Arms and the Prof

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In France teachers and scholars can look forward to being decorated with the Order of Academic Palms, a sort of chalky version of the Legion of Honor, or the Order of Arts and Letters. The Dante specialist I worked under in graduate school wore a medal from the city of Florence with his academic gown. The British crown made the leading bagpipe scholar in North America an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. Like military officers, academics long for promotions and think they belong to an elite corps that alone treasures the values and traditions that make the country great. Naturally, they are delighted by medals and titles. I can't claim to have been decorated for my scholarship; nevertheless, thanks to my research I have been honored by the Queen of England.

My academic specialty is English, in the largest sense. I have written books on novelists, but my essays and papers cover everything from Chaucer and the Bible to television dramas. My favorite subject, though, has been heraldry ever since I first read about it junior high school. Coats of arms, badges, and flags and all the wonderful rules covering their creation and use have given me more innocent pleasure than almost anything else. They have offered me a world of beauty and order while literature has moved more and more to the sloppy and the tawdry. And—to speak to the realities of life on the tenure track—they have given me some major publications.

When I entered graduate school, my field was dominated by something called "theory." Theory covered quite a bit, though nothing so pedestrian as how authors create poems and stories or readers read them. In fact, the hipper critics would say with a

straight face that the author didn't exist or that he was merely "the space in which the text occurred." They also claimed that signs, such as words, were not the names of things but arbitrary counters that could be interpreted in myriad ways. (Somehow they never called on that theory when the sign on their paychecks didn't match their expectations.) The fad for that sort of thing has passed; now the trendy critics spend their time proving that every poem about daffodils and every yarn about detectives is really about the glorious trinity of Gender, Race, and Class, but at the time structuralism, post-structuralism, and semiotics were what we talked about instead of books, authors, readers, and the historical periods that tied them all together.

I decided that I would run my favorite subject through the mills of theory and show that while such a thing could be done, it missed everything that was really interesting in heraldry, just as it missed everything that was interesting in literature. Showing that an enterprise is pointless even as you are embarked upon it is perfectly in keeping with the ethos of theory: in so far as the form of it called "deconstruction" has a goal in reading, it is to find an "aporia"—literally, a dead end—where the text undermines or contradicts itself. My project, though, had a point: it was to show that the mechanical search for the void was less interesting than the careful attempt to find what a work said about its time and the human condition. I also hoped to remind people—even English professors—that seeing how signs reflected the choices of those who used them and the times in which they were used was more interesting than imposing our own meaning on signs.

"Sign" was one of the buzzwords of the time. A "sign" is the union of a "signifier" and a "signified." Old critics might talk about words and things, but signs,

signifieds, and signifiers were for the initiates. There was even a new name for the discipline: "semiotics" or "semiology." That means, simply, the study of signs; it was once applied to what we now call "signage," the signs that mark streets and buildings. News journals appeared with names like Signs and Semiotica.

The article I wrote was titled "Semiotics and Heraldry." I both explained heraldry to the denizens of the world of theory and applied their system to it. I also hope I showed how when applied to heraldry—and, by implication, to literature, as well—semiotics missed everything that was most interesting. It was not an easy essay to place, but it finally appeared as the only article in an issue of Semiotica, a journal edited at Indiana University and published by the distinguished German house Mouton de Gruyter. I also found myself speaking at a Semiotic Congress at the University of California, Berkeley. I wish I could say that my work banished semiotics from my field, but the truth is that theorists simply got tired of the void and became obsessed with sex, especially in its transgressive forms. If I wrote my article with the same purpose now, I would have to call it "Queering the Escutcheon."

My interests, though, were always more focused on heraldry than on literary theory of any kind. As I studied it further—and I have become someone other scholars consult on heraldic matters, if only because I am the only person they know with his own copy of Papworth's Ordinary of British Armorials—I began to wonder if I might become armigerous myself. (*Armigerous* simply means possessing a coat of arms.) In one sense, nothing could be simpler. It is a free country and I could adopt a coat of arms, just as I could give myself a title of nobility. But doing that, I felt, would be like calling myself

Duke of Missouri and Landgrave of Illinois on my calling cards, a stunt fit only for fools, madmen, and charlatans in a story by Mark Twain.

There are some places in central Europe where arms are shared by a family or alliance of families, but that has never been the case anywhere in the English-speaking world. My own ancestors were not armigerous, so far as we know. If I were to have a coat of arms, it would have to be granted to me personally.

That would be no problem if I lived in England, Scotland, Canada, which each have their own heralds, or in the other nations of which the Queen is sovereign. It wouldn't be a problem in South Africa, which has its own herald, even though it has been a republic since 1961. The one heraldic authority recognized by the United States government, though, deals only with the U.S. Army. Citizens seeking legitimate armorial bearings must go abroad.

That state of affairs still leaves several options, but I knew what I wanted to try first. I would contact the College of Arms in London. The kings of arms there had granted arms to Shakespeare and many others I felt I knew from my readings, and their own number had included such men as Sir John Vanbrugh, a playwright I had taught, an architect I admired, and a herald of dubious qualifications. During one summer's trip to England, I stopped at the College of Arms and was given the name of the "Officer in Waiting," the herald who handled inquiries during the time I visited. As a result, I corresponded with Robert Noel, then Bluemantle Pursuivant. It turned out that the crown can only grant arms to Americans if they can prove descent from a British subject or have been honored by the crown. And, like other honors from the crown bestowed on Americans, the arms would be technically "honorary," because of the unpleasantness in

1776 and an agreement between the State Department and the Foreign Office designed to paper it over. (The difference between a plain honor and an honorary honor is one I leave to the theorists.) He recommended against trying to prove my descent from a British subject, certain as that was, "due to the vagaries of Irish genealogy," meaning all the courthouses burnt in 1921.

Being honored by the crown did not, to begin with, seem a likely prospect. George Mitchell and Ronald Reagan had been made honorary knights, but my achievements were rarely noticed by Rendleman, much less Buckingham Palace. There was another possibility, however. Bluemantle also told me that Americans could be considered for membership in the Order of St. John, a royal order of chivalry whose members acquire no rank or precedence, but that does count as an honor from the Queen for heraldic purposes. (And for wearing decorations.)

It turned out that I actually knew people who could propose me for membership, so while I waited for the Queen's action on my nomination, I learned more about the Order of St. John. Along with the Knights of Malta, it is one of the heirs of the Knights Hospitaller of the crusades, but today it is an active, practical charity. In some countries it teaches first aid, in others it runs the ambulance system, in others it runs homes for Alzheimer's patients or does AIDS outreach. The American group supports the Order's ophthalmic hospital in East Jerusalem. The more distinguished members when I was admitted included Nelson Mandela, Clayborne Pell, and Madeleine L'Engle. The day of my investiture as an Associate Officer (Brother) was one of the high points of my life.

I have since been granted my coat of arms, which is described in the language of blazon as "Argent on a Bend Azure between two Cat's Faces Sable three Harps or

stringed Argent and for the Honorary Crest Upon a Helm with a Wreath Argent and Azure A Bear sejant erect and affronty Sable armed Or the sinister paw raised the dexter paw enveloping a Book proper bound Or garnished and clasped Azure Mantled Gules doubled Argent." It took some negotiation to come up with a design the kings of arms would accept as both unique and in heraldic good taste. They also reminded me of the arbitrary powers they wield as servants of the Crown. The bear in the crest, who was supposed to be brown, like the bear in the flag of California, my home state, became black at the command of Garter King of Arms, and my production of examples of brown bears from the walls of the College of arms itself would not sway him. That the bear is clutching a book and growling represents my worse days as an English professor.

The letters patent granting my arms hang in my library at home, but for years I had a full-size reproduction in my campus office. No student ever asked what it was. (A magnetic version of the arms applied to my car doors does attract the interest of the workers at McDonald's.) My students have heard a fair amount about heraldry, all the same. It appears in poems and novels from Chaucer to Hawthorne and beyond. And the students in my Introduction to the Bible course have benefited from my involvement with the Order of St. John, since I have visited the St. John Eye Hospital in Jerusalem twice and seen many biblical sites firsthand. I have gone on publishing on heraldry and have designed arms for individuals and institutions who must adopt them *ex motu proprio*, such as Catholic clerics and institutions. My design for the arms of the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wisconsin even won the American Heraldry Society's annual prize for best heraldic design by. My inability to draw does not hamper me in this

enterprise, since I blazon the arms in my best mixture of modern English and Old French and the heraldic artist translates that into a beautiful image.

The university has supported me in attending a meeting of the heraldry society, and, in return, I have volunteered to help the university become armigerous itself. Besides several universities, many American institutions have had arms "devised" for them by the College of Arms. They range from county governments to the Mescalero Band of Apaches. The university has never taken up the idea. While Oxford and Cambridge have kept the same arms for seven centuries, Southern Illinois University goes through logos at about the same rate it replaces chancellors. A cynic might link those two cycles or simply assume that the university is powerless in the face of downstate stationers, who would be denied a regular windfall if we had what they now call a "visual identity" worth sticking to.

Over the years I have also used the same skills I employed as editor of *Papers on Language & Literature* in the service of the Order of St. John. I have used my page layout and copy-editing skills to make the order look better in print. I must have done a good job. I have been promoted twice, and am now a "knight of justice." I wear robes that include a mantle and a sopra-vest as well as a decoration. That has been my reward for following my academic interests where they took me.

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