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# To Stand Out by Blazon: Heraldry, Hierarchy and Social Competition during the Early Modern Period

Nicolas Vernot

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Steven Thiry & Luc Duerloo (Eds)

# HERALDIC HIERARCHIES

Identity, Status and State Intervention  
in Early Modern Heraldry

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Edited by  
Steven Thiry and Luc Duerloo

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# 6.

## To Stand Out by Blazon

### Heraldry, Hierarchy and Social Competition during the Early Modern Period

*Nicolas Vernot\**

Although heraldry appeared during the Middle Ages, a vast array of sources shows that armigerous people have never been as numerous as during the early modern period, around the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, while the felt need to use heraldry has never been stronger than during this period, the social role fulfilled by this emblematic practice remains unclear. And the constant reassertion that, in the vast majority of countries, armorial bearings have never been an exclusively noble privilege only obscures the issue even more: if even craftsmen and peasants had coats of arms, must we therefore conclude that heraldic practice and social status were completely disconnected?<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades, the issue of the social extent of heraldic practice has usually been monopolised by a desire to demonstrate that the use of armorial bearings was not restricted to the nobility.<sup>3</sup> This was fully justified, given the weight of prejudices which, in most European countries, still cause coats of arms to be seen as a privilege of the noble class. The studies published along this line by historians like Michel Pastoureau in France not only contributed to breaking heraldry free from its reputation as merely the display of vanity, but also made it academically respectable among a wider audience. Scholars could now show an interest in coats of arms without being labelled as snobbish or reactionary.<sup>4</sup>

But this democratisation of interest in heraldry has sometimes created the illusion that heraldic practice was in itself 'democratic'. Too often, specialists who are committed to promoting good practices in the contemporary use of coats of arms



cite the very existence of peasants' heraldry as evidence that heraldry has always been a 'popular' practice. Many heraldists, reluctant to see coats of arms associated with any kind of elitism, now tend to over-emphasise the 'democratic' aspect of heraldry for fear of being accused of suspect ideological motivations.

But if we examine the bibliography devoted to peasants' heraldry, it is surprisingly meagre.<sup>5</sup> Michel Pastoureau, in his *Traité d'héraldique*, popularised the idea of Norman peasants having heraldic seals, but a closer study of this sigillographic iconography led by Christophe Manouvrier has shown, on the contrary, a very sharp division between the seals used by local noble families, which depict coats of arms, and those of peasants, whose emblems appear directly on the field of the seal. This demonstrates a very explicit and shared social division between non-armigers and armigers, the latter being, in that rural context, nobles.<sup>6</sup> Though genuine peasant heraldry is documented in the early modern period, it seems to have been statistically scarce almost everywhere, and in some places completely absent. Indeed, when considering the social extent of heraldry in eighteenth-century Western Europe, the general trend seems to have been the following: 100% of the nobles made use of coats of arms, while no more than 5% of peasants did so.<sup>7</sup> But what about the others in between?

To understand the social role heraldry played in early modern Europe, demonstrating that it was not a purely noble prerogative was a necessary step, which now needs to be surpassed, for early modern society was far more complex than a mere opposition between nobles and commoners.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it would be misleading to conclude that heraldry has *nothing* to do with nobility. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to question the social value assigned to heraldic use in early modern societies, and especially the links between heraldry, nobility, élites and the population at large. To what extent did heraldry contribute to defining and making visible social identity? Did the use of such emblems identify groups or the people within them? Was heraldry used to define or to challenge social hierarchies? To what extent did these issues affect heraldic composition?

On the specific issue of how social status affected the content of shield design, this paper should not be considered as a peremptory position, but as a flexible framework to be applied and challenged by heraldists for other territorial contexts.

## Armigers vs non-armigers: approaching the social identity of heraldic users

While in many areas commoner armigers were more numerous than noble ones, many factors demonstrate that, in the early modern period, there was a close association between heraldry and nobility. How do we solve this apparent paradox?



### *Reassessing the link between heraldry and nobility*

Created in aristocratic circles during the Middle Ages, heraldry was used in warfare and during tournaments, activities that were essentially knightly by nature.<sup>9</sup> Even though non-noble coats of arms are documented as early as in the 1250s in some areas,<sup>10</sup> they always appear later than noble ones. The delay between the earliest appearance of noble and commoner heraldry is only a few generations in some places, centuries in others, and it hardly ever occurred at all in some areas, such as Russia and Lorraine. In other words, the general trend of social dissemination of heraldic use is a top-down movement, with non-nobles appropriating an emblematic system invented and extensively used by the nobility. Michel Pastoureau estimates that of all the known medieval coats of arms, two-fifths belonged to commoners,<sup>11</sup> but this ratio does not reflect the number of times each coat of arms was used or displayed. For example, in many public places such as churches, depictions of the arms of nobles are often far more numerous and appear in more prestigious places.<sup>12</sup>

Coats of arms are displayed on a shield and often topped with a helmet: such iconographic features refer primarily to knightly culture, even if they were later borrowed by commoners. The most frequent charges belong to the lexicon of nobility: animals symbolising power and courage (lion, bear, eagle) or related to hunting (boars, greyhounds) and charges evoking the Crusades (crosses, crescents, Moorish heads, etc.). Towers are far more numerous than barns, swords than forks, eagles than hens.<sup>13</sup> Heraldry smells like blood rather than sweat.

In many countries nobles lobbied to obtain restrictive heraldic laws in their favour by publishing treatises or exerting political pressure on the prince.<sup>14</sup> They did not always succeed, but the fact the pressure originated from the nobility is itself significant: peasants and craftsmen never lobbied for the restriction of heraldry. Moreover, most, if not all, of the plaintiffs in heraldic trials were nobles.<sup>15</sup>

Proofs of nobility were usually illustrated with coats of arms, as were letter patents granting nobility. It is significant that false nobles, usurpers and the purveyors of fake titles have never failed to support their pretensions through the display of coats of arms.<sup>16</sup>

In early modern Western Europe, almost all nobles had coats of arms and they could neither pretend to act nobly nor exercise their noble prerogatives without them.<sup>17</sup> No other social group made more systematic and extensive use of heraldry or displayed greater concern about it. To have a coat of arms was an essential part of noble identity and discourse. Except in a few regions, peasants usually did not place a coat of arms above the entrance to their homes; nobles always did so in their castles.

For early modern nobles, heraldry was a necessary tool in asserting their legitimacy as the dominant group. The use of heraldry generated and strengthened the nobility's internal cohesion through visual compositions such as architectural décor

as well as illustrated genealogies and armorial registers emphasising family, social and feudal ties. In both private and public spheres, heraldry visually expressed the symbolic capital of nobility, based on values such as lineage, honour and heroism.<sup>18</sup> Arms were extensively displayed by the nobility in places and at events to assert the group's social pre-eminence: at seats of power and in churches, at ceremonies such as joyous entries, funerals and processions. Even though coats of arms were not in themselves an exclusive privilege of the nobility, they were used quasi-systematically to identify things that were noble privileges, from pre-eminence in church to the exercise of seignorial prerogatives such as justice. Coats of arms were indispensable to the nobility as a group in the exercise of its authority, whether seignorial, political or cultural.

For the population as a whole heraldry was associated with nobility and its corollaries: power, prestige and good taste. If the relationship between nobility and heraldry had been nothing more than a prejudice emanating from a bunch of wandering minds, its abolition by revolutionary movements (in France and later in countries ruled by socialist regimes) would have been politically and symbolically meaningless. Indeed, the political consensus which led to these campaigns of heraldic iconoclasm cannot be understood without taking into account the links, both tangible and intangible, that people and leaders alike perceived between nobility and coats of arms.<sup>19</sup>

### *Non-nobles and heraldry: the big issue*

Although commoners' heraldry is well documented as a widespread phenomenon, we lack studies to approach its quantitative and qualitative significance according to times and places. To get a better view of the social scope of the practice, it would be relevant to know:

- the ratio of armigers compared to the whole of society;
- the breakdown of armigers between nobles and non-nobles;
- the composition of commoner armigers in terms of social identity, and how representative they were within their group of belonging.

Such an enquiry must keep in mind that social identity was often multifaceted. Many wealthy people were able to play with a complex set of emblems. For instance, the French printer Pierre Palliot (1608-1698) identified his shop with a sign displaying the Madonna and Child, some of his products with a personal linear mark incorporating a sign of four, his family with an inherited coat of arms and the books he printed with a mark integrating all of these.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, early modern engravers produced triple-faceted seal matrices, displaying on one side a coat of arms, on another a cypher or a mark, on the third a portrait, a heart or some other personal device.<sup>21</sup>

For Western Europe, we suggest the following general estimates,<sup>22</sup> in the hope that they will generate statistical research confirming or nuancing the proposed trends, according to various times and places:

- Between 0.1% and 5% of the population were armigers (possibly with higher rates in some areas).
- 100% of the nobility; regardless of the place, the *seigneur* was always an armiger (indeed, even if he was not noble).
- The proportion of commoners within the armiger community differed greatly from one place to another; it could be close to zero in some regions and exceed 75% in others. But whatever the rate, these armigers could always claim elite status on some basis, be it economic, political, judicial, administrative, professional, military, intellectual or religious.

Diagrams 6.1a-d propose a general framework for approaching the social significance of heraldry within early modern societies. Diagrams 6.1a-c consider the hypothesis of heraldry as being a (a) 'democratic', (b) 'middle class' or (c) 'popular' practice. To our knowledge, such situations never happened.<sup>23</sup>

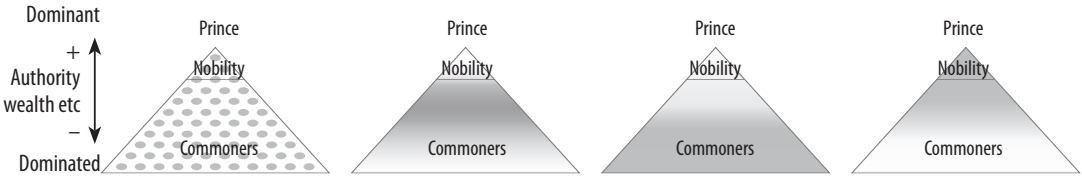
Diagrams 6.2a-d picture the fact that the social heraldic spectrum has differed significantly from one period to another and from one place to another; it seems that societies with the narrowest social use of heraldic practice, with coats of arms essentially limited to the nobility, are to be found in Eastern Europe (Balkans, Russia, etc.) and, surprisingly, in the duchy of Lorraine, which apparently managed to restrict the use of coats of arms to the noble and ennobled alone. In contrast, a wider social spectrum of heraldic practice that included significant numbers of peasants and craftsmen seems to be found mainly in the Germanic areas. On a more regional scale, areas such as the Rhine Valley, Flanders and northern Italy, in which networks of active cities favoured economic expansion and social competition, seem to have been fertile soil for heraldic dissemination. Locally, some 'threshold effects' are apparent; when comparing two neighbouring localities with similar socio-economical profiles, for example, some seem to have been more heraldically oriented than others. Individual initiative followed by social emulation may explain such variations.

Whatever the context, all the diagrams suggest as constitutive trends that (1) people using a coat of arms were always a minority in their communities, and that (2) this minority occupied the higher layers of those communities.

**Representing the social distribution of heraldic use: an attempt**

The aim of these diagrams is to provide a reflection framework to contribute to a better understanding of the social significance of heraldic use and the social identity of armigers. Like every diagram, they tend to over-simplify reality. Nevertheless, such simplification is useful to identify major trends, generate comparisons, suggest new research and arouse discussion.

**Diagram 6.1: Four hypotheses about the social distribution of heraldic practice.**



**1a. Heraldry as a ‘democratic’ emblematic practice**  
The proportion of armigers is homogenous whatever the social group. Heraldry does not relate to any specific group.

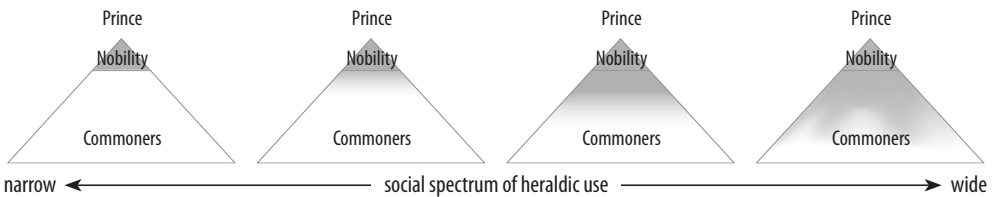
**1b. Heraldry as a ‘middle class’ emblematic practice**  
Armigers are mostly to be found in intermediate social groups; heraldic use does not concern primarily either the ruling classes or the disadvantaged.

**1c. Heraldry as a ‘popular’ emblematic practice**  
Armigers are mainly to be found among what the élites call ‘the people’, i.e. social groups below them.

**1d. Heraldry as an ‘elitary’ emblematic practice**  
Armigers are to be found mainly in the ruling and upper social groups of the society.

**Comment:** To our knowledge, hypotheses 1a – 1b – 1c have never been encountered in any area during the Middle Ages or early modern times. Only 1d is confirmed by available material, which allows us to conclude that élites are the social group primarily concerned with heraldic use. However, the notion of élites is very vague and has been offering different – sometimes conflicting – interpretations, according to times and places, social groups and individuals themselves, hence the need for a closer look to what ‘armigerous élites’ may have meant.

**Diagram 6.2: Types of profiles of the social distribution of heraldic use among élites: from narrow to wide social spectrum.**



**2a: Coats of arms restricted to the nobility**  
Such restriction can result from state will (duchy of Lorraine) or social consensus (rural areas in Eastern Europe).

**2b: Coats of arms restricted to specific élites (beyond the nobility) as defined by the state**  
In England, coats of arms are considered to be privileges for the nobility and the gentry. Heralds managed to impose the idea that heraldic devices used by lower groups were not legal and, consequently, not real coats of arms.

**2c. Coats of arms assumed by a wider circle of élites**  
In some areas, the use of heraldry expands to wealthy urban commoners, rural local representatives of authority, etc. Though not to be considered as widespread, the use of heraldry is expanding beyond the noble circles up to a ratio of 1 noble: 1 commoner armiger.

**2d. Coats of arms assumed by wider segments of the well-off population**  
In places where social competition is particularly active (prosperous rural areas, competing cities), different kinds of élites, at different levels, appropriate heraldic emblems or insert marks in shields, thus expanding the use of heraldry to a wider array of people, including notable manual workers. This situation favours debate on who should be entitled to use a coat of arms.

### *Noble emblems favoured by commoners: solving the paradox*

But if heraldry is so closely associated with nobility, how can we explain that in many areas the majority of coats of arms were borne by commoners? The concept of the ‘reference group’, borrowed from sociology, is relevant to resolving this apparent paradox. ‘A person’s reference group’, according to André Orléan, ‘is the set of other persons to whom he compares himself in order to assess his own characteristics or social position. In other words, the reference group is used as a model to discover which conventions govern the definition of what is prestigious.’<sup>24</sup> Such a reference group may generate ‘anticipatory socialisation’, when a person socialises not only according to the group he actually belongs to, but by learning and internalising the standards and values of the reference group he wishes to join.<sup>25</sup>

In *ancien régime* societies, the nobility clearly represents an aspirational group for a vast majority of the population as a source of authority, prestige and good taste precisely epitomised by heraldry. This view is confirmed by the Archbishop of Bologna, Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), for whom coats of arms were created to convey ‘some credit and authority to those whom they represent, whence comes the fact that usually only gentlemen and other people elevated in ecclesiastical or secular dignity use them, and that they apply them only to the most significant things.’<sup>26</sup>

This capacity of coats of arms to express authority, prestige, wealth and good taste made them attractive and useful for anyone who, without being a prince or a nobleman, needed to assert some degree of social pre-eminence within his community.

### **Adopting a coat of arms as a performative act: leaving the masses to become part of the élites**

Unlike family names, which were given by others, the vast majority of coats or arms were freely composed by the people who intended to use them. Consequently, the elements of these devices were selected to convey an advantageous image of the owner, reflecting various degrees of self-promotion, from pride over prestige to vanity.

### *To become an armiger: looking for the right ‘social moment’*

Social status is not a fixed condition; families are constantly striving to improve it. When we compare the social trajectory of successful families, we find that the adoption of a coat of arms often takes place at similar ‘social moments.’<sup>27</sup> In Western Europe, the favourable context for the adoption of arms usually combines economic comfort, personal achievement and the exercise of responsibility on behalf of the prince, the *seigneur*, the church or the community. The aspirant for arms is not, or is

no longer, or is not only a peasant. He has qualifications (commercial, legal, medical) or virtues (military, religious) that give him a degree of authority and social recognition. Institutional recognition (e.g., an academic degree, ordination as a priest, promotion in military rank) may precipitate the decision to adopt a coat of arms. So may family events such as marriage with an armigerous bride, or the desire to be remembered after one's death as a benefactor of the local parish. Some material necessities and opportunities should also be considered as activators of the heraldic impulse: the practical need for an engraved seal, the construction or remodelling of a house requiring decorative embellishment.

The adoption of a coat of arms can be read as a social rite of passage marking the fact that an individual or a family is separating itself from what will henceforth be seen as the indistinct masses, to aggregate to the perceived *melior pars*, or elite. In that regard, it is a performative act bearing similarities with baptism or even getting a tattoo, with the critical difference that its effect is not limited to a single individual, but may also apply to his descendants as well. However, the heraldic ritual sometimes occurs in several stages.

#### *Having a shield but no coat of arms: exploring the 'grey zone'*

In exploring the semiology of vernacular architecture in villages and boroughs, one often encounters non-heraldic shields combining inscriptions (such as initials and dates) and generic symbols such as crosses, stars and hearts. Usually neglected by heraldists because they do not comply with the standard rules of blazon, these emblematic compositions deserve our attention because they tell something about the social identity of the bearers. What the houses displaying such devices have in common is a sense of social ease, signified by physical size and quality of architecture, compared with others in the same village or neighbourhood. Their owners could be defined as some sort of 'upper middle class' within their local community, sufficiently well-off economically and educated enough to display their initials on a shield, but not daring to cross the line which would make them true armigers. This grey zone between non-armigers and armigers should attract greater attention, for it helps us to understand the role this commoners' 'proto-heraldry' played in defining a group that perceived itself as intermediary between the masses and the armigerous élites.<sup>28</sup>

It is also necessary to keep in mind that, in many families, the appropriation and manipulation of heraldic images was a process continuing over several generations, rather than a decision taken once and for all by a single person.<sup>29</sup> Retracing these emblematic biographies is always instructive, for every change is usually socially significant. For instance, in the village of Vieussan (Languedoc) a non-heraldic shield tops one finely built entrance, depicting, from bottom to top, a crescent, the initials P C, a star between two hearts, the date 1619, and three small crosses (fig. 6.1). The

man who had this carved shield erected was the notary Pierre Catala. A couple of generations later, a relative, the owner of a small lordship and of a tower overlooking the village, Captain Jean-Gaspard (de) Catala, uses a coat of arms that now strictly obeys the rules of heraldry, displaying an oak tree supported by two lions, under three stars (fig. 6.2).<sup>30</sup> The comparison with the device used by his predecessor, the notary, clearly allows us to measure the social progress the Catala family has achieved.



Fig. 6.1: Heraldry-inspired emblem of notary Pierre Catala, village of Vieussan (Hérault, France), 1619 (photograph José Fornell).



Fig. 6.2: Coat of arms of Jean Gaspard de Catala, from C. d'Hozier, *Armorial général de France dressé en vertu de l'édit de 1696*, vol. 15 (Languedoc II) (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits. Français 32242, p. 1225).

The proto-heraldry used by so many rural notables is expressive of the prestige of heraldry among the population. Inserting initials and a date into a shield was deemed an appropriate way to suggest a level of notability that the same inscriptions alone would not convey. But when the social standing of one individual is enhanced, the adoption of a proper coat of arms becomes a necessary step to assert that advancement among the community. Compliance with the rules of blazon is itself a social marker, as a sign of good education as taught in higher schools.

Reflecting social position and aspirations, newly created coats of arms are usually shaped by the will to express more or less explicitly the positioning of the new armiger according to his group of belonging and group of reference.

## Natural elements as classifying elements

Social inequality being considered natural and the result of God's will, it is no surprise that natural elements are used to locate armigers in social hierarchy.



### *Mud and the Ether as opposite poles on the dignity scale*

Celestial charges such as stars and crescents, very common in early modern heraldry (especially but not only in France), are not mere geometrical figures. The taste for the ethereal expressed by these symbols is closely linked to a bipolar social classification commonly acknowledged among early modern élites, according to which peasants, because they work closest to the ground, have low expectations and values. While social inferiority is associated with the earth, weight, darkness and vice, superiority is associated with the sky, lightness, brightness and virtue,<sup>31</sup> which is in turn related to the belief that the stars presaged royal and princely fates.<sup>32</sup> In heraldry, the symbolic intent of celestial charges is made explicit by numerous mottoes. For instance, the stars displayed in the coat of arms of the famous French family of *juges d'armes* d'Hozier are glossed through the immodest words of the motto *Et habet sua sidera tellus* ('the earth also has its stars'), while the association of a crescent, stars and cinquefoils in the coat of arms of one Edmé Thomas inspired the motto *Crescat flos debitus astris* ('may the flower grow according to the stars').<sup>33</sup>

The heraldic vocabulary of social advancement is also constituted by the stylisation of natural eminences. In Germanic areas a *dreiberg* (a mount made of three round summits) often elevates the main charge, while in France and surrounding countries a chevron, as a stylised peak, frequently directs canting charges towards the sky.<sup>34</sup> In both cases, it is neither unusual nor insignificant to find stars completing the composition.

### *Animal and plant hierarchies as metaphors*

The idea that social hierarchy is natural and has its equivalent among animals and plants is a commonplace among early modern élites.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, coats of arms favour the display of animals and plants that are considered the monarchs of their respective realms. Among beasts the lion is king; among birds the eagle; among fishes the dolphin.<sup>36</sup> On the botanical side, the oak is monarch among trees, the rose or lily among flowers. The case of Catala, cited above, offers a good example of the use of a lion and an oak tree to suggest social pre-eminence in the village by referring to the lexicon of royalty. The need for differentiation among arms makes it necessary to consider other noble animals as well, especially those associated with the gentle pastime of the hunt, whether as participants (greyhounds and falcons) or prestigious prey (stags and boars).

Animals of lower rank, such as small birds, usually found as canting charges, may be dignified with crowns or accessories such as stars and mounts. The evolution of the coat of arms used by the Leroy de Lozembrune family, in northern France, offers a striking illustration of the classificatory value assigned to heraldic animals.



According to the chronicler Antoine Scotté de Velinghen (1655-1733), this family initially adopted a shield displaying, as a canting charge, a wren (in French *roitelet*, a word literally meaning 'kinglet') upon a tree, under a chief azure charged with three mullets or. But at some time, writes Scotté, the family, 'realizing that these arms were not noble enough and not befitting their name, have changed them (...): they replaced the small wren, which is one of the small animals, (...) by a lion which is the king of animals'.<sup>37</sup>

This classificatory logic explains why some families choose 'intermediate' animals such as the dove, pelican, stork, lamb or bull, whose lower rank compared with lions and other royal animals is offset by their religious symbolism. These families are justifying their social utility by appealing to moral values which, although not associated with nobility, guarantee the good functioning of society: piety, sacrifice, humility, peace and constancy. For instance, in Porrentruy, former seat of the court of the prince-bishop of Basel, a lawyer named Jean Nicolas Guisinger, son of a leatherworker, replaced the tools his father used as heraldic devices with a crane, a symbol for vigilance.<sup>38</sup> Throughout Europe, a number of commoner families used coats of arms depicting a dove and a snake, with or without the motto, *Sicut serpentes, sicut columbae*.<sup>39</sup> Taken from the Gospels, the words are inviting us to be '[wise] as serpents and [innocent] as doves' (Matthew 10:16). Such a symbolic coupling does not owe its success only to its religious inspiration; it expresses perfectly the way that values like caution and integrity legitimised the social prestige of commoners such as merchants and lawyers without challenging the superiority of royal eagles and lions.

It is important to add that the use of natural elements to denote social status is not a systematic scale but only a general trend admitting many exceptions.

### Impact of models: from 'similarisation' to usurpation

Every newly created coat of arms positions itself in the network of pre-existing arms, which more or less consciously affects new compositions. Previous coats of arms provide models of different kinds. Some are aesthetic: they shape tastes, structure fashions and determine what is *chic*. Some are semantic: they provide a catalogue of signs that can be drawn upon to portray various situations. The social references implied by these aesthetic and semantic models will have considerable influence on the ultimate choice of design. Those considering the adoption of arms will tend to appropriate the tastes and symbolic culture related to their group of belonging and/or of reference, in a subtle balance between distinction and 'similarisation':<sup>40</sup> distinction, for each coat of arms needs to be different from previous ones; 'similarisation', because

the adoption of a coat of arms is also a way to aggregate with a defined group, be it the élite at large or a more specific section within it.

The coat of arms of one Pierre Furet, once a student at the University of Paris in 1569, offers a good example of the appropriation of aristocratic codes by a student from a merchant background. His coat of arms (fig. 6.3) is painted in the *Album amicorum* of Antoine Mouchet, nephew of Cardinal Perrenot de Granvelle, made while he was a student (1565-1570).<sup>41</sup> The album displays the Granvelle kinship and diplomatic networks, embracing nobility from the county of Burgundy, old (Achey, La Baume) and new (Perrenot, Carondelet), as well as aristocracy from the Spanish Low Countries (Berlaymont, Berchem in Antwerp). The merchant-born Pierre Furet not only surmounts his family's merchant mark with a chevron topped by a star and crescent to evoke social and spiritual ascent, but tops his coat of arms with knightly attributes such as helmet, mantling, crest and motto, just like the noble families recorded in the album.



Fig. 6.3: Coat of arms of Pierre Furet, student in Paris, 1569, from *Liber amicorum d'Antoine Mouchet*, 1565-1570 (Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon, Ms 1201, p. 55).

In contrast, some merchants adopted coats of arms carefully concealing any trading activity. For instance, the bend charged with three stars borne by one Denis Euvrard, a merchant in Besançon around 1700, is very similar to pre-existing local arms of both nobles and commoners. Thus, he can marry whomever he wants and hold whatever office he can attain without having to alter his emblem. Not only is every allusion to business hidden, but also any element that would allow easy dating of the arms' origin. Such coats of arms are clearly designed with a long-term perspective, with the idea that the symbolic value of the asset will increase through hereditary transmission. Once it is carved on a tombstone in a local church, this coat of arms will be useful for the great-grandchildren of the deceased to consolidate their social credibility by citing it as a proof of ancient no(ta)bility.

Some coats of arms include different levels of 'similarisation' up to the point of imitation of the arms of a specific family. In 1675, the ironmaster Gaspard Barbaud, established in southern Alsace, was raised to the nobility by Louis XIV.<sup>42</sup> His grandson, Léopold Gaspard Barbaud de Suarce, used a quartered shield that illustrates the variety of iconographic strategies a family could use to promote itself (fig. 6.4). Quartered shields are ordinarily used to display advantageous matrimonial alliances, but in this case the prestige of quartering is fictitious, since all the quarters refer to a single family. While any allusion to industry is concealed, each pair of quarters cants on the family name using charges with noble implications. In the second and third quarters appears a 'barbet', a dog used in the noble activity of hunting, surmounting an acorn, fruit of the king of trees. In the first and fourth quarters are two 'barbauds', a species of fish, in conscious imitation of the arms of an old and powerful local feudal family, the counts of Ferrette, which had the same arms except for the colour of the field.



Fig. 6.4: Coat of arms of Léopold Gaspard Barbaud de Suarce, from C. d'Hozier, *Armorial général de France dressé en vertu de l'édit de 1696*, vol. 7 (Bourgogne comté) (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits. Français 32234, p. 375).

Some do not hesitate to cross the threshold separating imitation from usurpation in order to suggest that they descended from a prestigious noble family. For instance, one family called Rascas, descending from an ironmaster, was condemned by the Parliament of Aix-en-Provence for having usurped the coat of arms of the noble lineage de Rascas, lords of Le Canet.<sup>43</sup>

Pre-existing coats of arms may also function as counter-models because heraldic creation is driven not only by the necessity to conform to social patterns. To display a turnip, a scorpion, even a devil as a charge required a kind of boldness that could turn to the advantage of the bearer. Heraldic compositions may contain a certain degree of provocation and subversion.

### Dealing with *roture*: from shame to pride

Manual labour being considered fundamentally inconsistent with nobility,<sup>44</sup> its evocation through heraldry inevitably raises questions about the tensions involved in crossing social hierarchies.

#### *To display in order to hide?*

Many ennobled families have patronyms betraying their commoner origin. Some use canting devices to clean their ancestors from the stain of *roture*. For instance, one family called Le Laboureur ('ploughman') sports a spur rowel and indentations, suggesting that its ancestors were knights ploughing the field of Mars!

Others prefer to blur rather than to deny. The Le Prince d'Ardenay family from Le Mans is famous for having been enriched by manufacturing and selling wax and candles. In 1763, Jean Baptiste Le Prince acquired the office of secretary of the king, which could convey nobility, and, in 1767, the seignory of Ardenay. Although on the path to nobility, the family was not in a position (and maybe not even wished) to hide the well-known origin of its fortune. The coat of arms shows eight bees converging on their sovereign, set in the middle, with the motto *Gens sub principe tuta*,<sup>45</sup> which can be translated as 'A nation is in peace under the protection of the prince'. This composition offers at least three levels of interpretation, a subtlety which in itself constitutes a mark of distinction. Although alluding to the family's successful candle trade, it is not, in contrast to a merchant's mark, explicitly mercantile. The family's arms are also canting, displaying the prince of bees in order to suggest that someone called Le Prince is by nature a ruler. As well as complimenting the sovereign whom the family was serving, the motto also refers to Le Prince himself as a benevolent patron, both interpretations promoting submission to authority as a necessary condi-

tion of peace and social order. Devising such a subtle set of symbolic interpretations constitutes a way to distinguish the family not only from the masses, but also from the old nobility with its rudimentary simple charges (and values?).

In fact, ambiguity is fundamental to understanding the relevance of coats of arms in the context of social competition. Heraldry is not an established code and many charges are polysemic, even ambiguous. Is a crescent on a shield intended to suggest social elevation or to recall the Crusades? The most explicit compositions are also the least impressive: a plough for a ploughman, a hammer for a smith. On the other hand, ambiguity itself creates social distancing. Expressive enough to impress non-armigers thanks to their ferocious beasts and spiky crests, coats of arms are also covered by a veil of mystery separating the initiated from the ignorant, unable to decipher the language of blazon. Consequently, for many ogling at nobility, a good composition is not an explicit one, but one able to inspire the most prestigious potential meanings, past, present and future.

This raises the question of the relevance of explicitly roturier coats of arms.

#### *Asserting social pre-eminence among commoners... and beyond*

In Courtedoux, a village in the former bishopric of Basel, the heraldic seal used in 1650 by the peasant Henry Michel, displaying a ploughshare under the capital letter M,<sup>46</sup> should not merely be considered as proof of the existence of peasants' heraldry. First, the main charge presents him as a ploughman, i.e. a landowner wealthy enough to work his fields with his own tilling equipment. Second, his seal, although without helmet and mantling, is very finely engraved; Michel had the means to hire a qualified engraver. Third, the coat of arms is displayed on the seal Michel was using as the judge in his village, asserting him as a local representative of the prince's authority. The emblem of this rural notable positions him at the convergence of two kinds of audiences. Within his local village community, it makes him a leader; on the other hand, the charges he chose situate him among the lower ranks of the armigerous, for capital letters and tools never appear in arms used by the local nobility. Such a coat of arms does not seem to be a threat to social order.

The arms engraved in the small village of Liesle, near Besançon, in 1736 on the stone lintel of the house owned by a blacksmith called Claude Soulier provide another interesting occasion to consider explicit commoner heraldry (fig. 6.5).<sup>47</sup> When considering all of the people acting in the iron industry in France, armigers are to be found mainly among iron-masters, and very rarely among independent smiths.<sup>48</sup> Blacksmiths' arms did exist, but they were unusual, especially if we consider that there was at the very least one smith per village. Why was Claude Soulier using heraldry? The explicit charges he chose show that he did not pretend to be noble; there were, in and around the village, several manors with noble families who knew perfectly

well who was who. Thus, this blacksmith is most certainly addressing the village community and his fellow smiths. The fact that his shield encompasses not only the expected tools used by a smith (e.g., anvil, pincers) but also crossed keys displayed in a heraldic style presents him as a qualified craftsman able to make elaborate ironwork such as gates and locks. This is confirmed by parish registers, which mention him not only as a ‘locksmith’, but also as a ‘master blacksmith’. By adopting this coat of arms Claude Soulier presented himself as something of a smith *d’élite*.



Fig. 6.5: Coat of arms of Claude Soulier, smith in the village of Liesle (Doubs, France), 1736 (photograph by the author).

While this approach is individual, other emblematic practices reflect a more collective consciousness of social utility. For instance, it is quite a common practice among sixteenth-century printers to use as a mark a heraldic shield, with knightly helmet and mantling replaced by a tree and allegories or symbolic allusions which suggest another kind of social eminence, that of knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

While exercising a trade could lead to derogation from the nobility, to assert oneself as a merchant within a community could also be a sign of social assertion and promotion for individuals eager to show that they were not (or no longer) peasants. In some rural areas to be termed a merchant by the notary or the parish priest was highly valued, even if the signers of a document were modest tailors or clog makers.<sup>50</sup> It is thus no surprise that brand marks were frequently used by traders as main or unique heraldic charges throughout Europe, even in non-commercial contexts: on funeral monuments in churches or in private spaces, adorning door lintels, well-copings, ceilings, cast iron firebacks or chimney lintels.<sup>51</sup> The mark not only identified a man's goods as owned by him, but reflected his pride as a successful merchant in his community.

Sometimes, the display of explicit merchant heraldry clearly challenged the pre-eminence of the nobility. For instance, three of the finest Late Gothic and Renaissance houses in Vesoul's main market square were identified with shields displaying merchants' marks as their main charges, without any helmet or mantling, while most displays of feudal heraldry were relegated to outside the walls of the city, on more or less rustic mansions. However, the victory of marks over traditional charges is usually



a short-term one. When merchants are able to consolidate their status by acquiring lordships and contracting matrimonial alliances with the old nobility, marks are replaced by new charges concealing the tradesman's source of wealth.

## Conclusion

The appropriation of heraldic codes by a greater number of people regarding themselves as élites of some sort confirms its relevance as a means of defining but also challenging early modern social hierarchies. The success of heraldry confirms the attraction the nobility exerted as a model for the whole of society, while simultaneously undermining that attraction. It challenged the idea that the nobility's social pre-eminence was natural and legitimated by blood.<sup>52</sup> Commoners explicitly defying nobles by arrogant display of their marks or, more deviously, by borrowing their emblematic culture or usurping their very arms, were seen as subversive for two main reasons. First, they suggested that non-noble values such as labour, patience, knowledge and competence could justify social pre-eminence; second, it blurred the boundary between noble and commoner élites. Hence the attempts of the nobility to reassert the noble essence of heraldry and to gain from the state a monopoly, if not of heraldic practice, at least of external ornaments.<sup>53</sup>





## Notes

- \* I wish to thank Luc Duerloo for his trust, Steven Thiry for his patience and Joseph McMillan for his expertise.
- 1 For a discussion on this estimate see N. Vernot, 'La signification des armoiries françaises à l'époque moderne: nouveaux axes de recherche', *Revue française d'héraldique et de sigillographie - Études en ligne*, 2020/5 (April 2020) 1-4.
- 2 Dealing with the sociology of heraldic practice at the scale of Western Europe and its overseas extensions necessarily implies some degree of simplification, for the very definition of 'noble' and 'peasant' may differ significantly from one country to another. For the sake of clarity, in this paper 'peasant' is defined as a manual worker whose main source of income is farming, whatever his status (free or serf, owner or tenant) and 'noble' as a member of the 'second order', distinct from the clergy and the commoners, legally recognised by each European monarchy and enjoying specific privileges.
- 3 H. Pinoteau, M. Pastoureau and M. Popoff (eds.), *Les armoiries non nobles en Europe: XIIIe-XVIIIe siècles. IIIe Colloque international d'héraldique, Montmorency, 19-23 septembre 1983* (Paris, 1986).
- 4 M. Pastoureau, *Traité d'héraldique* (Paris, 1979).
- 5 For France see J. Bretscher, 'Bauern- und Handwerkerwappen am oberelsässischen Haus', *Archives héraldiques suisses/Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik/Archivio araldico svizzero*, 95 (1981) 65-81; 96 (1982) 53-87; C. Muller, *Emblèmes de métiers en Alsace, vol. 1: 'Agriculteur' à 'Maréchal-ferrant'* (Strasbourg, 2016) 20-33. For a recent attempt at synthesis see Vernot, 'La signification des armoiries françaises', 3-6. For Switzerland see O. Clottu, 'Armoiries paysannes valaisannes d'inspiration italienne', *Archivum heraldicum*, 70 (1956) 50-51; id., 'L'héraldique paysanne en Suisse', *Archives héraldiques suisses/Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik/Archivio araldico svizzero*, 85 (1971) 7-16.
- 6 M. Pastoureau, *L'art héraldique au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2009); C. Maneuvrier, 'Emblématique villageoise et culture politique à travers les pratiques sigillaires de Normandie (XIIIe-XIVe siècle)', in F. Boutouille and S. Gomas (eds.), *Cultures villageoises au Moyen Âge et à l'époque moderne* (Toulouse, 2020) 77-86.
- 7 There are no general data on this issue. The basis for this estimate is the statistics published in N. Vernot, *L'Armorial général de 1696 et son application en Franche-Comté* (Versailles, 2003) 138-139 for the county of Burgundy, supplemented since then with twenty years of readings, investigation in archives, field research, attendance at colloquia and discussions with scholars from other places in the context of the meetings of the *Académie internationale d'héraldique*. Without providing numbers, Luc Duerloo offers information supporting our estimate. See L. Duerloo, 'Het blazoen ontmet. Adellijke heraldiek als toe-eigening van eer en deugd, 1550-1650', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 123 (2008) 633-654. It is to be hoped that the present chapter will generate precise statistical approaches to measuring the prevalence of heraldic practice in given times and places.
- 8 F. Cosandey (ed.), *Dire et vivre l'ordre social en France sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2005).
- 9 J.-F. Nieuw, 'L'invention des armoiries en contexte. Haute aristocratie, identités familiales et culture chevaleresque entre France et Angleterre (1100-1160)', *Journal des savants* (2017) 93-155.
- 10 Pastoureau, *Traité d'héraldique*, 51.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 This paragraph and the following ones also apply to English gentry.



- 13 See, for instance, the index of heraldic figures in J.-B. Rietstap, *Armorial général, précédé d'un dictionnaire des termes du blason*, 2nd edn. (Gouda, 1884).
- 14 R. Mathieu, *Le système héraldique français* (Paris, 1946) 206-208.
- 15 Ibid., 104-108, 136-142.
- 16 D. Delgrange, *Impostures héraldiques au XVIIème siècle. Les frères Pierre et Jean de Launay, 'pseudo barons de Launay': généalogistes, héraldistes, faussaires*, 2nd edn. (Wasquehal, 2017).
- 17 This applies also to the English gentry, which during the sixteenth century became distinct from the nobility: C. Cheesman, 'Grants and Confirmations of Arms', in N. Ramsay (ed.), *Heralds and Heraldry in Shakespeare's England* (Donington, 2014) 68-104.
- 18 S. Jettot and M. Lezowski (eds.), *L'entreprise généalogique: pratiques sociales et imaginaires en Europe (XVe-XIXe siècle) - The Genealogical Enterprise: Social Practices and Collective Imagination in Europe (15th-20th Century)*, vol. 2 (Brussels and New York, 2016); M. Provence, E. de Boos and J. Pecnard, *Les plus beaux arbres généalogiques* (Paris, 2006).
- 19 N. Vernot, 'La réintroduction des armoiries par Napoléon: entre retour de la noblesse et mise en image d'une élite nouvelle' in F. Pernot and É. Vial (eds.), *Revenir. Actes de la journée d'études organisée au château de La Roche-Guyon le 25 février 2017* (Montreuil, 2019) 130-221.
- 20 J.-B. de Vaivre, 'Introduction', in P. Palliot, *La vraye et parfaite science des armoiries* (reissue; Paris, 1979) vii-xxxv, ix.
- 21 [Coll.], *Les sceaux: empreintes du pouvoir [collection L. et E. Capellini, Museo del sigillo, La Spezia]* (Paris, 2001) 66-67.
- 22 See note 7 above.
- 23 One possible exception to the latter being cities in Eastern Europe, with German or Italian merchants introducing heraldry in societies where aristocratic classes were ignoring it.
- 24 A. Orléan, *L'Empire de la valeur. Refonder l'économie* (Paris, 2011) 125, my translation.
- 25 C. Dubar, *La socialisation. Construction des identités sociales et professionnelles*, 2nd edn. (Paris, 1995) 57.
- 26 Literally 'quelque crédit et autorité à ceux qu'elles représentent (d'où vient que ce ne sont d'ordinaire que les gentilshommes et autres person[n]es relevées en dignité ecclésiastique ou séculière qui s'en servent, et qu'elles ne s'appliquent qu'aux choses les plus considérables': G. Paleotti, *Les sentimens de l'éminentissime cardinal Gabriel Paleote, archevesque de Bologne la Grasse, en Italie, touchant les armoiries, comme elles ne doivent estre mises ès églises et sur les ornemens, tirez du livre qu'il a fait des images sacrées et profanes* (Lyon, 1664) 49.
- 27 N. Vernot, *Le cœur en Franche-Comté à l'époque moderne: iconographie et symbolique*, 4 vols. (PhD thesis, Paris, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2014) III, 558-559; Duerloo, 'Het blazoën ontsmet', 645.
- 28 Vernot, *Le cœur en Franche-Comté*, II, 413-422.
- 29 Cheesman, 'Grants and Confirmations of Arms', 98-103 provides interesting examples of 'replacement grants'.
- 30 Montpellier, Archives départementales de l'Hérault, Matrices du compoix de Vieussan, 1B 11097-11098, transcribed by José Fornell, who graciously provided his documentation about the Catala family. Thanks are due to him. The coat of arms was registered in C. d'Hozier, *Armorial général de France dressé en vertu de l'édit de 1696*, vol. 15 (Languedoc II), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Manuscrits français (Fr.), 32242, 1225.

- 31 A. Jouanna, *Ordre social: mythes et hiérarchies dans la France du XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1977) 63, 106-107, 109, 121.
- 32 M. Turbiaux, 'Histoire et mythologie: prédire l'avenir et la mort des Grands (1ère partie)', *Mythologie française*, 269 (2017) 63-77, esp. 64-65.
- 33 M. Orcel, *Dictionnaire raisonné des devises. Tome I* (Paris and Nice, 2017) 74; Vernot, 'La signification des armoiries françaises', 137 and 15-22.
- 34 Vernot, 'La signification des armoiries françaises.'
- 35 Jouanna, *Ordre social*, 30-31, 44-45, 115-116.
- 36 Dolphins were then considered to be fish, not mammals.
- 37 *Description de la ville de Boulogne-sur-Mer et du pays et comté boulonnais et de tout ce qu'ils contiennent de plus remarquable, recueillie et rédigée par Antoine Scotté de Velinghen, personnel de Besinghen et d'Embry, ce XXVI janvier MDCCXX* (Bibliothèque municipale de Boulogne-sur-Mer, ms. 468), published by D. Delgrange, *Sceaux et armoiries du Boulonnais* (Wasquehal, 2015) 98.
- 38 Seal of Richard Guisinger, 5 June 1650, and of his son Jean Nicolas Guisinger, 1693 (Porrentruy, Archives de l'ancien Évêché de Bâle, A 37/54, B 137/1-1).
- 39 For instance, Cousin (County of Burgundy).
- 40 S. Tito Achen, 'La similarisation: un côté oublié des études héraldiques', in *Genealogica et Heraldica. 10. Internationaler Kongress für genealogische und heraldische Wissenschaften, actes du Xe congrès international de généalogie et d'héraldique, Vienne, 14-19 septembre 1970*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1972) I, 329-340.
- 41 Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms 1201, 55.
- 42 P. Mieg, 'Mulhouse et les Barbaud de Florimont', *Bulletin du Musée Historique de Mulhouse*, 66 (1958) 37-52.
- 43 S.-J. de Barcillon, 'Critique du Nobiliaire de Provence' [de Dominique Robert], BnF, Fr., 32607, fol. 122 r. Such practice is to be observed throughout Europe and America. See, for instance, R.P. Cust, 'Heraldry and Gentry Communities in Shakespeare's England', in Ramsay (ed.), *Heralds and Heraldry*, 190-204; José Manuel Valle Porras in this volume.
- 44 Jouanna, *Ordre social*, 62-63; Cheesman, 'Grants and Confirmations of Arms', 68-69.
- 45 J.-B.-H.-M. Le Prince d'Ardenay, *Mémoires d'un notable manceau au siècle des Lumières (1737-1817)*, ed. B. Hubert (Rennes, 2008).
- 46 28 August 1650 (Porrentruy, Archives de l'ancien Évêché de Bâle, J 49/1-3).
- 47 The coat of arms was identified thanks to Olivier Moine and Françoise Galliou.
- 48 There are no recorded blacksmiths' coats of arms in local armorial registers and, to my knowledge, no more than half a dozen subsisting on stones (lintels, tombstones).
- 49 C. Goldstein, 'L'honneur de l'esprit: de la "République des mathématiques"', in F. Co-sandey (ed.), *Dire et vivre l'ordre social en France sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2005) 191-230.
- 50 A. Fillon, 'La traque de l'historien', in S. Granger and B. Hubert (eds.), *Souvenirs d'un villageois du Maine. Louis Simon (1741-1820)* (Rennes, 2016) 237-369, 297.
- 51 M. Bourin and P.-O. Dittmar, 'Les identités sociales dans le décor des plafonds peints languedociens', in G. Bartholeyns, M. Bourin and P.-O. Dittmar (eds.), *Images de soi dans l'univers domestique (XIIIe-XVIIe siècles)* (Rennes, 2018) 19-30, 24-25; J. Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure: usages de signes identitaires dans l'entourage de Francesco Datini (Toscane, vers 1400)', in *ibid.*, 191-207, 197-203.
- 52 Jouanna, *Ordre social*, 15-21.
- 53 Duerloo, 'Het blazoen ontsmet'. See also the contributions in the third part of this volume.

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