

## Women in the Age of Chivalry and Heraldry



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### ABSTRACT

*Author discussed the important traditions and rules that the age of chivalry demanded of women in the bearing of arms and how their education reflected the needs of the era. She then indicated current changes about women and the bearing of arms.*

KEW WORDS: *women, education, age of chivalry and heraldry*

### Introduction

While we see many images of women in the age of chivalry and heraldry, there is little written about women of this time. What can we say about the role of women in the age of chivalry and heraldry. Were there rules of behavior and protocols for women in the bearing of arms?

As it was, the foundation of this age of feudalism--the lands, the military and the fighting for "heraldry was the province of the knights."<sup>2</sup> "It was because of the loyalty of such men that wars could be fought and won."<sup>3</sup> However, people began to realize that wars were not constantly being waged, and, if they were always battle ready, knights could become dangerous and barbaric, which was potentially detrimental to the well-

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being of the country and its citizens.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the “code of chivalry,” a set of ethics and rules, became the tool by which the behavior of the early knights focused on warfare could be monitored and regulated. The “code of chivalry” was a necessary institution in the age of heraldry that brought order and established the parameters of acceptable moral behavior among these wayfaring knights.<sup>5</sup>

It was the thinking of Thomas Hobbs, a social philosopher of the 1600s, that brought about the basic tenets of sociology. His philosophy was that man is by nature violent and will always act to further his own agenda in order to gain power and overthrow others. His thinking was important because he addressed one of the fundamental questions in social theory: “How can some semblance of social order and organization be created and maintained?”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it was the implementation of the Code of Chivalry, a set of ethics that addressed the social order. The Code cultivated the warlike behavior of the knights.<sup>7</sup> They needed to honor God, go to church, protect women and the weak, love their country, make war against the non-believers (infidels) of God, perform their feudal duties, never tell falsehoods, give to all, and, finally to stand up for righteousness and goodness.<sup>8</sup>

## **Influential Women in the Age of Chivalry**

### **Influential Women of Heraldry**

There were two women who were very influential in this time and wrote of the age of chivalry and the Code of Chivalry. They were Christine de Pisan (c. 1364 - c. 1430), who followed the teaching of Honore Bonet (c. 1380) and wrote *The Book of Feats of Arms and Chivalry (1408-09)*. She addressed issues that clearly illustrated her knowledge of the military era of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

Along with the work of Christine de Pisan is that of Raymond Lull,<sup>10</sup> who wrote *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* in 1275. This work was a textbook at that time of chivalry, which focused on converting the heathen to Christianity. It was enthusiastically received by the rulers of all Europe whose goal it was to make their courts centers of learning and culture based around the chivalric code and courtly love with the pageantry of tournaments and the winning of a lady. It would provide the tools by which

courtiers became more civilized and cultivated and, thus, molded into a loyal and dedicated force for the country.<sup>11</sup>

### **Arms and Illiteracy**

In the Middle Ages, many people were illiterate. There was a need for members of the nobility to find a way to identify themselves and their family lineage. Not only were they proud of their heritage, it was important for a knight to be able to identify the lineage of the house into which he was born. His arms told a genealogical story, a story of his noble birth, his marriages and the alliances of houses, his children, how many sons he had and their marks of cadency, his daughters with their marks of differentiation, and his wives of noble birth and from which noble family they came. However, in spite of the complexity of arms, Fox Davies<sup>12</sup> laments, “bearing in mind that armory was so deeply interwoven with all that was best in chivalry, it is curious that the armorial status of a woman should have been left so undefined.”

### **Chivalry and Women**

Chivalry, feudalism and heraldry were inseparable components in the Middle Ages; it was knights, the lands and warfare that send visual images to us over the feudal period. We must recall that it was an essentially military period in history in which protecting the lands and fighting vassals were the primary concerns. Because of these conditions, the role of women in society was a disadvantageous one.<sup>13</sup> Also, feudalism was another factor that shaped and molded the concept of marriage and the role of women in society. Some men thought that a “most beautiful woman in the whole world was less than equal to a good horse or a fine lance thrust.”<sup>14</sup>

Girls were married at 12 years of age and knights at 15. This was the rule of canonical law taken from the Canonical Tribunals.<sup>15</sup> These tribunals were consulted on the issue of marriage. Girls needed the consent of both parents and young men the consent of their fathers.<sup>15</sup> Canonical law was often disregarded, however, as marriages were often arranged between fathers of children sometimes as young as 5 years of age.<sup>16</sup> In this age of military warfare, it benefited a woman, especially if she was an heraldic heiress, to have a husband to protect her and her lands from plunder and seizure.<sup>17</sup>

If in dire need of a husband, women would sometimes go to the king as widows. "Find me a husband, a powerful husband to protect my lands," or, "My father died two months ago. I request you to find me a husband." Widows hardly had time to grieve after the deaths of their husbands because it meant that their lands were vulnerable. For that reason, feudal marriages needed to be completed very quickly.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Young Girls and Education**

Most noble young ladies were educated when very young. Many had hired governesses who oversaw their education. The young lady of that time was religious and assisted at Mass every day. She read Latin and learned the songs of the wandering minstrels that came to the castle. She knew some arithmetic and science and prepared remedies for illnesses. She was also taught basic housewife tasks such as sewing and weaving and could embroider and make the clothes for the family. In addition, she was schooled in the ways of being a proper hostess when knights came to the castle or manor.<sup>19</sup>

### **Women and Arms**

There is evidence that the noblewomen in Europe in earlier centuries (for example, the 13<sup>th</sup> through the 15<sup>th</sup>) were found to have borne their arms on shields that were oval in shape and did not have a crest. Research by Slater<sup>20</sup> indicates that on monuments women were sometimes depicted holding shields.

However, because the shield was a military device and was associated with warfare, it was deemed an inappropriate symbol for women. It was eventually replaced by another shape for the identification of the noble alliances and lineage of women, the lozenge.<sup>21</sup> There is no record of when this custom was adopted.<sup>22</sup> However, because it somewhat distorted the placement of arms, the lozenge was not considered as appropriate as the more effective oval shape. A seal from a noble woman circa 1347 was found and included in the design are five small lozenges.<sup>23</sup> However, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the diamond shaped lozenge was the preferred configuration for the display of women's arms in Britain, France and the Low Countries. When you view the lozenge, it is quickly apparent how such a shape would distort the arms.<sup>24</sup>

In this military period of feudalism and chivalry, women were not allowed to use certain devices that were essentially militaristic.

Let what is definitely known be stated. In the first place, No woman (save a sovereign,) can inherit, use or transmit crest or motto, nor may she use a helmet or mantling.

All daughters, if unmarried, *bear upon a lozenge* the paternal arms and quarterings of their father, with his difference marks. If their mother were an heiress, they quarter her arms with those of her father.<sup>25</sup>

There was no appropriate mode for a married woman (other than a peeress in her own right) to display her own arms during the lifetime of her husband.<sup>26</sup> Her arms were placed on her husband's shield as an escutcheon of pretence or as a quartering.

However, this ruling has now changed. Recently, the English King-of-Arms has ruled "that a married woman may bear her paternal arms, even if her husband is not armiger us." Her arms would be displayed "on a shield or a banner differenced by a small escutcheon of a contrasting tincture in a corner or elsewhere on the shield, in a manner most suitable to the design."<sup>27</sup> "Furthermore, the ruling states that even if the wife comes from an armigerous family, she may bear her husband's arms alone, the shield charged with a small lozenge."<sup>28</sup>

However, an unmarried woman who is either the head of a college or a mayor may impale the arms of the college or corporation alongside her own with the official arms on the right (Dexter) side.<sup>29</sup>

The "Law of Arms"<sup>30</sup> was written at a time when a wife's arms were placed on a small shield in the center of the larger shield of her husband.

Fox-Davies further remarks:

As an unmarried heiress she undoubtedly was a somebody; As a widowed and richly jointed dowager she was likewise of account but as a wedded wife her identify was lost, for the married Woman's Property Act was not in existence, nor was it thought of. So completely was it recognized that all rights and inheritance of the wife devolved of right upon the husband, that formerly the husband enjoyed any peerage honours which had descended to the wife and, was summoned to Parliament as a peer in his wife's peerage. Small wonder, then, that the same ideas dominated the rules of armory. These only provide ways and methods for the husband to bear the wife's arms.<sup>31</sup>

In recent years English married women are allowed to bear their own arms on a shield rather than marital arms as custom dictates. A small blank

escutcheon is placed in the center of the shield of a woman bearing her own arms.<sup>32</sup>

Margaret Thatcher's arms have a blank escutcheon in the center; this signifies that they are hers and not her husband's.<sup>33</sup>

A divorced woman may bear her paternal arms with a mascle.<sup>34</sup> (A mascle is a lozenge with its center removed.)<sup>35</sup>

A widow is allowed to bear her husband's arms on a lozenge with her own arms impaled or in escutcheon of pretence.<sup>36</sup>

Spinsters or unmarried daughters could bear their paternal arms on a lozenge, which was mounted by a ribbon and was often blue.<sup>37</sup>

Women bear the cadency marks of their fathers, but, unlike the cadency of sons, girls have no differentiated birth order markings.<sup>38</sup>

However, today, as women have their own careers and interests separate from their husbands, a married woman may use her arms for her own purposes.<sup>39</sup> Also, husbands are permitted to use their arms without their wives' coats impaled or on escutcheons of pretence. However, it is not appropriate for a married woman to use only her family arms. Married women are not permitted to use married arms on a lozenge because this is the mode that is used by a widow.<sup>40</sup> A married woman should place the arms of her husband as well as her own arms for her particular purposes. Brooke-Little<sup>41</sup> refers to Fox Davies, who he believes knows the correct precedents. She should place the arms of her husband and then herself on a shield with a knot of ribbon above it. This impalement, or escutcheon of pretence, will indicate that they are married, and a knot indicates that the arms are those of a woman.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Marshalling of Women's Arms**

Woodcock<sup>43</sup> gives us the definition: "Marshalling of Arms is the proper arrangement of armorial bearings to denote rank and condition connection by marriage or representation of families."

The term was used to denote a side-by-side alliance of two coats on a shield. It was used when marriage was displayed on seals and monuments during the early years of the days of heraldry. The complete shields of the husband and the wife were placed on the shield, and they simply chopped the shields in half vertically. This was known as "dimidiation." However, the two sides placed together on the shield often ended up with ludicrous animals or other odd figures, such as lions with the hind parts of eagles or

lilies. This practice of “dimidiation” was neither effective nor well liked, so it became the custom at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Edward III<sup>44</sup> for both full coats to be depicted on one shield.<sup>45</sup>

According to Slater,<sup>46</sup> putting two or more full coats of arms on one shield is known as “marshalling.”

### **Quartering of Arms**

Quartering was the method by which alliances made through marriage were displayed. This indicated how estates or “fiefdoms” were established and built up through these alliances. This custom differed depending on the country as they each had their own heraldic rules for quartering.<sup>47</sup>

As the Middle Ages progressed toward the late medieval period, pedigrees, family papers and shields all became more complex because of the method of quartering.<sup>48</sup>

### **Heraldic Heiresses**

With her marriage, an heraldic heiress, a woman from a family without a direct male heir, brings an “escutcheon of pretence” to the marital shield. As a result, the husband, instead of having his wife’s arms alongside his on the marital shield, placed her arms in a small shield in the center of his arms.

This small shield is known as an “escutcheon of pretence.” The husband is pretending to be the male head of his wife’s family. Thus, “any children born to the marriage can bear their father’s arms and also those of their mother (to be on a shield for a son, or a lozenge for a daughter, as quartering).”<sup>49</sup>

### **Women, Cadency and Children**

Cadency is an important part of the British armory system as it is used to differentiate children from the head of a family. The rationale of heraldry is its ability to identify individuals’ ancestry, as well as their rank or title. Thus, the coat of arms became a pictorial signature of the armiger.<sup>50</sup> Fox Davies<sup>51</sup> maintains that “the manner in which cadency is indicated in heraldic emblazonment forms one of the most important parts of British

armory,” and that differentiating arms in this way is seen as an obligation. This was recognized universally in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Let us first look at well defined and designed cadency markings for the sons of a family and then we will turn to the girls in the family.

Cadency is normally used for the male line. Growing out of the feudal system, its function was to protect the land. The arms became territorial and familial. However, the male head of the family only temporarily owned arms.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it was necessary to give a mark of cadency for the first-born son. This first mark of differentiation in heraldry was known as the label and was the first mark of differentiation. This seems to date from the early or middle part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup>

The first-born son was the heir apparent, and it was necessary to identify him as he would eventually bear the arms of his father. In addition, the lord of the estate and the heir apparent were the most important members of the family. This was understandable as the heir apparent needed to learn the work of the estate.<sup>54</sup>

As early as 1410 there were several issues that led to the need to devise cadency markings for the younger sons. One was the case of Scrope and Governor.<sup>55</sup>

The cadency marks of the sons were as follows: the mark of the second son was a crescent, the third son a millet, the fourth son a mantle (a bird without feet), the fifth son an annulet, the sixth son a fleur-de-lis, the seventh son a rose, the eighth son a cress mine, and the ninth son a double quatrefoil.<sup>56</sup> “The position for the mark of difference is in the centre chief point, or it can be charged on a chevron or fess in the centre point.”<sup>57</sup>

There is no mark of cadency for the girls in the family. Cadency is used to indicate the birth order of sons.<sup>58</sup> Girls were considered equal in whichever order they were born. In England, they each bore a mark of difference.

Adopted children, after they were granted a royal license, could use arms of their adoptive parents.<sup>59</sup>

The position of illegitimate children, and the arms of their lineage, is one of the more undefined areas of heraldry.<sup>60</sup> In 1464, the chief herald of the Duke of Burgundy wrote, “A bastard may carry the arms of his father with a baton sinister.” However, Slater<sup>61</sup> notes that the baton sinister is only one of the heraldic marks used to differentiate illegitimacy.



For illegitimate children to use the arms of their father, the father must first acknowledge paternity to the illegitimate child or children. Then, there must be a royal license of illegitimate children issued. Only then can a royal license be granted to use the arms of the father. However, there must be a differencing mark, which is usually a wavy border.<sup>62</sup>

In England, a female illegitimate child can become an heraldic heiress and is further allowed to transmit her father's arms to her children. However, there must be a mark of difference on the arms that indicates illegitimacy.<sup>63</sup>

In Scotland, there is only one mark of official illegitimacy--the bordure company--which is a border divided into segments.<sup>64</sup>

In Ireland, Slater tells us that illegitimacy is not recognized in heraldry.<sup>65</sup>

Even more distinct in the heraldic literature we read about are the Spanish arms and titles as that inheritance comes through the female line.<sup>66</sup> It is also curious that there is no constraint upon illegitimate children as there is in England, France, and Germany. "In general, it was considered that a family pedigree could be more damaged by misalliance than by illegitimacy."<sup>67</sup>

Fox-Davies describes several examples of the arms of illegitimacy and speaks of the illegitimate son of Henry VIII.

One of the most curious bastardized coats is that of Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond and Somerset, illegitimate son of Henry VIII. This shows the Royal Arms within a bordure quarterly ermine and counter-company or and azure, debussed by a baton sinister argent, an in escutcheon quarterly gules and varied or and vert possibly hinting at the Blount arms of his mother, Barry nebula or an sable over all a lion rampant argent, on a chief azure a tower between a stags heads abashed argent, attired or.<sup>68</sup>

## **Women and Heraldic Dress**

We have seen pictures of women in the Middle Ages. Women of nobility had heraldic dress, which was of the most beautiful cloth and was worn for ceremonial occasions.

Lady Sabine duBourbonnais<sup>69</sup> wrote about heraldic dresses for women to help those who wished to create armorial dresses. She found that although such gowns appear on numerous sources such as funeral

monuments, brass effigies/ inscriptions and illuminated manuscripts, there was little evidence to support that gowns carried marks of heraldry in the fashions of the age. However, she points out there is one notable exception, that of royal ceremonial dress. She indicates that for important state events it appears that royal women would have been wearing heavily emblazoned gowns, which were the traditional ceremonial gowns. She maintains that mantles and cloaks were especially made for the same traditional ceremonial uses (<http://www.sca.org.au/st-florians/university/library/articles-howtos/heraldry/Geraldry/GerakducFriocks5>, gtn).

The gowns and cloaks that the noble heraldic women wore conferred rank, wealth and status in medieval royal courts. Thus, the queens and royal princesses had the arms of their countries emblazoned on their gowns. However, other minor nobles of the court would not attend state ceremonies. Thus, they would not have had such gowns.<sup>70</sup>

For places to see the heraldic dress of the Middle Ages one can find it in funeral monuments, brass effigies and inscriptions, illuminated manuscripts, extant garments and textiles, armorial rolls and in museums. Sources can be found on the types and styles of heraldic garments for women.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to identify some important traditions that women of the heraldic and chivalric age lived by, and have identified more current changes that have been made about women and the bearing of arms.

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