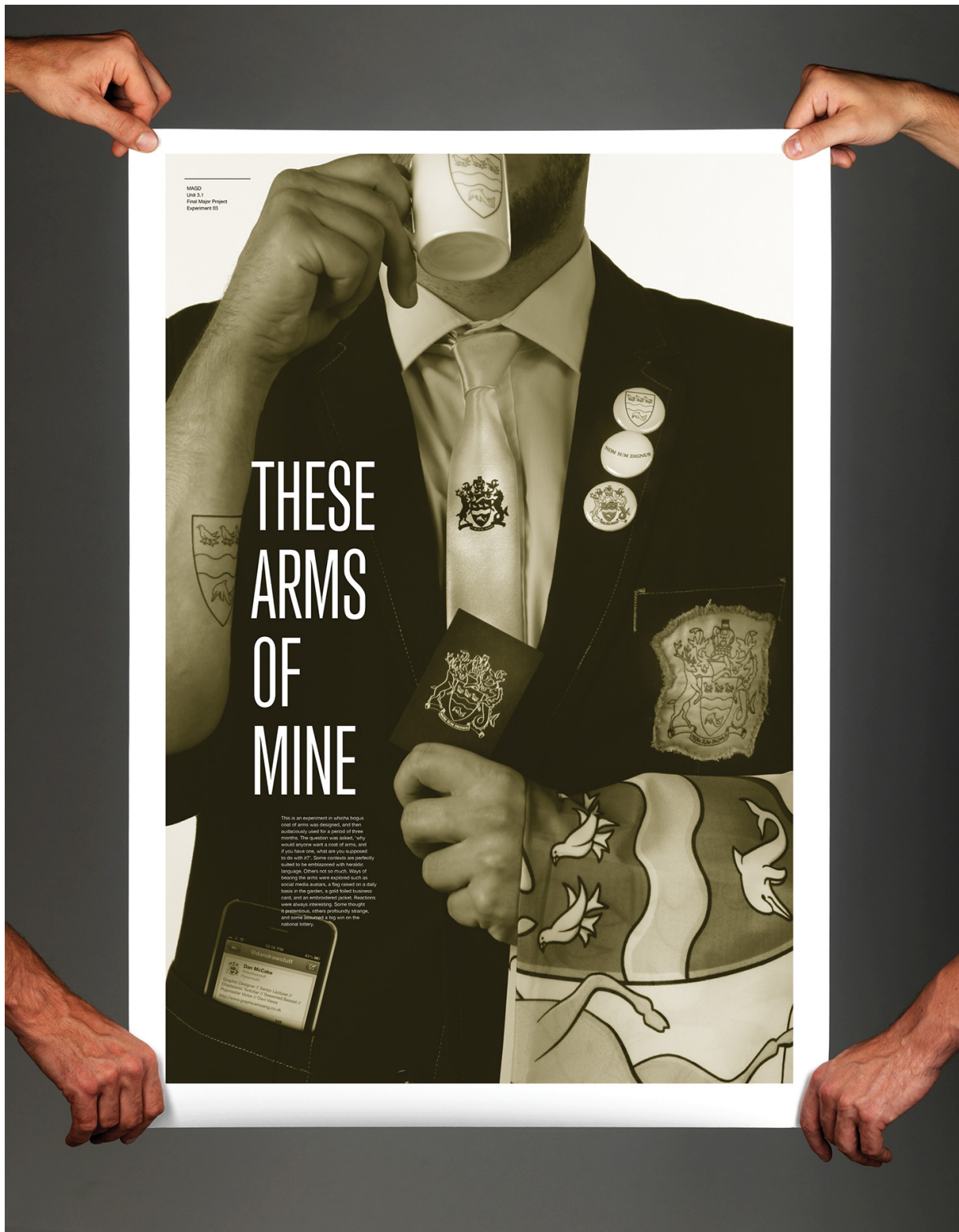


Introduction: Speaking of Arms

by Fiona Robertson and Peter N. Lindfield



A poster from Daniel McCabe's essay, 'The Graphic Herald', courtesy of Daniel McCabe.

In what ways and in which circumstances, historically and culturally, and under what assumed privileges and adopted constraints of knowledge, do heraldic signs ‘speak’? Who do they speak to, how, when, and why? The essays in this volume address questions raised by heraldry as a communicative medium which is — necessarily — contingent, culturally and historically specific, and open to interpretation, but which is commonly both desired and dismissed as a stable system of signification and even as a fixed system of meaning. To speak of arms, this volume suggests, is a complex matter.

All the essays collected here have their origins in the 2014 symposium ‘Emblems and Enigma: The Heraldic Imagination’ held at the Society of Antiquaries of London and organized by the editors of this volume. Under discussion at that symposium were the variety of ways in which heraldic practice has been understood, and misunderstood, from the late middle ages to the present day. The essays selected for this volume have been brought together under the heraldic design principle of *Semy* (also *Semé*, *Aspersed*, *Replenished*, *Strewed*, *Strewn*, *Poudré*, or *Powdered*): that is, a field strewn or powdered with individual charges. A mix of longer studies and shorter interventions, the essays in *Semy-de-Lys* are individual pieces which ask, in relation to various contexts and subjects, not only ‘what do these charges mean?’ but also ‘how are these charges being used?’. The essays come from several different fields — art history, graphic design, literature, cultural history, and the history of heraldry itself — and they all move between past and present in their reflections on how heraldic identifiers adopted at various historical moments have fared, and fare, in future years and in changed social and political contexts.

The essays are presented *semy*, and as separate arguments, but they all return to the question of how heraldry speaks. In itself, this is an intriguing issue, because there is a complex relationship between speaking and showing in heraldry *per se*, and also in heraldry’s wider cultural presence. At first sight a predominantly visual system, heraldry is constantly open to, and capable of being represented as, linguistic construction. The technical language of blazon is a traditional, regulated means of rendering visual devices in words; but, more than this formal system of verbal representation, the visual in heraldry is often a form of word-play. Arms devised as a play on the bearer’s name, occupation, family motto, locale, or other distinctive feature are found in the heraldic traditions of many nations; and, like other elements in heraldic tradition, they are subject to changes in taste and emphasis. *Armoiries parlantes*, ‘speaking heraldry’, is also known as ‘punning’ or (the dominant form in English) ‘canting’ heraldry. The shifts of implication between these terms alone might serve as an anatomy in miniature of the ambiguities in the cultural status of heraldry. To ‘speak’ or ‘voice’ is more open and less tricky than to play on words or to ‘pun’, and both are free of the troublesome implications of ‘cant’, the peculiar phraseology or jargon of a self-determined group, marked by perceived affectation and/or manipulative pietism. In Chapter 14 of Walter Scott’s first novel, *Waverley* (1814), the Baron of Bradwardine plays on the implications of ‘canting’ heraldry as a less noble form when he denounces the degraded practice, as he regards it, of heraldry drawn from words rather than from deeds. He describes this form of heraldry as:

— a sort of bearing which the French call *armoiries parlantes*; the Latins, *arma cantantia*; and your English authorities, canting heraldry; being indeed a species of emblazoning more befitting canters, gaberlunzies, and such like mendicants, whose gibberish is formed upon playing on the word, than the noble, honourable, and useful science of heraldry, which assigns armorial bearings as the reward of noble and generous actions, and not to tickle the ear with vain quodlibets, such as are found in jest-books.

The Baron does not speak for Scott, but his position on the changing emphases of heraldry, and the disjunction between sign and deed, still has a lot to say about the role of the heraldic beyond the battlefields for which (it is generally assumed) it was originally designed, and in different social contexts of identification and display. For example, there is an assumption, still perceivable in present-day advertising and brand identity which vaunts products and personalities alike, that heraldry speaks very loudly. What Thomas Gray called in ‘Elegy Written

in a Country Churchyard' (1751; line 33) '[t]he boast of heraldry' is still, typically, regarded as a way of raising one's voice. Yet it also, paradoxically, goes unheard. In Philip Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', the closing poem of his 1964 collection *The Whitsun Weddings*, the details in stone which have come to be the earl's and countess's 'final blazon' are now, 'helpless in the hollow of / An unarmorial age', a mystery to those who passively consume them. Two lines in Larkin's poems speak eloquently of the distancing of the tomb's sculpted language from those who come to view it:

How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read.

Larkin means a wider visual language here, not heraldry specifically, but these lines are particularly appropriate to the modern status of heraldic signs. To be looked at, not read, both weakens and intensifies heraldic signs, which have become felt, rather than understood, in modern culture. Signs which we are happy not to understand, and sometimes actively seek to dismiss, nevertheless exert great power over us, not least when we seek to assert our individuality, and our loyalties, as consumers. As the essays in this volume show, heraldry has always signified beyond itself, affectively and politically — enough to be desired at some historical and cultural moments and violently rejected at others. It is time to look more closely at the narrative of devices and desire.

Semy-de-Lys opens and closes with considerations of the perceptions and uses of heraldry in modern society. Daniel McCabe's thought-provoking essay, 'The Graphic Herald', raises fundamental questions about modern-day applications of the heraldic, the omnipresence of heraldry and heraldically inflected design in certain commercial activities, and the general public understanding of this long-established art form. Based upon a practical case study exploring contemporary uses of heraldry — from labels on wine bottles and clothing, to cars and council property — McCabe's essay shows how official heraldry and unofficial para- and cachet heraldry (unsanctioned, and sometimes crass, applications of armorial language and its visual characteristics) are essential to our modern understanding of commodities and identity, and, in particular, to perceptions of their claimed value. However, as McCabe's research demonstrates, unlike widely accepted heraldic applications in the corporate and retail sectors, where arms-bearing is taken as a sign of authenticity and quality, the personal bearing of arms can, instead, be seen as an outmoded, pseudo-aristocratic convention with little relevance to twenty-first-century life. This dichotomy illustrates heraldry's complex functions in modern society, and the degree to which its interpretation is dependent upon use and context. McCabe's essay introduces key elements in this volume by being so open to the many media in which modern heraldry signifies, some of them very far removed indeed from the precision, discipline, and authority of the College of Arms or the Court of the Lord Lyon. For example, his project has harnessed and mined the widely acceptable practices of 'bucket shops' which sell coats of arms based upon family name. In addition, through a series of events at Portsmouth's Southsea Castle, McCabe has been able to challenge and inform public perceptions of heraldry, questioning bucket-shop practice and also, by unmasking heraldry and raising awareness of the principles and elements of heraldic design, making the case for a greater recognition of the relationship between heraldry and present-day graphic design.

After this opening essay, the collection runs in chronological and thematic order. Alice Cavinato's essay, 'Imaginary Heraldry and Self-Portrayal in Fifteenth-Century Siena', follows on from McCabe's emphasis on invention by examining two instances in which fifteenth-century Sienese merchants created their own arms for personal aggrandizement. Moving from present-day Britain to fifteenth-century Italy shows that — in the field of heraldic signs and their perceived import, at least — there are more similarities than differences between these two cultures and epochs. Cavinato's first case study involves Bindino da Travele of the Siena Painters' Guild, who incorporated fabricated arms (based upon his rural upbringing) to a manuscript's historiated capitals. Her second example is a manuscript, *Storia di Troia*, by Niccolò di Giovanni di Francesco di Ventura. Next to a full-length portrait of Niccolò is a mysterious coat of arms,

presumably that of the author. Cavinato demonstrates through two archival case studies the social cachet associated with arms, and the forging of arms to represent mercantile identities. Andrew Gray's contribution, 'The World on a Shield', complements Cavinato's study of manuscript and rare archival material. Gray's subject is Randle Holme III of Chester, who compiled and started to publish *The Academy of Armoury* (1688). Gray reappraises this important but neglected work of documentation, sets it in comparison with the well-known *A Display of Heraldrie* (1610) by John Guillim, and argues for an increased awareness of Holme's contribution to heraldic literature.

The next two essays address French heraldry. Nicolas Vernot's 'Adopting Arms in France, 1500–1789' considers the social and symbolic meanings of heraldic practice outside the context of warfare over the course of nearly three hundred years. Paying close attention to the adoption of aristocratic arms by commoners and the spread of arms to women, the clergy, rich merchants, and craftsmen, Vernot identifies and analyses a remarkable expansion of the armigerous classes. As he suggests, particularly interesting is the choice of charges for those engaged in mercantile activities: charges were chosen to represent business interests. Privileges attaching to colour — notably azure — and the rise of particular astronomic charges, and the use of select ordinaries in imitation of older, aristocratic, arms, are similarly considered. Vernot's essay clearly shows the significance of detailed attention to heraldic practice in establishing a wider social history. The adoption of heraldic detail, and the patterns which emerge in heraldic fashion, provide insights which historians might not otherwise see. David Bennett's essay, 'Plaques de cheminée', follows on from Vernot not only in its attention to heraldic signifiers in France but also in showing us how unexpectedly and richly looking at heraldic signs can reshape our understanding of a particular historical period and its social and political upheavals. Bennett's subject is the way in which the celebrated or infamous iconoclasm of the French Revolution affected one specific material context



Stone above a door, 1692, Pesmes, département of Haute-Saône, from Nicolas Vernot's essay, 'Adopting Arms in France', courtesy of Nicolas Vernot, photo by Jean-Pierre Bévalot.

for the display of heraldic signs — the domestic chimney fireback. The practicalities of creating firebacks in imitation of heraldic forms using found objects are considered, as are the various categories of fireback design (from royal heraldic schemes through to religious, allegorical, mythological, and secular designs). By Republican decree in 1793, firebacks displaying royal and aristocratic heraldic devices had to be turned around and then melted down and recast, to remove the symbols of inherited power even from domestic hearths. The decree itself is a mark of the recognized affective and ideological potency of heraldic signs; but, as Bennett shows, it was far from universally complied with. The story of turning and re-turning firebacks concludes, very appropriately in the context of this collection of essays, with remarks on the desirability of pre-Revolutionary firebacks in the present-day antiques market. The practicalities, ideological nuances, and ironies in Bennett's analysis of what he describes as the *recherché* topic of the domestic fireback bring us back to one of the sub-headings of McCabe's essay, 'Status Symbols and Vanity Signals', and to the present-day exchange value of the heraldic.

Returning to British heraldry, and its influence over, and integration to, Georgian literature in particular, E. G. Stanley considers the heraldic possibilities of Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto, A Story* (1764; the sub-title became 'A Gothic Story' in the second edition, 1765). Despite all the critical attention which has been paid to *The Castle of Otranto*, especially in the literary tradition which has subsequently come to be labeled 'Gothic', nobody has ever thought about the tantalizing appropriateness of the arms of the Italian town of Otranto to the novel which adopts or borrows its name. Stanley's essay emphasizes the involved family histories and complex shifts of register in Walpole's novel and considers the connection between the arms of Otranto — which are fantastical, but also rooted in local legend — and the principles underlying Walpole's narrative plotting. Moving the narrative into the nineteenth century, Diana Powell's essay, 'Symbolizing Succession', examines the role of heraldry in the work of Walter Scott and Charlotte Yonge. As Scott demonstrates in his entry on heraldry for *The Encyclopædia Britannica* (1818), he was fully aware of the language's function in militaristic and, increasingly, in social contexts as an indicator of status and wealth. As Powell establishes, both Scott and Young harness heraldry in their novels to convey implicit messages about union, history, and isolation. The problems of establishing succession — moral, legal, familial — in the nineteenth-century novel are brought into new focus here through the subject, often neglected in literary analyses, of the heraldic. Once again, as in the essays by Vernot and Bennett, details of heraldic description resonate in a wider social and political analysis, offering new insights into a language of suggestion and the implicit interrogation of social codes.

The collection's closing essay, Lynn Pearson's 'Of Griffins, Lions, and Unicorns', examines the role of heraldry within the brewing industry, an area of study known as zymurgical heraldry. As McCabe's opening essay has emphasized, we live amid a riot of largely unperceived, or at least underexamined, heraldic signs. We value and devalue them, implicitly trust and explicitly disavow them. Pearson's essay tells the story of the close relationship between heraldry and the business of brewing from medieval times to the present day, but focuses intently on the giant presence of the heraldic in nineteenth- and twentieth-century brewing identities. In terms of individual buildings as well as of brand identities, heraldic forms figure large. One of Pearson's most telling examples comes from the presence of the majestic nineteenth-century Coade-stone lion which since 1966 has stood on the south-east end of Westminster Bridge in London. This piece of statuary was not designed for Westminster Bridge; nor was it intended to dignify the implicitly civic space it now guards. It was rescued from the demolition of Goding's Lion Brewery, Lambeth, in 1949, and is in origin a commercial sign. Pearson's essay attends to some of the most common and prominent registers of the heraldic in modern visual culture, pub-signs, and reveals how much cultural (as well as financial) investment can be revealed, and concealed, by heraldic and heraldically derived signs.

These essays, *semy* or *poudré*, give individual interpretations of the wider cultural significance of heraldic practice from the fifteenth century to the present day. Collectively, they ask about how heraldry mattered, and matters, in cultural contexts which are surprisingly comparable across historical periods. As befits discussion of the visual language of heraldry, the



A locally-made terracotta version of the Phipps Brewery trademark at the former Scotgate Inn, Stamford, from Lynn Pearson's essay, 'Of Griffins, Lions, and Unicorns', courtesy of Lynn Pearson.

illustrations included in these essays are an important part of each argument, and work across the volume to emphasize the complexity and resonance of a visual form which has, to adopt Coleridge's words in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), 'strange power of speech'.

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