

Creating Personal Mythologies:

A Case for Personalized Award Documents in the SCA

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Preface

Once upon a time, when I was still in the early years of my SCA life, I got called into court, as most people who stick around for at least a few years eventually do, to receive my AoA. I was excited to be “Lady Mariette” (even though everyone still just called me Heather), and I was thrilled to receive a scroll that was an amazing piece of original art by a talented artisan, as is the tradition in the East. However, as I listened to the words the herald was reading, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was reading the right scroll. None of the words coming out of their mouth seemed to be about me or the things I had actually spent my time doing in the SCA.

Years later, when I began doing scribal work for the Signet’s office, I decided that every scroll text I wrote would be as specific to recipient as I could make it. Every. Single. One. The ideas that follow here are some thoughts about how to make that happen, but I can boil it down to two broad categories: personalization and periodicity.

Personalization

There are two places in a scroll text where personalization is easy to achieve: the address, and the exposition. In order to get the necessary details to make a scroll truly personal, though, some preliminary research is in order, especially if you do not know the recipient. Reaching out to people who know the recipient or have written them in for the award is generally helpful, as is a bit of searching on social media.

Address

There are numerous phrases that can be used to open a scroll, but in the SCA we tend to lean heavily on “Let it be known to all...” and all of its variant cousins, which can get a bit monotonous when scrolls are read out in court. The first line of scroll text should really be a hook, a line that grabs the attention of the audience when the herald starts reading; when it speaks directly to the recipient, the most important audience member in that moment, the effect is magnified. One of my favorite scroll openings is from an AoA I wrote for Brice McTavish, shown below. It is not based on a period text; it is based on the battle cry of his fight unit within the SCA, one that he immediately recognized, and which drew big smiles

from the recipient and his friends. Other ideas for the address may draw on the recipient's heraldry (as seen through the use of lions and thistles in the text for Konner's GoA, also below), or any persona attributes that you may discover in your background research.

Exposition

This is where we, as wordsmiths, really get to make sure the person getting recognized by the Crown has their praises sung. Talk, as specifically as your space allows, about what they have done. Don't just say they are a fighter; talk about what weapons form they use. Don't just say that their art inspires. What is that art? What office do they hold, what local group do they serve? Little details go a long way; "for service to Our realm" really just doesn't cut it.

Example 1: AoA for Brice McTavish

Glad are Our hearts when We hear the mighty shout of "Awhoo" rise up from the field of battle, for then do we know that the 404 have raised their swords and shields in service to the East.

Gladder still are we to acknowledge Brice McTavish, one voice in that chorus whose deeds have not escaped Our notice. Whether recruiting and training new fighters or attending to the needs of his local Shires and Baronies, this good gentle performs the tasks set before him with patience and skill. In light of this do we, Edward and Thyra, King and Queen of the East, award unto him arms:

Done by our hand this 17th day of November, Anno Societatis 47 at the Hundred Minutes War in Our Shire of Rusted Woodlands.

Example 2: GoA for Konner MacPherson

A lion resting among the thistle may hide well from Our sight, but only for a time. So have We, Brennan Augustus and Caoilfhionn Augusta, Emperor and Empress Orientalis, encountered a lion noble and true in Our loyal subject Konner MacPherson.

Whether acting as a knight marshal or pursuivant, working behind the grill preparing dayboard, or taking the field with his brothers and sisters from the 404, Konner has quietly performed these (and many other) services across the length of many years for both the Shire of Rusted Woodlands and the Kingdom of the East. So are We moved to Grant unto him the sole and exclusive right to bear these Arms: Quarterly per fess rayonny sable and argent semy of thistles sable, two lions passant guardant argent.

Done by Our hand at River War this 13th day of September, Anno Societatis 49, in the Barony of Iron Bog.

Periodicity

This is my term for “making something sound vaguely medieval-ish” without necessarily drawing on a specific period text. Even if we do not have access to detailed information about the recipient’s interests and activities in the SCA, we frequently do have a sense of the persona (or at least the name) they have chosen, and drawing on writing from that culture can help make the scroll text feel like it is actually written for the recipient. Here, influences from the styles of writing in various literary traditions can be very helpful, as can knowing a few basic pieces of background information about the culture of the recipient’s persona.

In the AoA I made for Bjorvig Huldarson, whose persona is that of an Icelandic poet, I drew on the alliterative nature of Icelandic verse, and its use of a poetic device called *kenning*, where the poet uses imagery to create a multi-word substitute for a noun. Here, “skyfire” is a kenning for “sun.”

Example 3: AoA for Bjorvig

The skyfire burns bright, and spring saunters forth. Frost makes way for the flowering time, and as the ground begins to thaw do We, Edward and Thyra, King and Queen of the East, command our scribe to carve these runes, telling the many good works of our subject Bjorvig Grimskald Huldarson, whose verse pleases the ear, whose meads please the palette, and whose sword strengthens Our army. In light of all this do We award unto him arms...

Done by Us on this 23rd day of March, Anno Societatis 47, at the celebration of Mudthaw in the Barony of Settmour Swamp.

Sometimes, using phrasing from a specific piece of poetry or prose can also be a way to launch into an award text. Even if I am limited in space, I can still slip in a few lines from a poem or a letter from the appropriate culture and period to set the stage. For an archery award being given to a Japanese persona, I was able to find a passage from the start of *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*, a journal in both poetry and prose written by a woman placed in the Japanese Imperial court during the late 13th and early 14th century.

Lady Nijo’s memoir starts thus: “As the mist rose among the spring bamboo heralding the dawn of the new year, the ladies of GoFukakusa’s court... made their appearances...” Sounds exactly like the type of phrasing that can be used for the address section of scroll text. My version appears below, with changes to adjust time of year and SCAdian court context:

Example 4: Apollo's Arrow for Asahi

As the mist rises among the snowy bamboo, heralding the dawn of the new year, the populace gathers at the court of Ivan and Matilde, Emperor and Empress of the East.

The snows melts away; soon, it will be time for the archers of the East to return to the butts. And so will the noble Kira Asahi draw her bow, releasing arrows straight and true, finding homes in their targets. Even when away from the range, Kira remains busy making her own arrows and assisting with the training of new archers.

In honor of these efforts do We see fit to induct the aforementioned Kira into the Order of Apollo's Arrow. Done on this 27th day of January, in the 52nd year of Our society, in the Barony of Stonemarche at Birka.

Sometimes, a little bit just isn't enough. Sometimes, a wordsmith can take on the tone of a piece of literature and sustain it throughout the entire text for an award. Here, someone did that for me. My persona is 14th century French; this text is based on *The Romance of the Rose*, an allegorical poem about courtly love and virtue. It was one of the most widely read pieces of literature in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. It would have been something with which my persona would have been very familiar.

Here, the wordsmith took on the tone of the authors, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. She uses the phrasing "fair one" to describe me, which is a term used throughout the original text to refer to the object of the speaker's affection, and she makes references to flowers and beauty, which connect directly to the allegorical garden of the poem. Most importantly, the wordsmith takes on the same mindset as the original speaker in the poem: that of an ardent admirer. Though the context is different (the poem is a love story, of sorts; I got a service award) the intensity of feeling is felt in the wording.

Example 5: Silver Crescent for Mariette (words by Mistress Kasumi no Tanaka)

There lives amongst us a rose of beauty and of words, who provides for us the Sovereigns Ivan and Matilde, Tsar and Tsaritsa of these eastern lands with both service and inspiration. She is Mariette De Bretagne, a woman of unquestionable spirit and intelligence.

To recount the deeds of this fair one would be as if to count the flowers within a garden or the stars above at night. We cannot, for all the stars fail to shine and the flowers pale in her service. To gaze upon her as she toils at her craft of poetry or scrolls, to view her visage as she works in finance, ink or flame, would stop the sun from setting.

This one flower serves as a beacon for us all to bloom, and because of this We welcome her to Our Order of the Silver Crescent and grant unto her these arms: Quarterly azure and sable, a butterfly between five mullets one, two, and two argent.

So witnessed this was in Our Crown Province of Ostgardr, on the 10th day of February, A.S. LII, as We celebrated the gentle arts and seeked out Our next Champions of Arts & Science and the Bardic Arts.

The Whole Shebang (Periodicity + Personalization)

Sometimes, you pull out all the stops. Sometimes, you get an assignment that has the potential to do all the things. For the Chivalry text below, I had a unique opportunity: a notable public figure in the East, one who had a unique persona profile (a Portuguese native who found themselves in Japan and became part of Imperial society) complete with a rich personal mythology.

For this text, I spent months researching a wide range of topics: the records of the first European visitors to Japan; naming practices at Japanese court; astronomical records from across Asia in the late medieval period; Japanese imperial dating systems; and the story of an English sailor, Will Adams, who became a samurai only after his English name was pronounced dead. Here is the result:

Example 6: Chivalry text for Sir Ryouko'jin of the Iron Skies

On the 26th night of the 5th month and 23rd year of the Tenbun era, a comet appeared in the Northern sky, sailing through the Big Dipper. Soon after, a demon crawled forth from the mountains, an imposing figure that made many tremble in fear and awe. But this demon did not ravage and plunder. Instead, he set upon a path of training and testing, becoming a fierce warrior through discipline and perseverance. And this demon raised his sword in service to Our Kingdom, serving Us as a champion of arms, a marshal on Our fields, and a commander in Our mighty army, embodying the virtues of duty, honour, respect, and courage for all of Our populace to see and emulate.

And so do we, Ioannes and Honig, Emperer and Empress of the East, declare the demon, Henriques Sandalio Corvo, dead, and with this death is born the samurai, Sir Ryouko'jin of the Iron Skies, Knight of the East, with all the privileges, insignia, precedence, and responsibilities such rank carries. Furthermore do We confirm unto him by Letters Patent the right to bear these arms:

which shall be borne from this day forward by him and no other. In witness whereof We set Our Hand this 9th day of August, Anno Societatis LII, at the 46th Pennsic War.

A few final thoughts...

Making an award document that is tailored to a recipient may be more important than many of us realize. If scroll text speaks directly to the recipient's activities and achievements, they will generally appreciate the recognition even more. Many studies have shown that specific, timely feedback, acknowledging a volunteer's service to an organization is one of the more reliable predictors for continued service to that organization. Even if we don't talk about it as scribes, what we do really can help improve retention in the Society.

Beyond that, the SCA is an organization where we are tasked with creating new identities for ourselves in the form of personas. Our award documents are part of that persona's existence in these current Middle Ages. Why not use those documents to build on those personas, creating (or solidifying) the personal mythologies that people are in the process of building?

As with all good myths, there is a larger-than-life element that makes the stories we tell memorable, so have at it! In this task, embellish away, gild the lily, exaggerate to the point of ridiculousness; then, scale it back, just a hair, during revision. This is your moment: be bards, be poets, be inspirational. Make everyone in the audience want to have a scroll made by you, just for them.

Some Suggested Resources

When the society first started out, and even fifteen years ago when I received my AoA, it would have been legitimately challenging to find some of the information I used in constructing these scroll texts. Today, we live in the age of the internet, which is an amazingly useful anachronism for doing research, both personal and academic.

Facebook can provide loads of information about award recipients from personal profiles and pages for kingdoms or local groups. Many kingdoms now have wikis that allow people to share information about their interests and personas. Countless period literary texts are available both online and in print, and Google scholar searches can easily turn up a wide range of historic documents. I could not possibly list every place to find inspiration from period texts, but a few of my favorites are listed below:

The Avalon Project (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/medieval.asp)

Part of Yale Law School's collection of legal and diplomatic documents. Includes laws and legal statutes, judgements, treaties and charters, including the text of the Salic Law and the Magna Carta.

Hanover Historical Texts Collection (<https://history.hanover.edu/project.php>)

Resources here are sorted by era and geography. Deeper with sources from 16th century Europe, but there are also other gems in here as well, including a collection of letters from Crusaders.

Online Calendar of Saints Days (<http://www.medievalist.net/calendar/home.htm>)

For when you want to give the date the way a medieval European might have reckoned it.

Towards a More Period Text (https://www.sca.org.au/scribe/articles/period_text.htm)

Baron Adhemar de Villarquemada's piece on using period texts in creating SCA award documents, including a number of examples. I am deeply indebted to this page, which also includes links to a number of additional online resources.