

Students/Wards/Cadets - What they are and why

by Baron Adam Comyn

Introduction

As a Companion of the Order of the Bronze Ring, one of my tasks is to school others in the art of SCA rapier combat. An option which I and many of my fellows choose towards that end is the taking of a student in a formal relationship. What exactly that means is entirely dependent on both student and teacher. Having been asked on more than one occasion to explain the concepts involved, I've written some opinions on [being a Ward](#) and a few [simple rules of conduct](#) farther down on this page. But the implied expectations can reduce the strongest student (and teacher) to anger and confusion, and even the "title" given to the student can befuddle the mind. A brief history lesson on the taking of students is thus in order.

Back in the Day

That a knight and only a knight wears a white belt is society law; almost all of the remaining color-coding done in the SCA is a result of convention. The Order of the White Scarf is an exception. An award created by the Principality of Ansteorra in A.S. 13 to honor its best and brightest fencers, the badge of the order is a white scarf worn on the left arm. The excuse was that a white scarf was worn as a badge of military rank during the Renaissance, although Cyrano de Bergerac was the inspiration for the original idea. Presumably the implied connection between white scarf and white belt was intentional, certainly all that followed suit was based on that parallel. As the knight's tradition of taking a squire was visibly proclaimed by a red belt, the members of the Order of the White Scarf gave their students a red scarf. And as knights may be called "Sir", the title of "Don" or "Donna" was given to the White Scarf, and the students of a Don were called "Cadets".

A few years pass, and the Kingdoms of Ansteorra and the Outlands sign a treaty of equivalence so that the Outlands can grant to its populace membership in the Order. The (probably apocryphal) story as it was explained to me is that the king of the Outlands heard of this wonderful award called the "White Scarf" and decided to give it to a deserving gentle in His own kingdom. Thus creating all kinds of chaos because the award belongs to Ansteorra and only the monarchs of Ansteorra can give the award, and even then only to members of Their populace. The solution was the aforementioned treaty, whereby Ansteorra gave permission for the Outlands to use the award, and each would recognize the legitimacy of the award given by the other royalty. This is kind of a big deal, since this is the first (and as far as I am aware, the

only) inter-kingdom treaty of equivalence for any award. More years pass, and more kingdoms decide that being a part of this "White Scarf Treaty" is a good thing.

The Midrealm Order

When the Middle Kingdom created the Order of the Company of the Bronze Ring in April of A.S. 33, it did so with the express intent of *not* signing on to the interkingdom White Scarf treaty. The reasons for this are varied, and not particularly relevant, but the upshot is that the Midrealm created an award that had much the same intent as the Order of the White Scarf but without the explicit history. It was (and is) all too easy to draw instant parallels between the awards. They are given a grant of arms for excellence in rapier, and so are we. They wear a white scarf, thus we wear a bronze one. They take students, thus we take students. They are called "Don" or "Donna" ...

What's in a name

And here it breaks down. While there are necessary parallels, the two orders are not the same. The wearing of a scarf on the left arm has roots in Medieval European practice, and has a long tradition in SCA rapier with a color-coding scheme relatively kingdom independent. To wear one ourselves isn't mimicry, but simile. But we are our own order, and have our own name. So while they are "Dons", we are "Warders". And although there is no rule against using "Cadet" to describe our students, the naming distinction is maintained by many Companions of the Order of the Bronze Ring by calling our students "Wards". A third option is to simply call the student a "Student" and be done with it. As with most things, different Warders have different opinions. The prevailing tendency seems to be toward the use of "Ward". The important thing to remember is that a Ward is a Cadet is a Squire is an Apprentice is a Protege is a Student. It's one person involved in a fealty-esque relationship with another. The more learned person agrees to teach a specific set of skills to the less learned in exchange for some benefit. Determining those benefits depends entirely on how the relationship is established and maintained. Which (finally) leads to some applicable information.

Why take a Ward? Why be a Ward?

As I've seen it, a Warder takes a Ward for two often intertwined reasons, each with their own merits. First, because you want to make them a Warder. They have that "whatsits" which is easy to spot but hard to delineate, and you want to see them gain the public recognition for those qualities they have or have potential to have. Second, because you want to make them better. Perhaps their rapier technique is horrid, perhaps their interpersonal communication is horrid. You can help, and making the relationship formal makes the connection between you stronger and your words more weighty. This second reason can be more troublesome, because if I don't think they

have "it" then I'm not inclined to offer the formal relationship. But, my opinion is certainly not the only one around and there are people who defend the merits of that position. If it works, I'm all for the success it brings.

As I imagine it, you become a Ward for two reasons. First, you desire to become a Warder. You learn from everybody, and you can become a Warder without ever having been a Ward. To be a Ward is to declare to the society that you have set a goal for yourself and intend to achieve it. Second, you like the Warder and want to make a formal connection with them. Maybe they're the only one who has translated Medieval Italian manuals, maybe they're somebody you've admired for years and wish to emulate. As with the secondary reason from the Warders perspective, I find this option can be troublesome because if you don't have the desire to be a Warder you can vouch for the "coolness" of someone in other ways. And again, my opinions are just that and I'm glad when any friendship works for both of you.

Formal versus Informal Teaching

Everybody teaches, some are just more intentional about it than others. In the same vein, you can learn from every person you face. It's this kind of, "hey show me that disengage again wouldya?" exchange which I label `Informal` teaching. `Formal` teaching involves a more deliberate attempt to pass knowledge between people through organized dialogues; more one-on-one training, specific focus on a single aspect of combat, advice on performance on and off the field, et cetera. It is this second category which is the hallmark of the Ward/Warder relationship. Not that a Warder will refuse to assist in a Formal capacity with the majority of the rapier population, but that the Ward is explicitly involved in regular participation in that regard. I teach everybody I fight with, but I make deliberate effort with my Wards to advance their learning.

For simplicity, this is written as suggestions to one who is considering the merits of becoming a Ward. The information here is predicated on the assumption that every Warder will teach you, but that becoming a Ward means you want to get "extra" help from one Warder in specific. Don't think that you're left out in the cold if you're "just another fencer", the vast majority of the Companions made it just fine all by themselves.

Three Be's and the Rule of Five

The following is entirely my opinion. I think it is well-reasoned opinion, but I'm sure that each of these points will have a counter-argument expressed by one of my fellows. Take my words (and theirs) with a grain of salt and remember, the only opinions that matter are those of you and your teacher.

- **Be blunt**

There is a time and place for flowery prose; setting the ground rules for the formal interaction between you and your Warder is not one of them. Speak plainly and clearly of what you expect and what you want, even if only to say that you don't know what to expect. Ask the same of your Warder. Dancing around any issues you have right now will, at best, only delay the inevitable. The more blunt you both are before you enter into the formal relationship, the better off you both will be regardless of the final decision.

- **Be honest**

Being blunt doesn't help in the least if the answers given and received are half-truths designed to soften a harsh opinion. If you don't like what you're hearing, say so. If you don't have an answer to a question you're asked, admit it. And if you don't know why you want to be a Ward, don't take their offer just because they asked. In short, know your Warder and know yourself.

- **Be aware**

Establishing a formal SCA relationship (ward, squire, protege, apprentice, whatever) carries a lot of baggage. Becoming a Ward is a public declaration of a personal goal, and your Warder is going to be the model that others think you are trying to emulate. It's not necessarily fair to either of you, but that won't stop it from happening. Take the time it takes to make your decision, neither of you are going anywhere anytime soon. Don't make your decision based on pleasing anybody but yourself... either answer is going to be a decision you will live with.

1. **What do you expect to gain**

2. **What does he expect to gain**

As a Ward, at least part of your answer is pretty easy: you want to become a Warder, and to learn whether you have it in yourself to achieve that goal. Make sure you find out what your Warder thinks they'll get from you. What will you get from him as your Warder that you don't get now? What will he get from you as his Ward that you aren't already giving him? If either of you are doing this as some sort of bragging rights about "the neat person I got to be my superior/inferior" then you're doing it for the wrong reasons.

3. **What do you want from her**

4. **What does she want from you**

Similar to the first two questions, but more specific to this particular person. What do you get from Warder Jayne that you won't from Warder Jim? Do you want martial prowess? Exquisite period technique? An introduction to The Powers That Be? A voice of wisdom? Geographic proximity? Everybody has their strong suit, make sure you like what you see. And make sure that you're ready to live up to the expectations Warder Jayne has of you. Can you make it

to two events a month? Afford to upgrade all your gear to meet her expectations? You should also find out how much of a serf you're expected to be. You (probably) won't have to polish helms or boots, but are you interested in playing up the fealty relationship with a "Yes, Warder" to her whims? Is she comfortable with you playing it up?

5. **What do you lose**

I touched on this in my Three Be's. You lose anonymity, and that can be a significant loss to some. There are people who will judge you based solely on whose Ward you are. But there are also people who will judge you based solely on the fact that you have no scarf at all -- I lost a fight in a champions tourney because of the ego of my opponent. Some of your friends will treat you differently simply because of the additional wardrobe accessory and it will take work to remind them that you're no different. Although, in some sense, you are different. You've chosen to work closely with one person to better yourself, and by definition that process will change you.

Who asks who, and what if they say no?

Traditionally, the teacher is the one who asks the student to join in the relationship. This makes a certain amount of sense, as the teacher is the one who should have the perspective to see the potential for growth (or need for direction) of the student. That doesn't mean you can't ask a Warder to become their Ward, but it does mean that you'll have a bit of an uphill battle to convince them that you're ready and that you're the right person for them. Don't worry about blind-siding them with your request, most of us are pretty aware of our surroundings.

Dealing with what's involved with an answer in the affirmative is what this article is about, but there's no requirement to accept the invitation. So what happens if Warder Jim asks you to be his Ward and you say no? Well, there shouldn't be any difference at all; Warder Jim should be big enough to handle your rejection and move on with life as it was before he asked. By the same token, if you ask Warder Jim to become his Ward, be strong enough to handle it if his reply is negative. There are a lot of expectations put on both sides of the relationship, and for whatever reason he's not able to give you what you asked. No offense should be taken or implied, it just is what it is.

What does a Ward do?

Depends on you, depends on your Warder. For some, it's daily contact and information exchange on and off the field. For others, it's having dibs on a Warder's time and talent. Most wear red scarves on their left arms, some wear another color,

some don't wear them. But always, a Ward's job is to fence. Put on gear, get on the field, and make things happen.

Sometimes, the Ward does servant-like duties, like keeping blades clean or polishing boots or helping tote and fetch garb and gear. Personally I have no problem with this; the explicit student/teacher relationship already indicates a degree of deference. If my Ward wants to help me care for my belongings, I take that as a sign of respect and I am truly honored by it. It's also my own junk that is being cared for, and I should darn well be capable of taking care of it myself. Being a lackey can be a positive element to include in persona playing, and I don't begrudge a Ward the chance to play at it. The obvious warning, of course, is to ensure that it remains playing and not an expectation or demand. Unless you wanted that out of the relationship, in which case more power to you.

Final Thoughts

That's an awful lot to read in one sitting. To summarize: Know what each of you will get out of this relationship, be blunt about what you want and ask for the same. Take the time it takes to make your decision, and don't make your decision based on pleasing anybody but yourself. If you are asked to be a Ward and can't say yes, then say no. If the Warder can't handle the rejection, they shouldn't have asked. If you ask a Warder, be ready to justify your reasons for being forward, and be strong enough to handle a negative response. The relationship can be a strong and healthy experience for the both of you, and well worth the effort.

The White Scarf history lesson came from two sources. [A Brief History of the White Scarf](#) and [History of SCA Fencing](#), both by Don Tivar Moondragon.

In service I remain,
Adam Comyn
written this 6th day of August in the reign of Valharic and Alys, Regnum
Mediterranae