

A Note on the Symbolism of Knighthood
and the Meaning of Membership in the COTS

One of the points which will need to be discussed by the Companions, and which will require careful handling, is the core symbolism of membership in the Order itself. By this I mean simply (well, actually, it's not at all simple) this: what does it mean to be a Companion of the Stone? What is this Companionship like?

In Masonry, to call on an example for clarification, the symbolism of membership is that of a guild of skilled craftsmen; this is developed quite explicitly in the rituals, and powerfully shapes the way Masons approach what they call their "Craft." In Odd Fellowship, the work of charity is central to the symbolism of membership; few Odd Fellows these days have actually buried a corpse or educated an orphan, but Odd Fellows still conceive of themselves as a group of people devoted to good works -- a self-conception which has had potent effects in motivating a great many actual good works.

Similarly, if less productively, the symbolism of membership in many modern Neopagan groups is that of an oppressed minority fighting for survival under the iron fist of the Christian Inquisition. This symbolism, which has become quite popular these days in a variety of groups, has a good deal to say concerning the often rather silly ways in which Neopagans tend to deal with the rest of us.

So -- the question needs to be asked -- what is the symbolism of membership in the COTS to be?

One image which has been discussed in various ways is that of knighthood, and the chivalric mythos does have certain things to recommend it -- notably a pervasive concern with honor and right conduct, and a good percentage of the Western world's most potent legends. Some work was done on a possible subsidiary group within the COTS' structure which was to use knighthood as its principal symbolism, focusing on the myths of the Grail.

Attractive as this idea may be, I have come to regard it as a serious mistake.

There are two severe problems with the use of knighthood as a basis for membership symbolism. The first is that the knight, in the popular imagination as well as in historical reality, is an elite figure within an intensely hierarchical authority structure. This same quality is implied, powerfully, by the core image of the knight himself -- the man on horseback, who sits above others and travels by means of another's effort. The Western esoteric tradition has had far too much a tendency to move in this direction anyway, and the symbolism of knighthood seems to be a bad idea in this context -- as the history of the

various Templar-revival groups in the last two centuries may tend to suggest.

The second, and by far worse, problem has to do with the role of knightly imagery in American society. The, on the whole, highly valuable American tendency to make fun of social pretensions has produced a deep ambivalence toward the concept of the knight, in which Galahad and Miniver Cheevy have come to play equal parts in the popular imagination of knighthood. This hasn't been helped by more than a hundred years of starry-eyed would-be knights in the English-speaking world, from the Victorian chivalric revival to the current antics of the SCA, whose exploits resemble those of Don Quixote rather more than those of Bedivere or Bors. If the imagery of the knight is brought into our self-symbolism in any significant way, it seems more likely to make us look pompous, pretentious and rather silly than to encourage the sort of attitudes -- in ourselves, and in those with whom we come into contact -- which we should be trying to generate.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest that a different but related imagery might serve as a more functional basis for the symbolism of membership within the COTS. This is the image of the company of pilgrims, of companions on a quest. This has a number of the same advantages as the imagery of knighthood -- it has the implication of commitment to an ideal; it shares in the odd complex of nostalgic idealization which dominates modern attitudes toward all things medieval; it draws, powerfully, on some of the most popular and positive imagery of modern fantasy fiction (compare "The Companions of the Stone" to "The Fellowship of the Ring"). At the same time, it avoids the implied elitism of knighthood, and draws on an image largely untouched by the posturing wannabees of the last century or so. It also lends a certain valuable air of practicality to the image; unlike the knights of the Grail Quest, who routinely wandered in the Waste Land for weeks or months at a time without any visible source of food, drink, fodder, or shelter, pilgrims on the road quite obviously have to look to lodging for the night and meals along the way. (For that matter, the image of journeying on foot seems to me to better express the often plodding and always effortful nature of progress in magic than does the image of the horseman riding by.)

The imagery of pilgrimage already has a place in present and proposed COTS ritual, and could easily be worked in to a greater extent. It could also be made part of the instructional material of the Order in a number of ways, subtle or obvious, beginning with the inclusion of the Staff as the working tool of the First Degree. (This could also be made a feature of the First Degree ritual with little difficulty.) My sense is that these steps, and the exclusion of the symbolism of knighthood, would go far to give the COTS the foundation for a useful and constructive symbolism of membership.