance in the tavern, don't get angry with them; politely excuse yourself, or drop out of persona. If they do it in your publicised period encampment, on the other hand, you might consider politely asking *them* to change the topic or leave.
- Try building up information about your persona like a story. When people ask you who you are, or what you are doing, not only do you have the information, but in a format that is readily presentable.
- Try to close in on where and when your persona actually is 'now' with more and more specificity. I use 1202 for Stephen and 1502 for Stefano because they are easy to remember. Next year it will be 1203 and 1503. I know of a Burgundian group that only does 1475-1500, and an Anglo-Saxon group that does 1002, 1003, etc.
- Use your persona to fuel your research or to learn new skills. Learn useful things that it would be appropriate for your persona to know.
- Above all, have fun. The SCA ought not to be a chore, but a game. I think that persona can help your research or learning become part of that game.

A List Of Interesting Questions Your Persona Might Be Asked ⁶

- Where were you born? What did/do your parents do for income/survival? Where did you live when you were growing up? What sort of building did you dwell in? Do you have any brothers or sisters? What enjoyments or pastimes did you have? What, if any, education have you had?
- How old are you? What year is it now? When is your birthday? Where do you live now? How are you employed? How many people live in the general vicinity? What sort of building do you dwell in? How many people live in the same building? Are your parents or siblings still alive? Are you married, and do you have any offspring? What do your family members do now? What are your common enjoyments or pastimes?
- What sorts of food do you eat regularly? What sorts of food do you eat on special occasions? Where does it come from? What eating customs or utensils do you have? What entertainments do you have on special occasions? How does the weather or season change what you eat?
- What sorts of clothes do you wear regularly? What sorts of clothes do you wear on special occasions? What regular customs of dress do you have? What cosmetics or jewellery do you use? What are they made from? Where do they come from, and how are they made? How does the weather or season change what you wear?
- What special occasions do you celebrate? What religion are you? Are you marked or clothed in a special way to show your religion? Who controls or mediates your religion? Do you know of any other religions? How do you reconcile your religion with other religions? (NB: Corpora specifically prohibits **compulsory religious ceremonies** at SCA events.)
- What, if any, travelling have you done? Why did/do you travel? What exact route(s) did/do you take? How did/do you travel? How long does it take to travel places? What accommodation do you use while travelling? What differences are there between where you come from originally and where you have travelled?
- How do you tell the time? How do you describe distance and measurement? What languages do you speak or write? How did you learn them? How and where do you buy or trade things? What trading

mechanisms do you use (types of money, etc)? How much do you earn a year? What things are expensive? What things are inexpensive? What are your most expensive possessions? Do you have servants or retainers? How well do they live compared to you?

- Who makes and keeps the laws of the land? How is justice and punishment dispensed? What punishment could you expect for common crimes, like theft or assault? What could you expect for murder? How much tax or tithe do you pay, and how and who do you pay them to? What do people think about the system of government?
- Who do you go to war with? How often and for how long do you go to war? What sort of people make up the army? How are they armed and armoured? How do they travel? What is the system of military leadership? How is the army provisioned? What sort of combat record does the army have? How many people are there normally in the army?
- What are the most common ways to die (including diseases and various other natural causes)? How are the sick treated? What do you think illness is caused by? What causes life? What is the purpose of life?



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⁶ On the same sort of lines as the list of questions I believe Duke Cariadoc once published in TI.