

# SECTION XIII -- MISCELLANEA

## 1) Fealty, Loyalty and Obedience (August, XXI)

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## FEALTY, LOYALTY, AND OBEDIENCE (AS WE KNOW AND USE THEM)

Frederick of Holland & Eilis O'Boirne (August, XXI)

*We have written this article at the request of Lord Reynardine of Tara. It is a brief introduction to fealty, loyalty, and obedience, as they are understood by the authors to be practiced in the West Kingdom of the Society for Creative Anachronism. We are Duke Frederick of Holland, MSCA, OP, and Mistress Eilis O'Boirne, OP. Please be aware that the opinions given here are our own, and do not represent any official policy of the Kingdom of the West, nor necessarily the opinions of a majority of the people in the Kingdom. Further, opinions on these subjects differ even more between Kingdoms than they do in any one Kingdom, so this paper should be read only as reflecting some of the attitudes held in the West. We would like to thank Sir William the Lucky and Mistress Hilary of Serendip for constructive criticism and judicious editing.*

### FEALTY

In the Old Middle Ages, fealty was a contract between lord and vassal, based on concrete benefits for both parties, and with very specific terms and limitations. The vassal, say a knight or baron, would receive a fief, most often a piece of land. In return, he would promise to fight for his overlord (bringing along a certain number of men and horses for a specified time period), or to perform some other service, or to pay an annual rent, either in coin or in produce. These contracts were often very specific, promising so much aid for a battle against Lord Thus-and-So, and less aid for a battle against Lord This-and-That, but more aid if Lord This-and-That was the one who provoked the quarrel.

Fealty was a cornerstone of the feudal system, influencing both economic and social life, and it shaped the ideals of the period. Oaths of fealty, and their consequences, were an important part of the history and literature from which we drew our inspiration in creating the Current Middle Ages. Therefore, fealty naturally occurred in our recreation. For us, however, it is an emotional rather than an economic force. We could not re-create it in its original form -- our Kings have very few manors to give to their supporters.

The eventual result of twenty years of experience, evaluation, adaptation, and re-evaluation (mostly subconscious) is a system in which Peers and Great Officers swear fealty to the Crown, and the Crown returns the fealty. The oaths are lovely, and impressive, and fill a real emotional and ceremonial need. However, the meaning of the oaths is meaningless at best. Some people feel that they are simply a collection of words which feel "proper" but which bind each side to nothing. Others feel that the oaths are much more serious, and that they do bind both sides to commitments of loyalty, obedience, and mutual service. When you speak of fealty in the

Society, make sure that you and your audience are both thinking of the same thing. If you do not, unnecessary misunderstandings may develop.

The foundation oath of our system is the one sworn by each Sovereign at his Coronation. In it, he swears to protect the Kingdom, and all who dwell in it, to the best of his ability. This is the Society version of the mythos which binds a King to his land. It is the fulfillment of this oath which differentiates the true King from the tyrant and keeps the power of the Crown from being abused. Further, the King is bound to obey this oath by custom and tradition, which are, in the West, far more binding than the limits set down either by the oath or in Law. The practical limit on the abuse of Royal Power is peer pressure, for in this Kingdom there is a large, active, and vocal group of Peers, drawn from all the Peerage Orders, who have strong opinions and are not shy about expressing them. If these people feel that a King is choosing an unwise course, they will not hesitate to inform him of this fact -- although they will generally do so in private and avoid making a scene in Court. Whether the King chooses to take the advice offered is his decision, but he should consider it carefully. If nothing else, he must consider whether he wants to live with the consequences after he leaves the Throne. (The final protection from a bad King is the fact that one can always choose to take a brief vacation from the Society -- until a new King is chosen.)

It is the King's Oath that makes it not only unnecessary but actually inappropriate for those members of the populace who are not Peers to swear fealty to the King. If they do so, the King promises protection (as he has already promised in the Crown oath), in return for a promise of personal loyalty and obedience. He gives nothing he has not already given, and takes back substantially more than he had before. Fealty is a mutual contract, and when something is given, something should

be returned. It is, however, both fitting and proper for the populace to offer homage -- a formal statement of their respect for the King and for the Crown. In a ceremony of homage, the King is promised nothing, but is offered honor by his people. He gives back nothing but his thanks. There are no lasting bonds formed; the ceremony simply acknowledges those which already exist.

It is proper for the Peers to enter into fealty, as they have received a fief of sorts. They have been given titles, and the right to wear certain badges of rank, and public recognition of their accomplishments. If they choose to swear fealty, they are given, in addition, the right to call upon the King, and upon the bond of fealty when they need to. In return, the King gets the knowledge that these Peers will support him, to the best of their not-inconsiderable ability, whenever he needs to call on them. Since the words of the oath are vague, the limits to these bonds are set, again, by custom and tradition. As a general rule in the Society, the overlord should invoke fealty gently. The vassals should invoke it formally, and only if truly necessary. It is proper for the King to remind his knights that they should fight in an upcoming War, but it would be improper for him to invoke their oaths and insist that they attend even if it would create difficulties for them. It would be inappropriate for a knight to use his fealty to ask his King's support in a private quarrel, unless his honor as a knight had been questioned, and even then he should endeavor to solve the problem himself, and only call on his overlord in an extreme case.

The only persons ever obliged to swear personal fealty (that is, fealty sworn in one's own person, not as King or Prince) are those members of the Order of Chivalry who elected to be named Knights. Whether they are obliged to renew this oath at each Coronation is a subject of debate, with some claiming that, if it is possible, a knight should swear to each new King, and others maintaining that a knight is in fealty to the Crown and Kingdom, and does not need to renew his fealty to each individual King (although he should unless there is cause). There are arguments to support each of these points of view. There is no "official" correct position in the West.

For all other Peers, entering personal fealty is optional. This is also true for the Great Officers and ceremonial heads of territorial groups. The oath sworn by the Officers and territorial Barons is for fealty in their Offices, not personal fealty. In other words, while acting *ex officio*, they are bound by their Oaths, but they are not so bound while acting in a personal capacity. (They should be very careful to keep the two separate -- but that's another

article.) In fact, those Officers who are not comfortable swearing personal fealty may state explicitly, in the oath, "In my Office, I so swear."

All the relationships discussed above are "public" fealties. Oaths of this kind may be accepted only by a King or Prince, or by a Viceroy, Baron, or other designated representative, in the name of the King or Prince. They should not be demanded by, or offered to, Barons or other heads of branches as part of their office. In fact, such oaths have been specifically disallowed in the West.

Of the "private" oaths of fealty, the most common is that sometimes sworn between a knight and a squire. In this oath, the knight will promise to instruct the squire in fighting and the ways of chivalry, usually in return for some degree of personal service on the part of the squire. The relationship must be clearly understood by both parties, and the conditions clearly set forth, as the terms are much less clearly defined by custom, and thus are more liable to abuse. In many knight-squire pairings, the bonds are indistinguishable from those of simple friendship and those developed by training together. However in others there may be a strong master-servant aspect ("Squire! More beer!"), which reflects some of the older medieval models. This might seem to run counter to the courtesy which we are all supposed to show in our dealings with each other. However, it is acceptable, even appropriate, in these relationships, provided that it has been agreed upon by both parties. It would not be an acceptable expression of the bond between the King and one of his knights. There is a more formal relationship, a contract between two who are essentially equals. It should be called upon only for higher purposes.

Occasionally all the members of a household will enter into joint oaths of fealty, or will swear fealty to the head of the household. This sort of bond is even more dangerous than that between a knight and his squire, as it is even less well defined by custom and tradition. Although it is not met with often, it is very open to abuse, especially since the members of a household usually interact a great deal of the time on an informal basis. Fealty in the SCA is more appropriate to a formal relationship, and is not truly needed within households. If the members of a household feel the need for mutual promises, it would be more appropriate for them to swear mutual support and friendship, until such time as they part.

Although all these oaths bind only within the Society, it is sometimes difficult to determine exactly where the

Society ends and mundane life begins. In general, the extension of an oath of fealty to mundane life, or to informal SCA situations like fighter practices, is entirely voluntary. However, if one takes the Society seriously, this extension (like the extension of courtesy and chivalry to all) comes naturally. The difficulty is that courtesy and chivalry don't get you in trouble outside the Society, but attempting to maintain or enforce a bond of fealty may.

A word which might be considered at this time is "glamour". In its old sense, glamour meant magic, a spell or enchantment. In its modern sense, it means alluring charm. Fealty is a "glamorous" relationship in both senses of the word. It is a relationship filled with the possibility of danger, but with a great potential for adding a dimension to our lives which is missing in the mundane world. It should be entered into only after the consequences have been thought out, and should not be taken lightly.

### **LOYALTY**

Even to those who are not all that serious about participation in the Society, loyalty to Crown and Kingdom should never be an issue. It is one of the binding forces which holds us together. This loyalty can be expressed in various ways. It starts with simply dressing for events, and acting in a manner which maintains the illusion for those around -- not necessarily fancy or formal, but in keeping with the surroundings. Beyond this minimum, which occupies very little time, some people feel that it is among their responsibilities to travel as much as they can to far parts of the Kingdom. There they do what they can to enhance the Society for those who do not live where they can attend an event every weekend and pursue SCA activities three evenings a week if they so choose. Others express their loyalty by putting in many hours a week, every week, event or not, on the semi-mundane tasks which are necessary to allow the Society to function. There are some who feel that they should attend all Crown events and Courts, to bear witness to the business of the Kingdom.

Another common way of expressing loyalty is the vocal boasting and boosting of your Principality or Barony or Province. This sort of vocal loyalty gets its best expression in the declarations of War, and rhetoric can run high on both sides, and flow on for hours. But since, by a gentlemen's agreement, all parties know that neither side will be converted, no one's feelings should be hurt.

These are all valid expressions of loyalty to the Crown, and each serves to enrich the lives of us all. However, it

is worth noting that, by common consent, "patriotic fervor" is not emphasized at Kingdom level by subjects of the West, especially when they are dealing with subjects of other Kingdoms. There are several reasons for this. One is that, since the SCA started in the West, other Kingdoms perceive that there is a "Western monolith" which is out to control the Society, and any boasting on our part would be taken badly. Another is the strong tradition in the West toward humility, which is sometimes actually a form of reverse snobbery. ("I'm just a simple country knight...")

It is possible to have loyalty to the Kingdom, a Principality, a local branch, a household, an office -- all at the same time. It is possible for some of these loyalties to come into conflict, and that is when we have to decide which ties are most binding. This problem is not new -- it was a common one in the Old Middle Ages. The decision as to which loyalty should be given priority at a given time can be different in different cases. But if the conflict is between two ties of fealty -- for instance, between a knight's fealty to his King and to his squire -- then whichever of the ties cannot be honored should be released in a formal manner, not simply ignored or broken. A release from fealty may be honorably sought, but breaking an oath damages the fabric of our Society.

For all of us, foremost among all our loyalties should be our loyalty to the ideals of the Society and of the medieval culture we emulate. Although not all of us dream the same Dream, for each of us there is a reason why we joined this group, and for most of us this reason includes some aspiration to courtesy, chivalry, and prowess, and to a more honorable society than we know in the mundane world. If we remain loyal to this aspiration, all our actions contribute to the realization of the Current Middle Ages. If we fail in this, all other loyalty loses value.

### **OBEDIENCE**

The question of obedience is a somewhat more difficult subject for most of us. Obedience to the Crown is a vital part of our re-creation, but even the obedience owed the Crown in the Old Middle Ages did not include giving up the right to ask questions. Such questions could get you labeled either as a trusted advisor of the King or as a potential rebel. It all depended on how you asked the questions. This is also true in the Current Middle Ages -- the difference is that the label may change every four months.

"The King's word is Law" does not mean "The King is always right", although it does mean that the King has

the last word. Every subject has the right -- and the duty -- to question the decisions of the Crown, if the subject feels that the decisions are not correct. However, the questions should be put at the appropriate time, and in the appropriate form. A question put at formal Court, and phrased "Are you out of your mind, you ninny?" has much less chance of being answered than one asked privately, which begins "Your Majesty, have you considered the following points?" Further, the public question is bad theater as well as being rude, while the private question is both politic and polite.

Further, even with those who are bound to him in fealty, the King does not have the right to demand obedience in matters which are not within his lawful command. The exact phrase used in the Western oaths is "to obey the lawful commands of the King", and some matters lie beyond that bound. "We would like to use your pavilion to hold Court, as the Royal Pavilion has blown away" is very different from "My sister showed up unexpectedly and will be staying in your pavilion this weekend -- find another place to sleep." The first is a command phrased as a request, and is something needful for the Kingdom, and it should be accommodated if at all possible; the second is a bald command upon an unlawful issue. It would provoke resistance for the first error, and deserve it for the second.

In his Coronation Oath, each King promises "to uphold the Law of the Kingdom". This "Law" includes both the written law of the Kingdom and the body of custom and tradition on which it rests, and it is this "Law" which bars the King from making unlawful commands. Further, in the same Oath, the King swears "to speak and to be silent". The first part of this phrase refers to the King's duty to issue such commands as are needful, but the second binds him to listen to the counsel offered him.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In all these matters, there is a necessity to balance and match the needs and demands of the parties on both sides. Both overlord and vassal must consider the abilities of their partners, and must not demand that which cannot be given. This is simple courtesy, which is the bedrock of our Society and should govern all our actions.

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