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Heraldry and the early modern state

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Steven Thiry and Luc Duerloo, eds, *Heraldic hierarchies. Identity, status and state intervention in early modern heraldry* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2021, 273 p., ill.)

Heraldry in the Early Modern period has all too commonly been written about by heraldic enthusiasts who are at heart medievalists. They have approached the post-medieval centuries in terms of decline from medieval ideals, and they have not cared to engage with the many new developments of the later sixteenth century and later. Refreshingly, the present collection is focused on all that was new in what pertained to the nobility and the Crown in their relations with heraldry in the Early Modern period, and it does not even disdain genealogy. Its various contributors engage readily (and capably) with the key issues: the identification of certain families with the princely state, the increasing division of the nobility into fresh and more sharply delineated hierarchies, the expression of these rankings through heraldry, and the roles purportedly played by heralds – now almost all become servants of the Prince – in regulating heraldry.

A helpful introduction by the book's editors, Steven Thiry and Luc Duerloo, goes far towards pulling together the different contributions and showing how (in all save two cases – the one an account of Mamluk emblematics in the fifteenth century, by Simon Rousselot, and the other a discussion of heraldry in the pre- and post-Revolutionary British 'Thirteen Colonies' of North America, by Joseph McMillan) they add up to an inter-related set of studies which share common ground. The demarcation of the nobility into different strata is one *Leitmotiv* that is pointed to as a theme that recurs in the ensuing chapters along with its

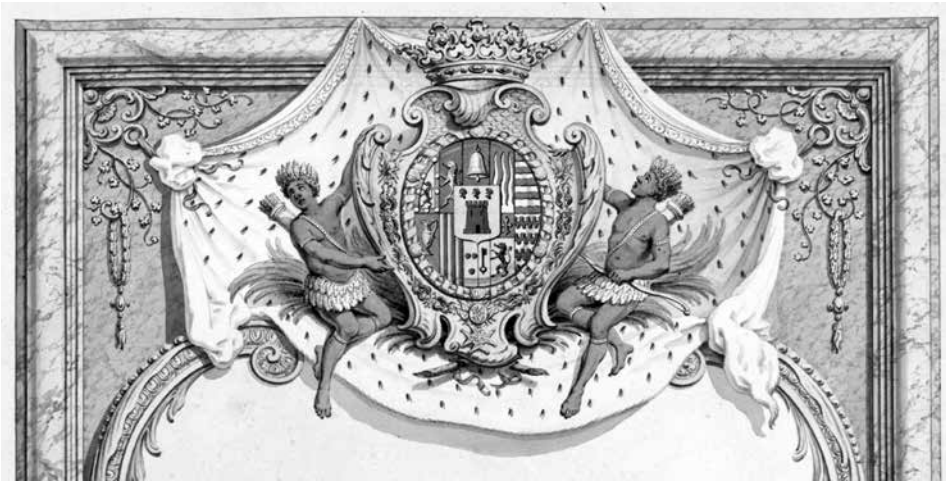


Fig. 1. Achievement of arms of the Pardaillan family, painted by Jean Chaufourier. This marshalling of arms, with multiple quarterings, will have been intended to convey a sense of the ancestry and distinction of this noble family (*detail of the 'Recueil des Plans, Elevations, et Veües du Château de Petit-Bourg, année 1730', fol. 4; coll. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, Réserve boîte FOL-VZ-1340*)

armorial counterparts, such as quarterings and also more specific *marques de noblesse*. The other side of the coin is not neglected, either: the Crown showed itself very ready, at least in principle, to maintain a degree of armorial discipline by the disgracing and destruction of the heraldry of those who showed themselves to be (or in one case, which forms a chapter by itself, to have been) a disloyal or dishonourable subject. Official iconoclasm has a long history, and some telling examples are presented here.

The scene is well set by Hamish Scott (in what is admittedly a foretaste of his forthcoming monograph, *Forming aristocracy. The reconfiguration of Europe's nobilities, c. 1300-1750*) with a wide-ranging *coup d'oeil* over the European aristocracy as it had taken shape by the early seventeenth century. In what is surely a novel approach, he considers in a comparative way (and with a succinct tabulation) the 'family trusts' or legal devices that were set up in almost all parts of Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries to preserve the material basis – that is, the tenure of landed estates – that formed the patrimony of the heads of families. One result was to enhance the tendency for certain families to increase their landed wealth from generation to generation, to the dislike of families of the lesser nobility and gentry (or equivalent).

A short paper by Clément Savary on the often-multiple quarterings of coats of arms in France – seen as initiated by René (1409-1480), duke of Anjou – brings in the study of genealogy in the seventeenth century by such scholars as André du Chesne (1584-1640): the addition of quarterings to a coat of arms depended on precise knowledge of the ancestry

of both the arms-bearer and the related families. A natural counterpart to this discussion is the setting of the theoretical armorial scene by Camille Pollet. Here, various English, French and Spanish treatises are considered for what they say about the nobility as well as heraldry: Pollet's concern is to see how far they portray nobility and entitlement to bear arms as resulting from blood (or 'birth') or, alternatively, 'virtue'.

We then move into a group of closer studies of heraldry, hierarchy and the role of heralds in policing these areas. Nicolas Vernot raises some of the key issues in his examination of those non-nobles in western Europe (and especially France) who sought or laid claim to coats of arms and the question of how far such moves can be correlated with social ambitions. Even the design of their coats was carefully considered by such merchants and other commoners. The pressures that led one Spanish king of arms, Diego de Urbina (1555-1623), to cut corners in making certificates or grants of arms are documented by José Manuel Valle Porrás. The nature of such certificates is not explained, which is a pity. It is an endemic and entrenched aspect of heraldry that the oldest arms have always been seen as the best, and thus that a grant
 150 of new arms has in various countries in the past been drawn up in such a way as to seem like a confirmation or certificate of arms; it is not apparent, however, whether the Spanish letters patent of Diego de Urbina were technically certificates, confirmations or grants. The actual authority of heralds in Lille at about the same date was mocked in a *Remonstrance burlesque* which is printed by Dominique Delgrange (pp. 154-5). It is also a fundamental problem for the heraldic profession that its income must come in large part from the making of new coats of arms (and perhaps pedigrees) for the *nouveaux riches*, since older families which already have a coat of arms do not need its services; and one consequence is that the heralds are in effect at the mercy of their clients – and thus all too liable to expose themselves to ridicule.

The book's third section focuses on the State and how it reacted to the burgeoning enthusiasm for heraldic displays, which were of course recognised as expressions of social ambition and assertion, and thus as potential challenges to the status quo. The sovereign's heraldic monopoly was one inevitable response. Steven Thiry shows this and more in an excellent overview in which he reconsiders the armorial dimension of territory already traversed in his recent monograph *Matter(s) of state. Heraldic display and discourse in the early modern monarchy (c. 1480-1650)* (Ostfildern, 2018). He demonstrates, for instance, that the very fluid, protean way in which heraldry existed meant that it could hardly be integrated into existing typologies: the bearing of coats of arms did not exactly correspond to noble status, and so it was all the more useful as a means of helping the non-noble to attain that.

Antoine Robin, by contrast, homes in on one particular legal case: the posthumous condemnation in 1527 of Charles III de Bourbon (1490-1527), constable of France, for treason. He was sentenced to be deprived of his name and for it to be damned for ever, for everything that he possessed to be forfeit to the Crown, and for his arms and badges throughout the Kingdom of France to be destroyed. Here again we see how heraldry's fluidity came into play: the men (none of them heralds) who were despatched to efface his armorial bearings were often at a loss to know what to do, partly because his arms were so very similar to those of the main Bourbon dynasty – and, moreover, he had himself used those latter arms himself after his marriage to Suzanne de Bourbon (1491-1521) in 1505. The ritual intention of the judgment was more significant, and it was certainly easier to publish than to enact in full.

The book concludes with Joseph McMillan's account of how the early years of the thirteen North American secessionist colonies, 1775-1800, saw the replacement of the old mix of public seals bearing symbols of royal heraldry and private gubernatorial seals with a new system which prioritised public heraldry over the use of private coats of arms. The republicans did not repudiate heraldry as such.

Each chapter has its own endnotes (but why not footnotes?) and there is an amalgamated bibliography. Alas, there is no index: such a coherent and useful collection of essays really deserved better.

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