

SECTION XIII -- MISCELLANEA

2) A Non-Herald's View of Heralds (August, XXI)

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A NON-HERALD'S VIEW OF HERALDS

by Theodric ap Breken Beaken

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I am a Knight of the Society for Creative Anachronism. Automatically, I have classified myself in a slot in the SCA. I can further define myself to you if I add more pertinent facts about myself: I am also a Pelican and a Baron. I am not a Count or Duke or Viscount, Etc. But the first definition will be likely to stay in your mind, to wit: Knight.

Much the same sort of process goes on in everyone's head; it is a mental shorthand, designed so that the mind can work with other problems while quickly compartmentalizing a person, place or thing. This process is also part of prejudice.

I have, based on my eight years of experience in the SCA, developed my own sets of mental classifications and a distinct blindness to my own class. I cannot see myself clearly as others see me.

This preamble leads into my topic that I am going to offer to you: a set of views of the Herald from three viewpoints: an SCA persona, a fighter, and a Baron and Seneschal.

An SCA Persona

Basically, I am important to me. I have worked long and hard to convince others of this fact. I have struggled to achieve what I consider to be my rewards of title and rank. Yet the only people who control the recognition I have earned are the Heralds.

The Heralds, those people with green all over them, own my recognition. They tell the world where I stand. I know that I could do that myself, but I have not the authority that the Herald has. To the Herald the people listen. He has the right to say where I stand in the Society. I can say anything I want, but the people will believe the Herald. My claims might be seriously questioned. Thus, he controls my recognition.

The Herald can write down what happens to me. It really does not matter that much whether or not an individual Herald knows me personally. What matters is that I can speak my name, and the Office of Herald will know me.

The power of recognizing me is incredible. I fear the Herald because of it, and I fear without knowing it. I fear the King and the Prince because he has a power over me that I have given him, in an effort to reinforce the game we play. But the Herald has a real power to acknowledge me or not, and that rules an aspect of my existence.

As a Fighter

I had to learn from the Herald when I was studying to be a Knight. The language of the Herald was strange to me, and I found it almost incomprehensible. Yet I could learn enough to name the shields that I recognized. I could know what was acceptable or not acceptable at a very basic level. This knowledge helped me qualify for consideration for Knighthood. But I still do not fully speak the language of the Herald.

The shields that he blithely names off I had to face on the field of combat. He knew them by gules and bends, but I knew them as rounds, heaters or kites. I had to fight them, so I concentrated on what was beyond the shields, rather than what may or may not be painted on them.

I became experienced enough to recognize fighters by their devices and shields. I could spot banners and I could see by the colours a fighter wore whether he was friend or foe. I thanked the herald then, because I knew that without his insistent knowledge and the language, there would be chaos on the field.

The Herald also acknowledged me on the field. I could walk out and fight, something that always means I am laying life and limb on the line, and the Herald would know me. I could be engaged in combat with the best of the Realm, and yet I knew that my name would be said, because the Herald would announce it. I do not know my opponent all the time, but the Herald does. He will say the name, so that everyone will know it.

The exception to this rule is the melee, and even then some Heralds take the time to name the individual fighters. At least Heralds will name the sides, so everyone will know on which side they are fighting.

Saying my name wrong, or mixing me up with some other fighter is painful. I have enough to contend with, knowing that the Lady I care for is watching, knowing that my friends are watching and that the Ruler is watching too, that I do not need the hassle of my name being mangled. When that happens I cheerfully hate the Herald.

When that does not happen, I know that I take it for granted. Then I cheerfully ignore the Herald. But somewhere, deep down inside, I am grateful to them, and the pageantry they represent for the field.

As a Baron and Seneschal

The Herald is part of the Seneschal's staff, and the Seneschal is in service to the Crown. I represent the Crown in my Barony, so the Herald is part of my staff.

I count on the Herald to take care of certain aspects of my Baronial life. I count on the Herald to organize my court. I trust him to put the mess in order, to stage manage what needs to be managed, to advise me on procedure and to assist me in making court a useful part of current medieval life.

In the Court, he has certain code words that he can use, and will use them to set the ritual. When he calls "Pray attend to the court..." the drama has begun.

If there is a procession, he will organize it, and it will proceed at his whim. Again, he knows the awards, precedence and the code of the ritual. His special language will allow him to set the stage.

I expect the Herald to keep me informed and up to date on who has what awards. I expect him to do this for me, as I expect him to recognize my persona.

I expect him to inform the people. He knows the code words for announcements. Everyone has heard those words time and again, yet when it is time to make an announcement, I find a Herald, who knows the code and proper tone.

Devices are the Herald's responsibility. He confers with other Heraldry, often over great distances, to ensure that a person's device will be "suitable and unique". He uses his special language to ensure that this work is done properly.

In my Barony, the Herald also has the responsibility of diplomacy and neutrality. He must be impartial in assisting the noble to understand the people and vice versa. The Seneschal may advise on the law, but the Herald should have the ears of both the people and the noble.

I have presented an outline of how a non-Herald views Heraldry. Allow me to offer at this point what I call my "Pet Analogy."

A Pet Analogy

In an attempt to relive the Middle Ages, we have ignored, through choice, an important aspect of European Medieval life: the Christian Church. A quick survey of Medieval Europe will show that the Christian Church was a predominant part and institution in the life and time. Yet in the Current Middle Ages this aspect of that life is not acceptable, for some good and sound reasons.

So we have evolved a substitute: the College of Heraldry. The comparisons may be drawn thus:

The Church spoke its own language, Latin. The Heraldry does too: Heraldic French.

The members of the Church wore their own garb, especially when acting in an official capacity. So do the Heraldry, and the colour green is their colour.

The Crown today has wisely elected to provide protection to the Heraldry, and so did the Crown in Medieval Europe. For the Church, and the Heraldry, can read, write, and provide recognition of the person.

The Church has its own rituals, with key words and procedures. These rituals are important to the life of the community. So too are the rituals and procedures of the College of Heraldry.

I think that the parallels are interesting. I conclude that I think the best view I can offer of the Heraldry is to compare it to the Church. I think both serve a function in the Society they live in: to maintain Order in the world.