

Heraldry for Those Who Cant

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“Heralds don’t pun – they cant.” That’s the customary joke, but what does it mean?

Definition

Canting...just what is it? Canting arms (also known as *Armes Parlantes*, *Armas Cantantes* and *Sprechende Wappen*) are usually defined today as armory in the nature of a rebus alluding to the name of the bearer. From a strictly medieval context though, it would be more accurate to expand this definition. Historically it would be classified as a form of allusive arms which usually refers to one's name, title, office, or estate (and less often but sometimes refers to an attribute or function) done via one's armorial bearings. It is not always just the name that a cant refers to. However, because we in the modern world don’t have the proper context to apply to the meanings, many examples of period canting have their humor lost to us. It is usually the cants that apply to names that are readily apparent to us, and thus why many people believe that canting was based on names exclusively.

Why Were Cants Done?

Puns were quite common in the humor of the Middle Ages. And it would be only natural that such a predominate pastime would be applied to such an art as heraldry. Simple enough to add humor to the creation of designs, for the enjoyment factor alone. Yet perhaps there was an even more basic purpose behind the use of canting arms. The world of the Middle Ages is noted as a time of major illiteracy.

What better way to have folks recall one’s name than to bear a device whose emblem would help them keep that name in their minds? Much the same way that company logos are used today, where the symbol helps us recall the name of the company.

Types of Cants

While there are no official / formal categories for cants, there are levels to the intricacy of these visual puns.

1. Simple Cant - This is where one object is sufficient to form the pun.

Kingdom of Castile Castile is Spanish for “castle” and the arms are: *Gules, a castle Or.*

Kingdom of Leon Leon is Spanish for “lion” and the arms are: *Argent, a lion purpure.*

2. Composite Cant - This is where the use of more than one object is needed to make the pun.

Harthill Arms are: *Argent, on a mount issuant from base vert, a hart lodged gules.*

Henneberg Arms are: *Or, on a mount vert a hen sable.*

3. Complex Cant - This is where the cant is based on sound, a word meaning or is alluded to indirectly. Many times these types of cants can require specialized knowledge to recognize the connection or appreciate the humor.

Sound: Lion in **Lyons** family arms; fox in **Fuchs** family arms.

English family **Harrison** bears a hedgehog. (Middle French for hedgehog is "herisson")

Knowledge: The arms of **de Lucy** bear a pike. (An archaic name for a species of pike is “lucy”)

Meaning: The arms of **Quatremayne** is: *Gules, a fess between four dexter hands couped argent.* (quatre mains = “four hands” in French)

Indirect: French family **Santeuil** bears: *Azure, a head of Argus Or.* Argus, from Greek myths was a monster with one hundred eyes. (French: cent = hundred, oeil = eye)

English family **Maltravers** bears: *Sable fretty Or.* The fretty here represents an obstacle. (mal traversé = “difficult to pass” in French)

To Cant or Not to Cant

When creating your own armory or consulting with heraldic clients, should you consider doing canting arms?

In favor of doing so is the fact that it was period. It was not limited to just one country, but was done throughout Western Europe, as the examples will show. Additionally, if we knew all the original full names of the owners of coats-of-arms (not just the family names as in many cases) and if we had a list of all the foreign terms that were used in punning in the Middle Ages, we'd certainly be set to better appreciate the "in-jokes" and as noted in *Boutell's Heraldry*, "it would probably be found that an allusive connection between name and arms was much more prevalent than is now apparent."

So, is there any reason not to pursue canting arms? Well, certainly a lot of period devices were not canting arms, so there's nothing wrong with not having canting arms. Plus when consulting, one should always keep foremost in their minds that they want to listen to designs the client likes. (After all, the main purpose for having heraldry is for heraldic display and one is only going to make display if they truly LOVE their device. So much better that a client have a design they love without a cant, than canting arms they were talked into, but don't really like, because then they won't feel motivated to use the design.) Also realize that if you have to use a lot of charges to create the cant, you run the risk of creating a poor design that is unperiod in style or one that could be offensive. As it has been said, "A good design is worth more than a bad pun." And one final thing to consider is that later heralds tended to view canting as a "peculiar form of human weakness," evidence of "the lamentable proneness of man to give way to evil habits."

So to cant or not to cant...it's a strictly personal choice.

Examples of Historical Cants

Following is just a sample of the canting arms found within the rolls of historical armory.

English:

1. The arms of Hopwell, contain rabbits.
2. The arms of Spense have a pence (coin) on it.
3. The arms of Lambert have a lamb on it.
4. The arms of Greyliy have a grayling (a type of fish) on it.
5. The arms of Beveridge have a beaver on it.
6. The arms of Corbet have a corbie (raven/crow).
7. The arms of Rokesdon have rooks (raven).
8. The arms of Crowmer have crows.
9. The arms of Cockerell are: *Or, a cross between four rooster-cocks gules.*
10. The arms of Haseky are: *Argent, a fess gules between three hazel nuts Or.*
11. The arms of St. Thomas Becket are: *Argent, three clough sable, beaked and legged gules.*
The original name for a chough (crow) was "beckit".
12. The arms of William Shakespeare are: *Or, on a bend sable a spear Or.*
13. The arms of Thomas Beckynton has a beacon issuant from a tun.
14. The arms of the Essex family from the town of Breame has three bream (a type of fish) on it.
15. The arms of John Oxney showed an eagle (the symbol of the evangelist John), an ox, and the letters "ne".
16. The arms of Sir John Peeche is a peach charged with the letter "e".
17. The arms of Sir Robert de Septvans has seven winnowing fans on it (sept=seven fans for "vans")
18. The arms of Sir Roger de Trumpington is: *Azure crusilly, two trumpets palewise Or.*
19. The arms of John Cammel is: *Azure a camel passant argent.*
20. The arms of Anne Boleyn's family have a bull on it.
21. The arms of the Perrot family have three pears on it.
22. The arms of Bacon have a boar on it.

Irish:

1. The arms of the Aherne family display three herons.
2. The arms of the Barry family are: *Barry of six argent and gules.*

Scottish:

1. The arms of Skenes have three dirk-knives, which were original called a skene.
2. The arms of the Fraser family bears strawberry flowers, which are known as frases.

French:

1. The arms of the town of Pontigny have a bridge on it. "Pont" is French for bridge.
2. The arms of the Mello family have merles (martlets) on it. "Merle is French for a small blackbird.
3. The arms of the Morin family have three Moors' heads on it.

Spanish:

1. The arms of Don Loys Cornel have crows.
2. The arms of Abello have bees.

German:

1. The armory of the Wurf family has dice on it. "Wurf" is German for a die or cube.
2. The arms of Geyer von Osterberg have a vulture on it. "Geier" is German for vulture.
3. The arms of Biberach has a beaver on it. "Biber" is German for beaver.
4. The arms of Berlin has bear on it.
5. The arms of Raeblinger have a raven.
6. The arms of Krhomair have a crow.
7. The arms of Gansen and the arms of von Ganse each use a goose close.
8. The arms of Die Fuchsen is: *Or, a brown fox salient proper.*
9. The arms of the Winkler family have an angle on it. An angle is also called a "winkel".

Italian:

1. The arms of Frangipani arms depicted two golden rearing lions facing each other and holding aloft a golden loaf of bread against a red field. This is a pun on their name which means "bread-breakers."
2. The arms of Felice di Peretto Ricci, from Montalto in the Marches of Ancona, has a blue field with a golden lion, carrying a pear tree branch, covered with a red bend charged with in chief a gold star and in base a silver trimount. The pear branch was for for Peretto and the trimount referred to his birthplace, Montalto.
3. The arms of di Topi include a mouse statant sable. ("Topo" means mouse.)
4. The arms of Ratazi uses a rat statant sable. ("Ratt" and "ratto" are Italian for rat.)
5. The arms of Ratanate uses a rat rampant sable.
6. The arms of the city of Torino has a bull (toro) on it.

Other canting arms:

1. The arms of Garin de Bassingbourne are: *Geroune [gyronny] d'or et d'azure.*
This is a cant on a first name!
2. The arms of Eschelard de Monsyrolle had escallop shells. Another first name cant.
3. The arms of the Dutch Knight Bott Dezeme have three turbots on it. Yet another first name cant.
4. The Dodge Family bears: *Barry of six, or and sable, on a pale gules a breast distilling a goutte argent.*
(A breast distilling milk is known as a "dug". Dug for Dodge.)
5. The arms of the de la Hose family have human legs clothed in men's hosen.
6. The arms of Henry of Henneberg bore a hen.
7. The arms of William Heringaud had herrings on it.
8. The arms of Godard Heron, John Heron, and Roger Heron each bore herons.
9. The arms of the Pyke family have a pike on it.
10. The arms of the Count of Tierstein have a female deer on it. Normally called a "hind", the term "tier" also means a doe.

11. The arms of Nicholas de Kennet have three dogs on it. Kennet is a type of dog.
12. The arms of De Ferres is: *Argent, six horseshoes sable*. Horseshoes were made of iron and the Latin word for iron is “ferrum”.
13. The arms of Desoles have a fish on it...a sole.
14. The Roach family arms bears a roche on it, a type of fish.
15. The Garvie family arms has upon it garvin fish.
16. The Essex family from the town of Breame have arms upon which is a bream fish.
17. The Earl of Surrey added two barbells (a type of fish) to his seal when her married the daughter of the Count of Bar in the 14th century.
18. The arms of Nicholas Breakspear (later known as Pope Adrian IV) have a broken spear on it.
19. The arms of the Bowes family have a longbow on it.
20. The arms of Horsens has a horse on it.
21. The arms of Füssen have three legs complete with feet (füsse).
22. The arms of Pelham have pelicans on it.
23. The arms of John Sponeley have spoons on it.
24. The arms of Bishop John Fisher bore a dolphin between three ears of wheat (fish-ear).
25. The Trusbuts family arms bore *trios boutz d'eau* (three water-bougets) and a second cant is present in the fact that they controlled the Barony of Warte.
26. The arms for both Shelly and Wilkinson bear whelk shells.
27. The arms of Brock contains three badgers. Brock is another term for badger. <This leads to the question...if a device has a semy (scattering) of mullets (stars) the term used to describe it is mullety. So, if you have a semy of badgers on the device, is it called brock-aly (broccoli)?>
28. The arms of Arundel have swallows (hirondelles).
29. The Avaugour in Brittany bears on its armory an apple tree. (aval gor = crab-apple)
30. The arms of the Fouquet family have a squirrel. (fouquet = squirrel)

Examples of Canting & Unusual Arms in the SCA

Following is sampling of the canting arms found within the rolls of the SCA.

Ælfwynn Fiske (5/90 An Tir)

Purple, a fish haurient between three crescents Or.

Fish for Fiske

Ancilla the Packrat (4/81 West):

Per pale argent and vert, on a fess counterchanged a rat statant contourné panniered, gorged, and being led on a chain, by a frog statant contourné, all counterchanged.

Panniered means carrying a pannier (basket worn on the back). Obviously this rat is being used as a pack-animal.

Andrew MacRobb (11/82 East):

Per pale Or and purple, a keyhole counterchanged.

This shield is also known as: The per pale peephole heater.

Aulus Allemanius Draconis (11/81 Ansteorra):

Or, seven ewes tergiant displayed, three, three, and one, vert.

aka: Seven vert-ewes displayed

Brendan of Millersvale (10/93 Middle)

Per saltire azure and vert, a saltire argent between four millrinds Or.

Millrinds (grinding stones) to refer to the Miller

Brianna Xylon (6/84 Ansteorra)

Per chevron Or and vert, in base a maple tree coupé Or.

The correct transliteration of the period Greek work for wood. (Greek letters here) is Xylon.

Brigida von München (8/03 Calontir)

Azure, a monk's hood and on a chief argent, three crosses of St. Brigid azure.

München = "little monk".

Caerthan Heraldic Symposium (09/81, Atenveldt)

Vert, issuant from a can two wyrm's heads addorsed Or.

aka: A can of worms

Catherine Anne Applebey (7/03 Calontir)

Badge. [Fieldless] On an apple gules slipped and leaved vert a Roman capital letter B Or.

A rebus on her surname.

Catherine Cameron (9/99 Outlands):

Azure, three natural dolphins naiant argent, each maintaining in its mouth a sprig of thyme vert, on a chief argent three loaves of brown bread proper.

aka: A thyme for every porpoise under leaven.

Coeur d'Ennui, Barony of (7/84 Calontir):

Argent, a laurel wreath vert within eight boars' heads coupé in annulo gules.

Coeur d'Ennui means "Heart of Boredom". The device is a boar ring; boring.

Daemon of Woadwood (7/79 Ansteorra)

Per bend sinister argent and sable, a tree blasted azure and an estoille Or.

Although woad technically comes from a bush, this is a nice play on the name.

David the Fretful (8/87 West):

Sable, fretty argent, on a base indented Or, a fret coupé sable.

Indeed, his armory is fret-full

Deodar, Shire of (2/84 Calontir):

Argent, two rabbits combatant sable and in chief a laurel wreath vert.

Mundanely known as Cedar Rapids, the arms are how some children have been known to hear the name; "See da rabbits." They are very disappointed when they get to town and see no rabbits.

Eldred Ælfwald (4/98 Atlantia):

Argent, semy of pine trees coupé vert, a tankard gules foamed Or.

For "Ale Red, Ale Wald"

Finn Herjólfsson (10/92 Middle):

Sable semy of hangman's nooses argent, an annulet of chain Or.

As the owner of this design is a knight, this is known as: Sir Finn hanging ten

Fiore Pescara (9/97 Ansteorra)

Barry wavy azure and argent, three bezants.

aka: Three coins in the fountain

Galen of Wiltshire (11/98 Outlands):

Sable, in saltire a Bourchier knot between four bees Or.

aka: Two bee, Or knot, two bee.

Gawain of Miskbridge (10/82 Middle):

Sable, mullet argent, a lymphad Or, fore and aft castles enflamed proper, issuant from base a demi-sun Or.

aka: A starship (what other type of ships has flames at it's end and is amongst the stars?); what an enterprising idea!

Genèvre la Tisserande (9/87 Outlands)

Per bend sinister argent and Or, in bend a juniper tree proper and a spider tergiant bendwise sinister sable.

"Genèvre" is a French term for the juniper berry

Grane the Golden of Hippogriff Tower (9/71)

Sable, three stalks of wheat as in a garb, Or.

Grains of golden wheat to refer to the name.

Harald of Madmarch (1/89 Caid)

Quarterly sable and vert, a hare rampant to sinister within a bordure engrailed argent.

aka: Mad as March hare

Honoria of Thescorre (12/95 East):

Argent, in pale a fish naiant gules and two more azure.

aka: One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.

Jararvellir, Barony of (1/84 Middle):

Pean, a catfish naiant Or.

aka: Catfish on rye.

Jararvellir, Barony of (5/84 Middle):

Purpure, in pale a bar vair and a catfish fesswise inverted Or.

for the Fermented Guild of Jararvellir

aka: Belly up to the bar

Kathleen Erin-go-burne-the-Bragh (1/74):

Vert, a chalice argent containing flames Or.

A burning cup (of a bra)

Linnett of Monadh (4/98 Middle):

Gules, three buckets in pale Or.

aka: Three pails in pale.

Lothar Freund (7/93 Trimaris)

Vert, a fess embattled counterembattled between a foi and a bull's head caboshed Or.

"Foi" is the French term used in blazons to refer to clasped hands.

Margrethe Astrid Ravn (10.76 West)

Azure semee of pearls, a white marguerite slipped and leaved, all proper.

Marguerite (flower) for Margrethe.

Matilda Hanscombe (10/03 Middle)

Vert, a hand argent sustaining to chief a comb Or.

Matti Turkulainen (1/98 Caid)

Azure, a Lucy between three lozenges argent.

aka: Lucy in the sky with diamonds.

Outlands, Kingdom of the: The following badge associated with this name was registered in August of 1978 (via Atenveldt) and transferred to Caerthe, Barony of in May of 1983 (via Atenveldt):

Argent, a toad sejant affronty vert warded Or, bearing on its chest a heart gules fimbriated Or, encircled by the motto "Before you meet the handsome prince you have to kiss a lot of toads".

for Courtesans' Guild

Peregrine de Porticu (8/85 An Tir)

Gules, a falcon close to sinister within a dolmen argent.

A peregrine (falcon) sitting within a portal refers to the name.

Politarhropolis, Barony of (9/90 West):

Argent, on a pale gules a griffin segreant argent, overall a laurel wreath counterchanged.

The barony is mundanely the city of Canberra. One of the principal architects of the city was named Burleigh-Griffon, so their arms depict a burly griffin on a field of red tape.

Rosemary Willowwood of Ste. Anne (1/84)

Or, two willow branches crossed in pall inverted proper between three roses gules, barbed and seeded proper, all within a bordure purpure.

The use of roses and willow refers to the name.

Stephan Sörensen (9/99 Outlands):

Azure, a triskelion of armored legs between three pairs of scissors argent.

aka: Runs with scissors.

Tarakan, House (2/81 Atlantia)

Gules, a cockroach (*Periplaneta americana*) tergiant erect sable, fimbriated argent.

The Russian translation of cockroach is "tarakan"

Yllaria Gyngyvere (12/97 West):

Purpure, three suns in their splendor and on a chief argent, three frets azure.

She says she chose the device because she has "three sons, over whom she chiefly frets."

Werbung of Wenlock (7/00 An Tir)

Argent, five pavilions two, two, and one within a bordure embattled sable.

Werbung translates as "war town". The pavilions, or tents, within an embattled border or wall are representative of an encampment within a defensive wall. In times of war cities of tents might spring up with some sort of palisade or embattlements around them to protect the army within.

William Gallowglass (1/81 Atenveldt):

Sable, in chief on a plate a satyr dancing and playing a flute proper, issuant from base a demi-sun Or.

aka: A frying pan

William of the Flaming Swan (8/82 Atenveldt):

Per bend sable and argent, in bend three mullets of eight points between in bend sinister two swans naiant counterchanged, the swans breathing flames proper.

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