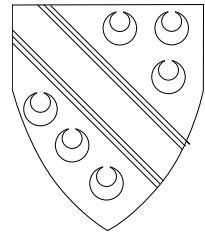# Canting arms: a comparison of two regional styles

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Background

Canting (or allusive) arms are those that make reference to the name of their bearer through a visual pun. In French, these devices are called *armes parlantes* and in German *redende Wappen*, both meaning literally "arms that speak", a lovely reference to the way in which such arms "speak" all or part of the owner's name.

Adopting canting arms was a common practice across medieval Europe, found in virtually every heraldic jurisdiction. Pastoureau [12] has estimated that 20–25% of heraldic devices use cants, with even more in Germanic countries. Woodward [18] states that "by far the larger number of arms used in earlier times were phonetic in character." He goes on to note that, while heraldic researchers at one time believed canting arms to be a later "degenerate" practice, this idea can easily be refuted by an examination of early rolls of arms. Pastoureau debunks yet another myth about canting arms, that they were used largely by commoners, noting that such arms are found frequently among the medieval nobility and in the arms of kingdoms such as Castile and León. Cants can even be found in attributed arms; Neubecker [9], for example, notes that German heralds attributed to the kingdom of Morocco arms depicting chess rooks. In German, Morocco is *Maroche* and chess rooks *Roche*.

Both Woodward and Pastoureau conclude that, with the exception of some parts of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe where heraldry arose late in the Middle Ages, the general practice is for arms to cant on an existing family name rather than for the name to be derived from the arms. This practice makes considerable sense when viewed in conjunction with the history of inherited surnames. Reaney and Wilson find clear evidence of hereditary surnames among the Anglo-Norman nobility as early as the 12th century and argue that the practice had become common by the end of the 14th century. The timing of this change closely matches that of the spread of inherited heraldry in the Anglo-Norman world, which as Pastoureau notes, began among the nobility in the 12th century and spread to the clergy,

the bourgeois, artisans, corporations, and civil and religious communities throughout the 13th and into the 14th centuries. Given the prevalence of canting arms in medieval heraldry, it seems plausible that these trends are linked as part of the general spread of feudalism in which signs of rank, personal identity, and feudal ties were of such importance.

Many of the meanings of canting arms have been lost over time because of obscure puns, linguistic changes, and the use of regional dialects and multiple languages. Bedingfeld and Gywnn-Jones [2], for example, discuss the use of martlets by the families of Arundel (*hirondelle* is French for swallow) and Valence (*volans* is French for flying). They also find that spades were used by the Gardner, Standelf, and Swettenham families and propose that spades were used by gardeners to delve in the earth and that digging leads to sweating. Oliver [10] notes that the Columball family used doves on their arms (*columb* is Latin for dove). In addition, cants often refer to the way a name was pronounced rather than to its original meaning. Pastoureau points out that the arms of the city of Lille depict a fleur-de-lys although the city's name derives from the French *l'isle* or island. Similarly, the Featherston family used feathers on their arms although the surname is a locative derived from the Old English *feother-stan* or place of four stones.

To add to the complexity of identifying canting arms, medieval families were sometimes known by more than one name. The family of Geneville were also the seigneurs de Broyes, which helps explain the horse-brays on their arms. During the Middle Ages, moreover, families sometimes adopted arms based on feudal ties. This practice, called cognate arms, has led to the spread of charges originally intended as cants to families that do not have the same surname. Bedingfeld and Gwynn-Jones, for instance, suggest that the cinquefoil may have originated as a stylized pimpernel flower, canting on the name of Robert FitzPernell, Earl of Leiceister. That earldom later passed to the de Montforts, some of whose followers adopted cinquefoils on their arms during the 13th century rebellion led by Simon de Montfort.

Analysis of canting in selected regional armorial styles

The remainder of this article is analysis of samples of canting arms found in rolls of arms from two heraldic jurisdictions and time periods: 13th–14th century Anglo-Norman and 14th–16th Century Germanic. My goal in conducting this analysis was to attempt to better understand the way in which canting charges were used in specific regional armorial styles. I also looked at whether cants used the whole surname in question or only part of it and whether or not rebuses were used in canting arms. As the discussion above suggests, I suspect I have missed some cants from the rolls of due to their obscurity and my lack of fluency in French, German, and Latin.

In studying canting arms, I have found the best practice is to use as

many sources as possible in hopes of getting some clue as to the puns. In examining Anglo-Norman rolls of arms, for example, I used Brault's *Early blazon* [3] and Stalins's *Vocabulaire-atlas héraldique* [16] to identify French blazon terms, *A dictionary of English surnames* by Reaney and Wilson [14] to find the meanings of obscure surnames, and the on-line *Oxford English dictionary* [11] to trace etymologies. For Germanic rolls of arms, I used Bahlow's *Deutsches namenlexicon* [1] and Brechenmacher's *Etymologisches wörterbuch der Deutschen familiennamen* [4] for name meanings, together with Hussmann's *Über Deutsche wappenkuns* [7] and Leonhard's *Das grosse buch der wappenkunst* [8] for blazon terms. I also found German-English, French-English, and Latin-English dictionaries to be very useful.

13th–14th century Anglo-Norman armory

This analysis is based on 80 canting arms found in Humphrey-Smith's *Anglo-Norman armory two* [6] and Foster's *The dictionary of heraldry* [5].

In this sample, about 60% of the puns were based on the whole name (Arches, for example, has three arches). Another 35% derived from the beginning of the name. Thus, Swynburn's arms have a boar. The remaining 5% cant on the end of the name with Coupen bearing quill pens. There were no examples of rebus arms; Swinford had only a boar, not a boar and a ford as might be expected. Animals, bird, and fish represented about half the canting charges, and many of the remainder used plants or man-made artifacts of various sorts. A few examples of cants on blazon terms could be seen, including the bars gemel borne by Barry and the cross Moline borne by Molyneux.

The usage of canting charges followed general Anglo-Norman armorial style. 75% of the charges were primary, mostly in groups of three or alone on the field but sometimes as groups of two or six or strewn on the field. 15% of the charges appeared as secondaries, usually three charges around a chevron or fess. 10% appeared as tertiaries, usually three charges on a bend or chevron.

Animals:
Bear (Fitz Urs, Barlingham, Barnard)
Dogs (Kennet, Malverer)
Hedgehog—herrison (Herries)
Calves (Vele)
Boars (Swynforde, Boer, Swinburn)
Deer (Malebis)
Horses (Horsley)
Lambs (Lambton)
Oxen (Oxenden)

Birds:
Heron (Heron)
Corbie (Corbett, Cormayles)
Cock (Cockerel, Cockington)
Falcon (Falconer)
Martlets (Martel)
Bird—volant (Valence)
Swallows—hirondelles (Arundell, Swalow)
Hawks (Hawkston)
Pelican (Pelham)

Eagles (Eglesfield)

Fish:

Fish (Fisher, Fishman, Fishbourne)

Barbels (Bar)

Pike (Lucy, Geddes)

Herring (Heringod)

Escallop (Scales)

Whelk shells (Shelley)

Plants:

Pine cones (Pin)

Roses (Roseles)

Garb (Weteley)

Leaves (Elmrugge, Hasilrig)

Trees (Okestede, Periton)

Apples (Applegarth)

Artifacts:

Arches (Arches)

Cups (Bottiller)

Church Bells (Benet)

Towers (Towers)

Horseshoes (Ferrers)

Buckles—fermails (Malet, Bunkhulle)

Water buckets—bouches (Buci)

Pilgrim's staff—bourden (Borden)

Crooks (Crook)

Mallets (Martel)

Horns (Trumpington, Horne)

Maunch (Mounceus, Mohun)

Stockings (Hoese)

Trivet (Trivette)

Winnowing Fans (Septvans)

Long Bows (Bowes)

Castle (Castleton)

Keys (Chamberlain)

Quill Pens (Coupen)

Gauntlets (Gaunt)

Fireball (Fursdon)

Hammers (Hamerton)

Chess Rooks (Rookwood)

Other:

Gryphon (Griffith)

Gurges (Gorges)

Mullets (Moeles)

Hands (Malmains)

Wings (Wingfield)

Fretty (Maltravers)

Bars Gemel (Barry)

Cross Moline (Molyneux)

Vairy (Ferrers)

Ermine fur (Ermine)

14th–16th century Germanic armory

This analysis is based on 100 canting arms found in Pinches' and Wood's *A European armorial* [13], Siebmacher's *Wappenbuch von 1605* [15], and the online Wappenrolle von Zürich [17].

In this sample, about 45% of the puns were based on the whole name (e.g., Wuerfel bears dice and Brandt, a burning brand). Another 40% derived from the beginning of the name. Eberbach's arms, for example, have a boar. 5% cant on the end of the name so that, for instance, Landkron bears a crown. Rebuses were relatively common (at least 10% of the arms). Many of these rebuses were used for names ending in *-stein* (stone), *-berg* (mountain), or *-fels* (rock) and had a charge or charges standing on a mount (e.g., Hirschberg had a deer on a mount and Spiegelberg had three mirrors issuant from a mount). Others used varied charges; Oxenhausen has an ox emerging from a house and Reitmohren, a Moor riding a stag.

The usage of canting charges followed general Germanic armorial style.

More than 90% of the charges were primary, nearly always a single charge (reflecting a larger trend in Germanic armory towards the use of single charges). Cants using groups of identical charges were most often found in groups of two, cants using secondary charges were very rare, and cants using tertiaries usually involved charges on a fess or bend. As in the Anglo-Norman analysis, cants involving animals, birds, plants, and man-made artifacts were common, but around 10% of the German cants used human figures or body parts. Since human figures and body parts are more common in Germanic armory in any case, this raises the question of whether that trend derives from the use of cants or some other reason. Certainly, it seems likely that only a cant would lead someone to choose a corpse for their arms as in the case of Leichnam (*Leiche* means corpse in German).

Animals:
Bear (Berner, Berner, Bernfels)
Boar (Schweinbock, Eberspach)
Fox (Fuchs, Fuchsen)
Dog (Toggenburg, Hundt)
Elephant (Helfenstein)
Sheep (Ramsberg, Schafen, Bocken, Buchseck, Boxdorf)
Beaver (Biber, Beverforde)
Wolf (Wulfurt, Wulfingen)
Lion (Lowenberg, Löwen)
Ape (Affenstein)
Deer (Rechberg, Hirschberg)
Ox (Ochsenhausen)
Hare (Hasen)
Domestic cat (Katzen)
Stag's horn (Hirschhorn)
Birds:
Crane (Kranenberg, Kranich)
Hen (Henneberg, Hünerhusen)
Swan (Schwangau)
Bird (Vogelweide)
Crow (Kromair, Khroe)
Goose (Ganse)
Falcon (Falcke)
Humans:
Monk (Münich, Munchaü)
Beggar (Betler)
Woman (Frauenlob)

Man (Utmänner, Mandech)
Moor (Reitmohren, Morschsten)
Angel (Engelshofen)
Man Garbed Gules (Rotzmann)
Corpse (Leichnam)
Bare foot (Barfus)
Fist (Faust)
Plants:
Garb (Graser)
Rose (Rosenhurst, Rosenberg)
Leaves (Blattenberg)
Seeblätter (Laubgrosen, Seebach)
Turnip (Ruber)
Tree Branch (Birchen)
Apples (Holtzapfel)
Artifacts:
Gate (Portenau, Offenburg)
Dice (Wuerfel)
Hunting horns (Jagher, Horning, Gelbhorn)
Tower (Niedertorm, Trheim)
Firebrand (Brandt, Brandner)
Mirrors (Spiegelberg)
Torse (Ringenberg)
Ladders (Leiterberg, Leiter)
Flails (Pflegelberg)
Helm (Helmshoven)
Yokes (Joch)
House (Oxenhausen)

Shovel (Graben)

Crown (Landskron)

Hoes (Heügel)

Well (Bronner)

Horseshoes (Eysen)

Millstone (Uhrmühl)

Saddle (Sattelin)

Fish-hook (Angelloch)

Belt (Belderstein)

Mallets (Schlegerer)

Garden rakes (Hopgarten)

Sleigh (Schlitsted)

Ship's hull (Bothmer)

Other:

Fish (Karpfen)

Fishbones (Gradner)

Snail Shell (Schnekhaus)

Gryphon (Gryffonstain)

Dragon (Wurm)

Mountain peaks (Siebenbürger)

Sun (Schienen, Sonnenberg)

Stars (Sternberg, Stern)

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