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When is a Panther Not a Panther?
Representing Animals in Early Modern English Heraldry

KATHRYN WILL

The Blazon of Gentrie, a 1586 book on heraldry written by John Ferne, uses a fictional dialogue between a herald and a knight to discuss “discourses of armes and of gentry,” including “the bearing, and blazon of cote-armors.” Midway through the book, Paradinus, the herald, describes an earlier writer’s take on the meanings of certain animals that may appear on coats of arms. According to “the fragments of Iacobus Capellanus,” he observes, “the Cuckow is for ingratitude, and the Doue for thankefulnesse,” lions signify “courage, furie and rage,” and “the flye is taken for a shamelesse or impudent person.” After listing over a dozen of these symbolic creatures, however, Paradinus cautions the knight to take his catalogue with a grain of salt:

I would not wish Gentlemen too curious in the signes of their coate-armors, for if any man should communicate in his life or conversation, but halfe the partes or quallities of that beast which he beareth in his coate of Armes, on my credit, it were more fit for him to be stabled amongst brute beasts, then chambred with the noble, albeit he bare euen the most worthie beast of all the rest.

Ferne’s sly presentation suggests that for many readers, heraldic animals were potent sites of signification. As Erica Fudge has observed, even when early modern writers characterized animals as “the antithesis of the human,” their rhetoric tended to blur boundaries between species rather than clarify them. Indeed, Ferne’s double-edged rhetoric—particularly his joke that no gentleman would want to resemble even the noblest heraldic beast—encourages his audience to consider whether creatures on coats of arms really do reflect their owners’ past behavior or present habits. By denying meaning in heraldic animals one moment and providing it the next, books like Ferne’s essentially created their own market.

Animals on armory were qualitatively different than lines, bars, geometric shapes, and objects like wheat sheaves and farm tools. Non-human creatures had accreted centuries’ worth of human observation and narrative: along with acting as laborers, food and medicine, and day-to-day companions, they were also objects of scientific observation and pro- and antagonists in classical, Biblical, and medieval fables. As a result, any given animal image could
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provoke various and conflicting interpretations and associations. Moreover, heraldic beasts possessed an avatari al quality that inanimate objects on shields lacked. Noble arms bearers’ badges had long been linked with animal symbols through historiographical and prophetic tradition; Richard III’s white boar appeared in visual and textual narratives for centuries after his death, and Elizabeth famously used a phoenix as her badge. Heraldic badges and seals featuring animals also appeared in populist contexts. Along with the beasts on London livery companies’ coats of arms, mayors and aldermen took up personal devices, often featuring plants and animals, which they displayed on seals and during London civic processions.

By the late sixteenth century, heralds at the College of Arms were belatedly exerting more stringent control over the proper use of such bearings. At the same time, popular printed texts circulated images and explanations of heraldry to gentlemen and strivers. As a result, beasts on coats of arms took on new uses and significations from those they had held in earlier centuries. In what follows, I explore how groups with stakes in heraldic distinction used animals’ multiplicitous meanings to redefine legitimate heraldry. To contest heraldry’s social and material diffusion, a gentleman was increasingly defined by his ability to call a panther a panther or distinguish a good lion from a bad one. In this milieu, beasts on early modern arms weren’t mere ciphers representing their bearers’ gentility. Rather, every coat of arms’ legitimacy depended partly upon how, and by whom, its animal components had been rendered.

Historicizing Heraldic Animals

During the early Crusades, knights used collective and personalized imagery on garments worn over their armor to identify themselves in battle and at tournaments. These garments were the original coats of arms; only later was the name extended to the shield that bore a knight’s design. In these early days, some knights obtained armorial distinction from their lords, while others assumed it of their own accord. Sometime during the twelfth century, these armorial designs were transformed into a genealogical system among royalty and gentry across Europe. In England, coats were generally passed down through a patrilineal system. Only the head of the household could bear the original coat design, while spouses, children, and siblings used versions of the same device that featured graphical alterations called differences.

Because heraldry is often discussed as purely representational, it’s important to note that animals participated in its material development, albeit posthumously. Many of heraldry’s geometric patterns, including thick bands and chevrons, originated in materials that soldiers added to make their armor more effective. Leather strips—i.e., animal skins—helped strengthen shields and could be painted with tinctures made from organic compounds like fish glue. Other animals provided visual embellishment via their hides. An entire class of heraldic decorations is known as furs: the delicate ermine pattern is an allusion to the
spotted coat of the ermine or stoat, while *vair*—alternating rows of blue and white bell-shaped figures—represents the sewn-together hides of a squirrel that was “blueish-grey on the back and white underneath” (Figure 1). As Susan Crane notes, these and other heraldic terms link graphical heraldry “with furred, trimmed garments.” By retaining visual and linguistic references to real animals, this stylized visual system constantly acknowledges its visceral origins.

Figure 1. Illustrations of shields featuring the furs ermine and vair (“verry”). William Segar (?), *Armorial of English Families* (ca. 1590). Folger MS V.b.74, 202v. Personal photograph of manuscript at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Graphic patterns on early coats of arms were thus animal-made objects in the dual sense Fudge describes in “Renaissance Animal Things”: both *animal-made* objects constructed from dead creatures, and animals *made-object*—objectified beasts who retained a degree of agency by protecting comparatively fragile human bodies. An animal depicted as a design, or *charge*, on a coat of
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arms added another representational dimension: we might call such a device an “animal”-made object, with scare quotes signifying the beast’s aesthetic role. The earliest charges of this sort included creatures like lions, eagles, and dragons. These exotic and fantastical creatures were always depicted according to specific generic conventions: they had stylized features, like raised tails and open jaws or beaks, and held poses later formalized in heraldic terminology as attitudes. Lions were shown rampant (rearing up) or passant (walking), while eagles were displayed (wings outspread). While the original sources for these particular animals and poses remain unclear, some scholars speculate that crusaders encountered them in Middle Eastern textiles. When knights from England and other countries returned to Europe from the Crusades, they may have imported images of non-native and fabulous creatures on their shields.12

Knights initially assumed their own heraldry when they served their lord or king in battle. Over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, landowners increasingly paid the king to hire soldiers without going to war themselves. In England, the fact that a person bore a coat of arms no longer guaranteed that they or their ancestors had borne arms on behalf of the sovereign.13 Along with heraldry’s reduced martial connections, thanks to economic and social shifts, more members of the lower gentry had the requisite income (about 40£ per year) to essentially purchase knighthood, and thus gained heraldic devices to pass down to their descendants.14 According to anthropologist Dave Davis, “lineage emblems represent the use of material culture to reconcile (1) systems of social ranking and economic privilege that are formally grounded in principles of inheritance with (2) the de facto upward mobility of some individuals into the lower ranks of the elite.”15 This schema accurately describes heraldic arms’ diffusion down the social ladder in England. Historian Maurice Keen observes that “heraldry…came in time to be emblematic of the pride of birth, station and culture of the nobility in its broadest range,” while Crane writes that by the time of the Hundred Years War, “not only knights but undubbed gentle and esquires were choosing coats of arms, without any presumption that they would become knights or even landholders.”16 The period thus saw a “proliferation of prosthetic ‘stand-ins’” for desirable qualities that ranged from respectable lineage to contemporary social status.17

As arms proliferated, people required more and different shield images to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. Though images of inanimate objects like plants, armor, and tools provided graphical variety, the natural world also offered a vibrant range of possibilities for shield decoration. By the middle of the sixteenth century, common creatures like turtles and squirrels—fully represented, not just their metaphorical hides—appeared as charges (Figure 2). Nonetheless, consistency rather than diversity was the rule: most arms grants featured the beasts that had appeared on shields for centuries. The lion appears on more European arms than any other animal, while other common beasts on arms included eagles, bears, and small generic birds called martlets. John W. Papworth’s nineteenth-century catalogue of English, Scottish, and Irish family arms reflects the lion’s ubiquity: the entries for arms with a lion as the main
charge take up 34 pages (and dozens more devices feature lions as a secondary or smaller charge), while arms featuring an eagle, the next most common creature, fill only nine pages. Animals we now consider fabulous, like unicorns and dragons—the latter a capacious category that included basilisks and cockatrices—remained relatively rare in European heraldry, despite their presence on the fictional arms of rulers like King Arthur. Still, surreality seems to have been a desirable trait in heraldic design. Most early modern English people had never seen a lion, making it in a sense fabulous, and even the unassuming martlet was imaginary. The relative dominance of fictional beasts in contrived poses shows that in heraldry, zoomorphic familiarity was generally subordinate to evocative aesthetic tradition.

Figure 1. Image of coat of arms with 3 squirrels. Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman* (London: Printed for F. Constable, 1627). Wilson Rare 823P31 OC, 169. Courtesy of Special Collections and Rare Books, University of Minnesota.

By the mid-1500s, English arms grants were made by heralds who worked under the Crown’s authority. Some of these officers created armorial compilations called ordinaries, which categorized arms by the main shape or image on the shield. Along with serving as records of the heralds’ work, ordinaries helped them avoid granting identical arms to different individuals. The main charge on many shields was a beast of some kind, so ordinaries effectively arranged gentlemen according to their animal avatars. The page below—taken from a sixteenth-century ordinary created by the herald William Segar—records
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rows of arms that feature birds, including eagles, cocks, and martlets, as primary images (Figure 3).

Figure 2. A page from an ordinary of arms featuring shields with birds. William Segar (?). Armorial of English Families (ca. 1590). Folger MS V.b.74, 56r. Personal photograph of manuscript at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Because the heralds limited the range of heraldic charges in their designs, ordinaries like Segar’s tend to emphasize rather than downplay the system’s apparent repetitiveness. In the page below, the bird sketches overwhelm the accompanying surnames, which are in no discernible order. For the modern viewer, the rows of similar items may have a visually numbing effect, rather like Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*. Unlike Warhol’s aesthetic critique of consumerism, however, these pictures of arms essentially are products for sale. During the late medieval period, assuming arms had been akin to claiming an identity—a process Crane likens to “self-naming.” But by the late sixteenth century, heralds, social strivers, and corporate bodies alike profited as arms increasingly became commodities for purchase. Officers like Segar were in the
business of producing consistent, recognizable symbols of gentility for their customers, so heraldic animals’ identifying function increasingly butted up against their economic and social utility. How could lions and the like represent abstract genteel values when their production and dissemination on clothing, décor, and household goods was becoming ever more commercialized? As heraldry became more like a business with competing corporate stakeholders, there was professional capital to be made in distinguishing good heraldic designs from bad ones. And because animals featured prominently in so many devices, they became flashpoints in disputes over what constituted legitimate heraldry.

Painting Panthers

In 1604, the year that William Segar became Garter King of Arms—the preeminent officer at the College of Arms—he presented King James I with a manuscript of his own making: a small, ornate book that illustrated and described the arms of English kings from Brutus through James himself. With its beautifully hand-painted achievements and painstaking lettering, the book was evidence of Segar’s artistic and antiquarian fitness for the job. It also placed James at the end of a pleasing progression that included the mythical rulers Uther Pendragon and King Arthur—a wise political strategy for a new officer in the royal household.

Several of the devices Segar includes feature heraldic beasts. His account of Brutus’ shield includes the three lions that would become indispensable to England’s royal arms, and Uther Pendragon’s device features two crowned dragons. In addition to Henry VI’s royal coat of arms, Segar also includes a description of the king’s personal device:

Hee gave also for his Badge, a Beast called a Panther breathing fire. This beast as Gesnerus writeth, is admired of all other beastes for the beauty of his Skyn, being spotted with variable colours; and beloued, and followed of them for the sweetnes of his breath, that steameth forth of his nose-thrills, and eares like smoke, whilch our Paynters mistaking, corruptly doe make fire.21

The passage begins with a conventional (for the time) description of the panther as a catlike creature with multicolored spots and an alluring scent—an attribute Segar attributes specifically to the animal’s “sweet breath.” As Segar’s citation of Gesner suggests, medieval and early modern writers on natural history often followed classical descriptions of the panther’s enticing aroma. Edmund Topsell’s Historie of Four-Footed Beasts (1607) was a translation of Conrad Gesner’s Historiae Animalium (1551-87), which was itself a translation of the Roman writer Aelian’s work on the subject. According to Topsell, Aelian wrote that “the Panther or Pardall smelleth most sweetly,” and that other animals “are so mightily delighted with his spotted skin and fragrant smell, that they wil
alwaies come running vnto him from all parts."22 Though Topsell doesn’t mention the beast’s exhalations, one medieval bestiary attributes the panther’s aroma to its “loud belch,” which produces “a very sweet smell from its mouth, like the smell of allspice.”23 Another bestiary observes that when the panther roars, “from its mouth comes a very sweet odour, as if it were a mixture of every perfume.”24

Segar evidently has these natural histories in mind when he argues that the image of Henry’s fire-breathing panther is erroneous—the result of incompetent work and mistaken interpretation by “corrupt” painters. However, his critique doesn’t acknowledge the many variables that could influence a heraldic illustration of an animal, particularly one with a complex history like the panther. Whether Henry VI actually used the panther badge is unclear; if so, he assumed it in the fifteenth century, well before English heraldic devices were codified by heralds and produced by tradesmen. From Segar’s own description, flames seem to have been an intentional component of the badge rather than a painter’s mistake: they were likely intended to represent the panther’s scented breath.25 In any case, heraldic historian Rodney Dennys observes that this beast, the “panther incensed,” is an uncommon charge in English heraldry. Indeed, Papworth’s compilation of English, Irish, and Scottish arms lists only two coats featuring panthers, neither of which are incensed.26 However, two London companies, the Dyers and Painter-Stainers—the very tradesmen Segar is critiquing—did bear panthers as supporters. Both guilds may have found the beast’s colorful spots an appropriate allusion to their trades, and the Painter-Stainers almost certainly intended “panther” as a punning reference to their occupation27—a strategy referred to as canting arms in heraldic tradition. Ironically, the panthers flanking the Painter-Stainers’ shield have tongues, not flames, protruding from their mouths, meaning they would have passed Segar’s inspection.

The history of the Painter-Stainers’ supporters is especially complex, partly because no official grant of their full device exists. Confusion sometimes arose when blazons of heraldic devices—i.e., their technical verbal descriptions—were translated into visual images, and vice versa. Though modern historians confidently identify the Painter-Stainers’ supporters as panthers, they note that the animals are often blazoned as leopards.28 And in spite of Edmund Topsell’s insistence that the panther, pardal, and leopard “are all one kinde of beast,”29 in heraldry, the leopard and panther were considered different animals with distinct features.30 Adding yet another wrinkle, the animal written in English blazon as a leopard is interpreted in English heraldry as a lion passant gardant, i.e., walking with its face toward the viewer.31 Manifesting this interpretive diversity, in Benjamin Wright’s 1596 engraving of all the London companies’ arms, the catlike beasts flanking the Painters’ shield possess hides with small black patches, not the transparent circles that usually signify a heraldic panther’s colorful spots (Figure 4).32 Evidently, then, certain creatures weren’t consistently legible in early modern heraldic imagery, nor in its attendant textual discourses. Given this multiplicity, why would Segar accuse painters of drawing panthers incorrectly in a missive to the King?
The answer lies in ongoing conflicts between heralds like Segar, whose education and gentle status had earned him the royal authority to devise and grant coats of arms, and artisans who executed those images in the form of paintings, engravings, and woodcuts. Segar's barb is just one salvo in heralds' decades-long battle with the Painter-Stainers over the production of heraldic materials. Though the main conflict arose later, its conditions were set when heraldry was belatedly brought under the sustained supervision of the royal household. In the earliest days of battles and tournaments, heralds held no jurisdiction over arms grants; as noted above, heraldry was a lineage identification system that aristocrats and marginal elites used indiscriminately and opportunistically. English rulers eventually took interest in regulating it and tasked heralds with that duty during the fifteenth century. But even though Richard III incorporated heralds as part of the royal household, subsequent rulers provided only sporadic support. The heralds often worked as independent contractors, without the financial backing or institutional space that would allow them to standardize their procedures and preserve their records in a royal library.

**Figure 4.** Detail from Benjamin Wright, *The armes of all the cheife corporatons [sic] of England...* (1596), STC (2nd ed.) 26018, Folger Digital Image Collection, File 6335. Image from Folger Shakespeare Library copy published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest as part of *Early English Books Online.*
By the time Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne, the College of Arms was a relatively secure extension of the Crown’s authority. However, heraldry as an institution was in a period of flux. Thanks to Henry VIII’s and Elizabeth’s initial willingness to distribute land and titles, the number of people qualifying as lower gentry had increased markedly. But after 1590, the overall number of grants shrank, leaving strivers clamoring for titles and the heralds hurting for income. When King James came to power, he again turned the tide by bestowing hundreds of new knighthoods. Throughout these expansions and contractions of honors, critics among the older nobility and gentry criticized the Tudor and Stuart heralds for granting arms to pretenders and undeserving *nouveau riche*. The College was also rife with infighting: some heralds accused each other of making bad grants as they jockeyed for authority, and their public jostles for power did lasting damage to the institution’s reputation. Still, even though some officers did profit from dubious grants, their ostensible largesse was an effect of social mobility rather than its cause.

The heralds’ rocky history and precarious positions made them protective of armorial imagery and *blazon*, the vocabulary used to describe heraldic devices. This defensiveness lay at the root of their feud with London’s Painter-Stainers Company, which had operated as a recognized craft guild since 1502. The officers of arms essentially claimed a monopoly over the task of granting arms: they researched pedigrees, sketched drafts of new coats, and created verbal descriptions of these devices, as well as bestowed patents bearing the Crown’s stamp of approval. They also wanted responsibility for painting arms on patents and household goods. However, in a twist on traditional guild competition, the Painter-Stainers took umbrage at what they perceived as the royal heralds’ encroachment on their trade. The Company insisted that only its members, not the heralds, should be paid to paint armorial devices on “silk, cloth, wool, leather, stone, iron, lead, tin, plaister, paper, parchment, vellum, or other thing[s]” that might display arms. The guild was possessive of textiles and leather because they were used to make heraldic liveries and funeral cloths for arms bearers; stone, tin and plaster comprised household décor and plateware; and vellum was the material of choice for official arms grants. Note that many of these products were animal-made objects: hearkening back to the system’s origins in leather straps and squirrel furs, they linked lower-class guild members to animal bodies, which needed to be processed and painted in order to sustain the early modern heraldic economy.

In 1578, the Painter-Stainers insisted that the heralds be forced to stop painting their own patents. That same year, William Flower, Norroy King of Arms, issued a proclamation that prohibited “all Painters, Glasiers, Goldsmithes, Grauers, or any other Artificers” from creating arms unless they were personally deputized by the College. Queen Elizabeth officially acknowledged the Company’s control over painting duties in 1581/82, and William Camden, a herald and the son of a Painter-Stainer, worked to improve cooperation between the groups. Still, despite these attempts to make peace, the two groups skirmished throughout the early-to-mid seventeenth century—sometimes with good reason. Records show that one woman asked a local tradesman to create a
coat for her, thinking he would consult with the heralds in the process. Instead, he presented her with a coat that plagiarized another device. By 1626, the Company felt the need to reiterate its jurisdiction over arms painting in a petition of grievances, and in a letter to a colleague in March of 1628, Segar reported the heralds’ complaints that their authority was being “utterlyie undone by the Paynters.”

Segar’s opinion of the guildsmen apparently didn’t improve much over the course of twenty years. The ongoing feud between the royal officers and working-class Company members exposes the economic and intellectual disparities undergirding heraldic labor during this period. Modern historians acknowledge the classed nature of the quarrels between these groups, pointing out that the heralds “stigmatised” painters as “a sort of illiterate mechanics.” Indeed, Segar and the other heralds seem to have worried that putting heraldry’s visual components in the hands of artisan painters diminished its elite cachet. The officers couldn’t ensure that painters would interpret their blazons as they intended them to be read, much less understand the human and animal historiographies underlying the symbols they had chosen. In their view, unlicensed painters who concocted coats for eager customers were further diluting the nobility of a system that was already difficult to regulate. As a result, coats of arms and the charges on them—including those of the animal variety—were inching dangerously close to meaningless ubiquity.

**Animals in Heraldry Texts**

As heraldic distinction fluctuated in attainability, the heralds and Painter-Stainers weren’t the only groups who sought control over its symbols. Professional men adjacent to the College of Arms also wrote wide-ranging heraldry manuals aimed primarily at educating new and striving gentlemen in heraldry’s precepts. A medieval heraldry text known popularly as *The Boke of St. Albans* had appeared in various versions and under multiple titles between 1486 and 1596. As the markets for heraldic distinction and information expanded, gentlemen writers capitalized on the demand by publishing new books on the topic, although many cited *The Boke of St. Albans*, as well as other medieval and classical authors, as sources. Along with helping readers identify images on arms and blazon them properly, these writers also promised to reveal the meanings of common charges, including the animals that featured prominently on many English arms. Given the social stakes of owning, understanding, and disseminating these symbols, heraldry treatises preyed upon the vanity and competitiveness of their readers, creating distinctions and sowing doubt where none might otherwise have existed. Under the tutelage of writers like Gerard Legh, Henry Peacham, and John Guillim, arms bearers learned overlapping and competing theories about heraldic animals and their predilections. Armed with this information, readers could apply compliments or critiques to the beasts on others’ arms, as well as defend their own heraldic avatars.
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John Guillim, author of the popular manual *A Display of Heraldrie* (1610), was a junior officer at the College of Arms, but most heraldic writers held no such title. Instead, many were Inns of Court men. As amateur experts, they openly stated their intentions not to encroach too much on the heralds’ territory. For at least one writer, staying on the heralds’ good side meant taking their part in the dispute with the Painter-Stainers. In *The Accedens of Armory* (1562), Gerard Legh complains generally of “workemen that bee not skillefull in thiss arte” of painting arms. Legh writes that the glazier who painted the stained glass windows on the north side of Temple Church at the Inns of Court “hath set the armes of England so out of order, as the Lyo[n]s are goyng oute of the fielde,” meaning that parts of the lions’ bodies appear to be cut off at the shield’s edges. Legh argues that this is a contravention of the rules governing mobile objects on arms, including animals. To prevent such travesties in the future, he advises that “neither glasier, paynter, nor anye that cutteth in Stone, maye dooe in these thynges without the aduise of the Herehaughts [heralds].” His rhetoric encourages viewers to analyze heraldic images—particularly public ones featuring beasts of national symbolic importance—with a discerning eye. By suggesting that depictions of England’s ancient lions may contain ignorant painters’ mistakes, the authors place their audience in a position of judgment and critique over the tradesmen who physically produce these symbols.

Henry Peacham’s courtesy manuals foster a similar mistrust in painters’ artistic abilities. Scholars have noted that Peacham’s work was aimed at readers striving to join the elite, and his work betrays this insecurity. From the section on armory in *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622), it’s clear that a striving gentleman needed to be able to blazon his own and others’ arms correctly: as F.J. Levy notes, “The ability to identify the arms borne by other gentlemen had an obvious social utility; and ignorance here put one’s own gentility in doubt.” But Peacham goes a step further, implying that readers should learn to critique the heraldic correctness and aesthetic merit of others’ arms, not merely identify them. In *The Art of Drawing with the Pen, and Limming in Water Colours* (1606), he includes a section titled “Of drawing beasts, birds, flowers, &c.” In contravention to his promise, he provides a sample image and drawing instructions for just one beast and one bird: a lion in the heraldic style and rampant attitude, and a generic martlet. The remainder of the section is only a brief list of other “beasts more hard to be drawn,” e.g., horses and tigers, and “others more easie,” including elephants, camels, and foxes. The fact that Peacham fails to include criteria for his verdict on drawing difficulty is both puzzling and revealing: he evidently doesn’t find this information relevant to the task at hand. Instead of explaining how to draw animals in a lifelike or realistic way, the author focuses on training readers to recognize acceptable heraldic style.

Peacham undermines painters even further when insists that although “the meanest workeman can drawe the ordinary shape of a Lion,” chances are he’s doing it wrong. Peacham offers a special method for drawing the rampant animal’s “hinder partes” that “among our ordinarie painters…would be condemned as lame, when I deserves most commendation.” In other words, he contrives a strategy for identifying shoddily drawn lions in others’ heraldic style.
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devices. By applying it, his readers can flatter themselves that their knowledge supersedes not only trade painters’, but their own peers’. Moreover, by denigrating these artisans, he suggests that arms not fitting his standards are illegitimate. At best, a poorly drawn device is embarrassing; at worst, it suggests the arms were obtained illegally and places their bearer’s gentility in jeopardy.

Peacham discusses heraldic creatures only briefly as part of his courtesy manual, but other writers elaborate extensively on the types and meanings of animals on shields. In general, authors whose sole focus is on heraldry spend between one-third and one-half of their texts illustrating and describing creatures that might appear in arms. Visually, these books tend to resemble fables and bestiaries: many animals are shown in emblematic poses, as when a pelican is depicted piercing its breast in order to revive its young with its own blood. But these illustrations are also notably similar to those shown in natural histories. Katherine Acheson has described how engravings in Gesner’s Historiae Animalium and Topsell’s Historie of Four-Footed Beastes take pains to include animals’ “salient features,” which help “distinguish them from other animals of similar appearance,” as well as forgo background imagery “in an effort to prevent distraction.” They are realistic but not naturalistic, and are “ideal templates for reproduction in plasterwork, embroidery, and tapestry.”

Animals in heraldic texts are even less contextualized than those in natural histories. They are shown on the field of a shield, without any naturalistic background; the focus of any given coat of arms is the animal’s aesthetic beauty, not its placement in a natural habitat. Heraldic beasts are also intended to be specific, in that they display salient features meant to distinguish them from similar creatures. Many of these attributes are visual: as discussed above, the panther’s and leopard’s hides bear different spots. Still, as evidenced by that example, such visual nuances could be difficult to maintain as the animals were translated from word to image and back again. Luckily, in heraldry texts, writers could narratively differentiate similar beasts by describing their divergent genealogies and their relationships with other animals. A reader confused about the difference between leopards and panthers could learn from John Bossewell’s Workes of Armorie (1572) that leopards are “gendered in spouse breache of a Parde, and a Lyonesse,” and from Guillem that lions are their enemies. By contrast, the panther, partly thanks to his sweet smell, “is frende to all Beastes, saue the Dragon, for hym hee hateth full sore.”

As these excerpts suggest, the authors present each animal’s social attributes in ways that are certain to reflect on the humans who bear them as armorial charges. Michel Pastoureau notes that in the Middle Ages, animals symbols could be interpreted favorably or unfavorably, and Peter M. Daly identifies a similar dynamic at work in early modern iconography:

a lion, a chameleon, and a snake were viewed as being composed of several different qualities and associated with very different stories. The one creature could thus become associated with several different ideas. . . . [It] could be regarded negatively or positively, in
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*bonam partem* or *in malam partem*, depending on which attributes or characteristics or stories were highlighted.54

Gerard Legh and John Guillim both state that heraldic animals should appear *in bonam partem*. In turn, they should be interpreted as positive reflections on those who bear them as charges. Legh explains that “All beastes of fearece nature, shalbe taken in blazon onely, to the best entent, yt is to say, to ye most worship of him yt beareth them.”55 Similarly, Guillim writes that such animals “must...be interpreted in the best sense; that is, according to their most *Generous* and noble *Qualities*, and so to the greatest honour of their *Bearers*.” Besides insisting on this affirmative approach, Guillim explains that armorial animals should always appear in postures that comport with their essential natures. Thus, “Beasts of Sauage and fierce nature” should look ferocious: a lion is best when shown rampant, with claws and teeth exposed. By contrast, creatures with “placable or *Gentle-nature*[s]” should be shown in graceful poses, “as a *Horse Running*” or “a *Deere Tripping*.”56 To do otherwise, he writes, would be uncivilized:

> It is one thing to beare a liuing creature, in *colour* or in *action* diuers from *Nature*; and another, to beare him *repugnant* or *contrarie* to *Nature* for the former may be borne commendably, but this latter sort of *Bearing* is holden *disgracefull*, or rather is condemned for *false Armes*, and therefore not worthie of *Bearing*.57

Taken together, these statements seem to suggest a coherent philosophy for heraldic representation; indeed, similar statements had appeared in the earliest known heraldic treatise, *De Heraudie*, which was probably written sometime before the fourteenth century.58 In this framework, animals in arms should be portrayed and interpreted within a positive schema that redounds to the benefit of both the animal’s and the bearer’s reputations. Thus, readers might reasonably expect heraldry treatises to limit their discussions to unimpeachably honorable heraldic animals and their “generous and noble qualities.”

Instead, the animal portraits they provide are decidedly mixed. Prior to discussing animals’ symbolism, some writers describe their material roles in ways that reflect tensions between their positive and negative attributes. In a 1627 edition of *The Compleat Gentleman*, Peacham presents classical accounts that emphasize the creaturely nature of the earliest shields. To support his observation that “the ancients had their shields of tanned leather, he writes that the Numidians of ancient Algeria “vsed shields made of Elephants’ hides impenetrable to any dart.” Although these tough animal skins provided near invincibility, they had one major downside: “in rainie weather they would like a sponge so soake in the water, & become thereby so heavy, the souldiers could hardly beare them.”59 The account presents elephant hide’s drawbacks alongside its advantages, and suggests that animals as (and on) shields have never been entirely submissive to the desires of their human users. By highlighting skin as an animal-made object in both senses—as a dead animal, and as an object with
unexpected agency—the author suggests humans can’t always put heraldry to their desired uses.

Often, these texts’ encyclopedic descriptions of animals are explicitly at odds with readers’ desires to claim heraldic animals as positive symbols. Rather than describing living creatures’ behavior in bonam partem, some writers alternate between favorable and unfavorable qualities over the course of a single paragraph. Immediately after noting that an observer should charitably assume that a coat of arms featuring a fox is showcasing the bearer’s “wit and cunning,” Guillim acknowledges the animal’s propensity for “Pilfering and Stealing.” He also insists “that as there is a difference in the nobilitie of Birds, so ought they to haue distinct terms of Blazon,” with those that can kill prey differentiated from those without talons and sharp beaks. Conversely, he also suggests that some symbols have become tainted due to the unfortunate behavior of earlier bearers. Of the raven, he writes, “This is good and antient Armorie … Yet it is a receiued opinion, that the first Bearer heereof, had a suspicion of the Fidelitie of his Wife, denying her Children to be his; vntill hee was drieuen by counter-proofe, to acknowledge his causelesse suspicion.”

By mentioning the possibility of “false arms,” Guillim also suggests that incorrect or less-than-noble arms grants do exist, and hints that readers should be on the lookout for animals and attitudes that suggest something ignoble or unpleasant about their bearers. Anyone whose arms featured a deer without antlers might be concerned after reading Guillim’s pronouncement on female creatures:

Sometimes the females both of Red and Fallow Deere, to wit, Hindes and Does, as well as Stagges and Buckes, are borne in Coat-armour: but such bearing is holden lesse commendable then that of Males, because Masculinum dignius est Foeminino, as Aristotle witnesseth, Topic 1. The male is ever nobler then the Female.

By insisting that male animals are superior to female ones, he calls readers’ attention to visual features that distinguish the sexes of animals on shields. Guillim’s focus in this passage is on deer antlers, but his proclamation might also lead readers to consider another prominent sex characteristic that often appears on beasts in arms. Animals in the rampant attitude—whether charges on the shield or supporters on either side—are often (but not always) drawn with erect phalluses. If the blazon calls for it, the penis and other salient features are painted a different color than the rest of the animal’s body, calling viewers’ attention to their presence. The image below appears in a 1586 copy of Ferne’s Blazon of Gentrie at the Folger Shakespeare Library. In it, the lion’s tongue, teeth, claws, and phallus are painted red, while the rest of the body is gold (Figure 5). Because certain animals were traditionally depicted in this manner, attentive arms bearers might have found themselves hoping their comrades’ avatars were less well-endowed than their own.

Like texts from previous centuries, early modern heraldry treatises described animals—and by extension, the humans who bore them—as both pro-
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and antagonists in social dramas. Coats of arms were meant to be salutary symbols of honor and distinction, but the images they bore, particularly those of the bestial variety, carried potentially problematic connotations. Though this duality was a natural extension of classical, Biblical, and medieval narratives, it had new stakes in the early modern heraldic milieu. By providing a huge volume of textual and visual information about animals, writers like Ferne, Peacham, Legh, and Guillim equipped readers to judge their own and others’ arms using copious and opportunistic parameters. Additionally, as Kathryn Perry observes, “the ubiquitous human practice of labeling enemies, inferiors, and outsiders as animals was frequently and enthusiastically adopted in the early modern period.”64 Because trade painters were already associated with animal products through their occupations, it was easy for heralds, writers, and socially mobile readers to label these artisans as inferior, and deny their capacity to render heraldic animals correctly—i.e., as ideal symbols imbued with salutary meanings.

Figure 5. Lion with phallus, painted on a blank page of John Ferne’s The blazon of gentrie: deuided into two parts (London, 1586). STC 10825 copy 2, Folger HH85/33, A1 v. Personal photograph of item at the Folger Shakespeare Library.
Heraldic writers also propagated the myth that subtle marks of degradation could be added to one’s arms as punishment for misdeeds, causing anxiety for marginally gentle readers who had acquired their devices recently or under questionable pretenses.\textsuperscript{55} The authors warned that shapes like points and gussets signified boasting, cowardice, and other crude or evil behaviors, spurring readers to look for damning signs in others’ coats as well as their own. Such quests would have been fruitless, however, since modern historians note that none of these so-called “abatements” have ever been located.\textsuperscript{66} Compared with the capaciousness of meaningful animal charges discussed here, such ciphers, much-feared but actually innocuous, seem like red herrings. In Tom Tyler’s book \textit{Ciferre: A Bestiary in Five Fingers}, he observes that animals in philosophical and fabular narratives function as codes or symbols for entirely unrelated ideas (ciphers), and as agents who make meaning through their particular, individual qualities (indices). Even when animals seem like “emblematic, even heraldic types,” Tyler writes, they “are not content to remain mere ciphers and demand to be treated otherwise.”\textsuperscript{67} If heraldic animals were ever mere ciphers for nobility—a questionable assertion to begin with—they became increasingly indexical over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As material and conceptual components of coats of arms, they resisted stable definitions, defied regulation, and constantly demanded interpretation by those who produced and used them.

\section*{Notes}

1. Throughout the essay, I use heraldry in the sense of the OED’s first definition, i.e., “The art or science of a herald; now, esp. the art or science of blazoning armorial bearings and of settling the right of persons to bear arms or certain bearings; in connection with which it deals with the tracing and recording of pedigrees, and deciding of questions of precedence”; \textit{OED Online}, s.v. “heraldry, n. 1.1” (Oxford University Press, June 2015), accessed November 24, 2015. The word doesn’t appear in the Middle English Dictionary; however, herald and herauld appear in the \textit{Middle English Dictionary Online} and \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} in fourteenth-century quotations. This may reflect the fact that late medieval heralds were officers in charge of recording arms at tournaments, but heraldry as a system wasn’t yet institutionalized. See \textit{Middle English Dictionary Online}, s.v. “herauld, n.” (University of Michigan, 2001), accessed February 17, 2016. I use the adjective “heraldic” in two ways: (1) to describe visual devices that represent a person’s lineage or identity, including coats of arms and badges; and (2) to describe textual and material media that display, describe, and/or elaborate on the meanings of such devices. My use of the term thus differs from those that exclude non-hereditary devices; see, for example, Anthony Wagner, \textit{Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages: An Inquiry into the Growth and Armorial Function of Heralds} (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 12.


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9. Oil paints that were used on plaster and wood also had eggs and wax as ingredients. W.A.D. Englefield, The History of the Painter-Stainers Company of London (London: Chapman and Dodd, Ltd., 1923), 20.


12. T.R. Davies, “As It Was in the Beginning,” The Coat of Arms 109 (Spring 1979), The Heraldry Society, http://www.theheraldrysociety.com/articles/early_history_of_heraldry/origins_of_heraldry_by_davies.htm, accessed November 24, 2015. The cause of heraldry’s visual consistency across cultural boundaries remains unknown, but Davies outlines two popular theories. The first is that heraldry “arose in Western Europe and spread rapidly from country to country . . . by international tournaments”; the second postulates that it emerged “in the Holy Land during one of the Crusades, when knights from all countries gathered together and could exchange ideas, which accounted for the adoption of armory in a single generation throughout so many countries.” Davies sides with the latter view, primarily because of the unusual nature of standard heraldic charges.


14. D. Vance Smith, Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26-28, 234 n97. Smith and Wagner both point out that the financial outlay required by knighthood actually prompted some men to hide income that would bump them up to knightly status or delay taking that status up. See Smith, 26-28; and Wagner, Heralds of England, 33.


18. An alphabetical dictionary of coats of arms belonging to families in Great Britain and Ireland; forming an extensive ordinary of British armorials; upon an entirely new plan, ed. Alfred W. Morant (London, 1858-74), 62-96.
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22. Edward Topsell, The Historie of Four-Footed Beasts (London, 1607), STC (2nd ed.) 24123, Huntington Library, EEBO, 27 May 2016, 580, sig. 3G2v. Unlike Aelian, Topsell asserts that the panther’s odor alone entices other animals, not its colorful spots; at fol. 581, sig. 3G3r.


25. John Vinycomb cites Segar’s manuscript in Vicious & Symbolic Creatures in Art with Special Reference to Their Use in British Heraldry (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1906), 200-202. He believes Segar is mistaken in giving credence to Pliny’s story of the panther’s scent, and suggests that the flames actually represent its tendency to anger quickly.

26. Denny, The Heraldic Imagination, 143; and Papworth, An alphabetical dictionary. In Papworth’s armorial, the two coats featuring panthers are on pages 111 and 301.


29. Topsell, The Historie of Four-Footed Beasts, 577, sig. 3G1r.


31. Shenton, “Edward III and the Symbol of the Leopard,” 73-4. Shenton unpacks Edward III’s use of the English leopard, arguing that he associated himself with the image of “the lion-like [i.e., Christ-like] leopard rather than the pard-like [cowardly] leopard” (74). In “Quel est le roi des animaux?,” Michel Pastoureau argues that the heraldic leopard was created during the twelfth century to assume the lion’s negative characteristics (135-36).

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to both define and fix London’s society and economy” (39). Corroborating the pattern of mistrust I discuss here, he also quotes an engraver insulting craftsmen (42).

33. Though institutional fights came to a head during the sixteenth century, individual arms disputes were being litigated centuries earlier. For discussions of the Scrope-Grosvenor case, which involved two men claiming identical arms and featured Geoffrey Chaucer as a deponent, see Joel T. Rosenthal, Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval England (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 63-94; and Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 180ff.

34. Crouch, The Birth of Nobility, 161.


37. While Segar was Garter King of Arms, a peevish colleague tricked him into granting a coat of arms to a London hangman. Even though the other herald was notoriously spiteful, critics have taken the episode as evidence of Segar’s corruption. J.F.R. Day observes, he “was apparently quite willing to confirm arms (for a fee) under very dubious circumstances to someone he did not know at all. . . . Worse, the coat Segar confirmed was a combination of the arms of two sovereign princes—something Garter King of Arms might be expected to know.” See “Primers of Honor: Heraldry, Heraldry Books, and English Renaissance Literature,” The Sixteenth Century Journal 21.1 (Spring 1990): 93-103, 99, 96.

38. The Painters and Stainers were separate groups until they merged in 1502; see Englefield, The History of the Painter-Stainers Company, 46-8.


40. William Flower, “By the king of hearolds of this province, from the river of Trent, North East and VVestvvard” (London, 1578), STC (2nd ed.) 11108, Bodleian Library, EEBO, 27 May 2016.


42. Wagner, Heralds of England, 238.


44. British Library Lansdowne MS 255, fol. 314.

45. Englefield, The History of the Painter-Stainers Company, 120; and Ayres, Art, Artisans & Apprentices, 139. Later writing by heralds shows continuing traces of disdain, or at least an ongoing gap in definitions of acceptable heraldic design. In A Complete Body of Heraldry (1780), the authors— all heralds—say the guns smiths’ arms “[appear] to be a composition of some painter and not a proper armorial ensign,” Joseph Edmondson et al. (London: T. Spilsbury, 1780), sig. 4n3r.

46. For one version of the text, see This present boke shewyth the manere of hawkynge [and] huntynge and also of diuersyng of cote armours (London, 1496), STC (2nd ed.) 15388, British Library, EEBO, 31 May 2016, fol. 50, sig. K2r.


50. Peacham, The Art of Drawing with the Pen, fol. 41, sig. G1r.


54. Peter M. Daly, *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem* (Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 8. Heraldic images are often treated like emblems, but the two genres have important differences.


58. Dennys, *The Heraldic Imagination*, 49, 59-61. Unlike the early modern heraldry tracts I discuss here, *De Heraudie* was most likely written for experts—i.e., heralds—rather than a broader public audience.


68. Tom Tyler, *Ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 22-50, 48, 29. I’m grateful to Karl Steel for pointing me to this terrific source.

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