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Abstract
Reviews basics of European heraldry and attempts to deduce the rules of Tolkien's elvish heraldry. Finds that elvish heraldry seems to have rules (although less stringently applied) but considerably more artistic complexity.

Additional Keywords
Heraldry, European; Tolkien, J.R.R. Illustrations; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Heraldry; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion—Heraldry; Margaret R. Purdy; George Barr
Symbols of Immortality

A Comparison of European & Elvish Heraldry

Margaret R. Purdy

With the publication in the last few years of The Silmarillion and more recently the Unfinished Tales, it has become more than ever apparent how much care and attention to detail was lavished on his Secondary World of Middle-earth by J. R. R. Tolkien. All of his many talents and interests were brought into play in the service of this sub-creation: his lifelong fascination with languages inspired the invention of the Elven tongues; his study of the tales and legends of the Norse, Anglo-Saxons and others provided sources for his own mythology; his scholar's mind produced essays on the technical details of the operation of the palantiri. His artistic skills, too, his eye for color and his talent for drawing and painting, helped to bring Middle-earth to life, for himself and for others. His most striking works in this field are his pictures of places, such as Rivendell, or Taniquetil, or the forest of Lothlórien. But here again the smallest details are not neglected, and one of these details is the heraldry of Middle-earth.

There is evidence that Tolkien had some knowledge of the heraldry of our own world, and the various banners and emblems present in The Lord of the Rings—the white horse of the House of Eorl, for instance, or the swan-ship of Dol Amroth—are indeed similar to the conventional coats of arms of European heraldry. The heraldic devices of the Elves, however (which have appeared in various places, notably in the Silmarillion calendars, and which are collected as the penultimate plate of Pictures by J. R. R. Tolkien), are strikingly different in style and conception, and it is this Elvish heraldry that I mean to compare with the European heraldry of the Primary World.

I use the terms "Elvish" and "European" advisedly. Though there are emblems shown for Men as well as Elves (e.g. Bëor, Beren, Hador), they are all Men who were closely associated with the Eldar, and these emblems were probably created either by the Elves or under their direct influence. When left to their own devices (if you'll pardon the expression), Men seem more inclined toward the European pattern, as The Lord of the Rings shows. Thus "Elvish" and "European" I use to distinguish the Primary-World heraldry that I mean to compare with the European heraldry of the Primary World.

European heraldry has been described both as an art and as a science. The artistic side of heraldry is apparent to anyone who has experienced its colorful displays; the "scientific" side of it becomes rapidly all too clear to the unwary amateur who picks up a textbook on the subject. For European heraldry follows very specific rules, and has a terminology all its own, one as esoteric and specialized, in its way, as that of physics, chemistry or biology. I still remember one of my first encounters with heraldic terminology, in a dusty old bound volume of St. Nicholas Magazine. It was part of a puzzle contest: "Argent on a fess between three crosses sable as many martlets of the field." 1 Years later, when heraldry had become a hobby, I was able to go back and decipher that blazon, which describes the arms shown in Fig. 1. The three little crosses with crossed arms, by the way, are more properly called "cross-croslets."

If there are similar rules governing Elvish heraldry, we have no knowledge of them. The heraldic devices depicted by Tolkien are never mentioned by him in any of his published writings; all we have are the devices themselves and whatever inferences we can draw from them. However, the more basic rules of European heraldry can form a model with which we can compare and contrast the Elvish craft.

One similarity between the European and the Elvish heraldic systems is that the shape of the field denotes the sex of the bearer. In European heraldry the man bears his arms on a shield, the most common form of which is the "heater-shape" as in Fig. 1 (though there are many variations upon it, ranging from the simple to the positively rococo). A lady, when her arms are displayed alone (usually when she is unmarried), bears them on a diamond-shaped field called a lozenge. In Elvish heraldry it is the male who uses the lozenge, though the European "lozenge" tends to be narrower in proportion to its height than the square-on-its-point used by Tolkien; the devices of the female characters are circular or disc-shaped (this shape would be called a "rounded" in European terms). The one possible exception to this rule is carefully labeled "House of Haleth."

European heraldry limits itself to a few basic pigments, called "tinctures." There are the five "colors"—gules (red), azure (blue), vert (green), purpure (purple) and sable (black)—the two "metals"—or (gold or yellow) and argent (silver or white)—plus a number of patterns known as "tinctures" which I will leave aside for the purposes of this discussion. To these is added the designation "proper," which means, more or less, the natural coloration of whatever is being depicted. In European heraldic art it is considered the best practice to use the brightest and purest possible shade of any particular color, with a minimum of artistic subtleties. In addition to this there is the rule "Color shall not be laid upon color, nor metal upon metal." Thus if the field (background) of a shield is gules, any charge (figure) laid upon it would have to be either argent or or; an argent field could bear a charge of any of the colors but not one of or.

Elvish heraldry, at first glance, does not seem to have these restrictions. Tolkien's pastel shades may be parti-
not, departures from it being most frequent in the devices of the female characters (though the aforementioned subtlety devices of Melian and Eärendil, and the varying reds in watercolor), but the subtle shadings of color in the devices ally due to the medium in which he was working (crayon or Elvish heraldry, rather than as a law. could say that the color/metal rule exists as a tendency in European heraldry a coat of arms can be a geometric design, of color sometimes makes it hard to tell, for instance, what reveal that the color/metal rule is followed more often than cally any other object in the known universe, or a combina­

tion of the two. Examples are shown in Fig. 2: the arms of Chaucer are purely abstract; the familiar lions of England are taken from the natural world (although admittedly no real lion ever looked quite like the heraldic variety); and the arms of Shakespeare combine the two forms, the "spear" of the Bard's name being added to the geometric pattern of field and bend. Elvish heraldry shows a similar range of styles: the device of Hador, and the intricate emblem of Melian, seem to be purely abstract patterns; Lúthien's two devices, and that of Gil-galad, combine such natural objects as flowers and stars in geometric forms; and finally the devices of Beren and Finrod Felagund are basically depictions of natural objects, Finrod's harp and torch being one of the simplest examples of Elvish heraldry. Elvish devices, however, have a strong tendency toward radial symmetry, not unlike the "hex signs" of the Pennsylvanian Dutch. Departures from this style are few, Finrod's being the most striking example, and the focus of these is still often the center point of the design (Beren, Hador). European arms, if they are symmetrical at all, will usually be bilaterally symmetrical. The shape of the field probably has a good deal to do with these tendencies.

The inspiration of some of the Elvish devices also seems similar to that of many European arms. Those arms which are not simply a pleasing pattern in somebody's favorite colors are often either puns on the name of the bearer (mounting arms infer a descent from his wife) or have an event in his life. Well-known examples of the former are the swallows ("hirondelles" in French) of the Earls of Arundel, and the pike-fish ("lucien") of the family of Lucy. As for the latter, a more recent example is the arms of William Herschel, the astronomer, which include a representation of a telescope. Among the Elvish devices we can note the stars in the emblem of Gil-galad ("Star of Radiance") and the flame-patterns in that of Fëanor ("Spirit of Fire"); while the device of Beren, depicting the Silmaril, the severed hand, and the triple peak of Thangorodrim, obviously alludes to the events of the hero's life. One of the major differences between European and Elvish heraldry lies in the matter of complexity. The patterns used by the Elves can display an intricacy of design and subtlety of coloring that is totally foreign to European arms. Outstanding examples of these qualities are the devices of the female characters, Melian, Idril, and the two emblems of Lúthien Tindviel. I have reproduced Melian's device twice now for two artistic projects, and I can testify that it is even more intricate than it looks; I have never even attempted to reproduce the delicate shadings of blue in the device of Idril Celebridal. Many of the male characters, too, go in for fairly intricate abstract designs; Fëanor's device is an example.

European heraldry, on the other hand, at its best remains quite simple in design. The arms shown in Fig. 2 are all examples of this simplicity, both in form and in color. It is only in relatively modern times that more complicated forms have come into existence, and part of the reason for this is sheer population pressure; all of the simple designs have been used already. European heraldry is also complicated by the addition of all sorts of accouterments to the central shield. A typical heraldic achievement will include a helmet, wreath, mantling, crest, and motto in addition to the shield; if the bearer is noble, there may also be a coronet and supporters as well as a compartment for the supporters to stand upon. (All of these components of the achievement are governed by rules of their own, of course.) A man may be entitled to more than one crest; he may have a war-cry in addition to his motto; he may be a member of a knighthly order (such as the Order of the Garter) whose decorations will be included in his achievement. The coat of arms of the Mythopoeic Society is a good example of a heraldic achievement (see Fig. 3). The Elves seem, perhaps mercifully, to have escaped this sort of complication entirely.

The other great source of complexity in European arms is what is technically known as "marshalling." Marshalling has to do with family relationships and genealogy. It begins with a married couple, both of whom come from armi­gerous families. If the woman has a brother, and thus is not entitled to pass the arms down to her children (yes, European heraldry is notoriously sexist), the man's shield is simply split down the middle, with his arms displayed on the dexter side of the shield (the right-hand side, from the point of view of a person holding the shield) and his wife's on the other, or sinister side (see Fig. 4a). This is called "impaling." If, on the other hand, the woman has no

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FIG. 2

CHAUCER: Per pale argent and gules, a bend counter-changed

SHAKESPEARE: Or, on a bend sable a tilting-spear of the field

ENGLAND: Gules, three lions passant-guardant or.

In neither system of heraldry do there seem to be any restrictions on what the device itself can include. In European heraldry a coat of arms can be a geometric design, a representation of bird, beast, flower, tree, or practically any other object in the known universe, or a combina­tion of the two. Examples are shown in Fig. 2: the arms of Chaucer are purely abstract; the familiar lions of England and the varying reds in watercolor), but the subtle shadings of color in the devices of Beren, and Idril Celebridal, are a significant departure from the European pattern, as are the several blues in the devices of Melian and Eärendil, and the varying reds in those of Hador and Fingolfin. However, a closer look will reveal that the color/metal rule is followed more often than not, departures from it being most frequent in the devices of the female characters (though the aforementioned subtlety of coloring sometimes makes it hard to tell, for instance, what is supposed to be silver and what pale blue). Perhaps we could say that the color/metal rule exists as a tendency in Elvish heraldry, rather than as a law.

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brothers, and thus will pass her family's arms down to her children, her arms are displayed on a little shield ("escutcheon") in the center of her husband's (see Fig. 4b). This is called an "escutcheon of pretence." Her children will then "quarter" the arms of their father and mother (see Fig. 4c). So far so good. But the real complications set in when more "armorial heiresses" enter the family line. The English and Continental systems have different methods of handling the multiplicity of quarterings that result (get a herald to tell you about "Grand Quarters" sometime), but in any case after a few generations of this the shield begins to look more like a patchwork quilt than a coat of arms.\(^6\)

**FIG. 3: A HERALDIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Closely related to marshalling is the concept of "differencing." By heraldic law no two living men may bear exactly the same coat of arms. Whenever military relationships are stressed in heraldry. Thus every male descendant of a certain family line will bear the same basic coat of arms, but with variations depending on his exact relationship to the senior line. In earlier times this differencing was done in many ways, such as keeping the forms of the ancestral shield but changing the colors, making some alteration in one or more of the charges, and so on. Later on, more formal systems were developed for differencing that, if you knew them well enough, would tell you not only what family a man belonged to, but whether he was a first, second, third or whatever son, what the seniority of his father was, and even whether or not he was illegitimate. Modern English and Scottish heraldry still maintain very consistent systems of what are technically known as "cadency marks."

All of these genealogical implications are almost totally missing in Elvish heraldry. There is no indication that Elvish heraldic devices were hereditary; on the contrary, each Elven prince or princess had a personal one. (Note that a Elvish heraldry is not sexist.) Fëanor and Fingolfin have their own emblems rather than variations of their father Finwë's, though there is a certain "family resemblance" apparent in the designs. European and Elvish heraldry, in fact, are very different in what they represent. A European coat of arms belongs to and stands for a family; an Elvish heraldic device is the property and symbol of a single individual.

For the reasons behind the great differences between European and Elvish heraldry we must turn to their origins. European heraldry evolved on the battlefield. With the advent of body armor, including helmets that covered the entire head and face, a knight in combat became totally unrecognizable. Some method of identification was needed to allow the fighters to distinguish friends from foes. Thus knights began adopting symbols with which they would adorn their surcoats (hence "coat of arms"), shields, horse blankets, banners, and any other large flat surface that was handy. Since these devices had to be identifiable at very short notice (like between the time an approaching knight spotted you and the time he threw his battleaxe at you or hit you over the head with his mace), they were for the most part simple and straightforward, with bright colors and lots of contrast (hence the rule of color upon metal and metal upon color).

Examples of this sort of heraldic usage appear in The Lord of the Rings, though banners and flags are more apparent than personal arms. The white horse of Rohan floats above the Rohirrim as they make their famous charge in the Battle of the Pelennor fields; the black serpent upon scarlet leads Théoden to his Southron foes; and the White Tree of Gondor and the seven stars of Elendil displayed on the prow of Aragorn's ship proclaim to the forces of the West that their king has returned.\(^7\)

Other components of the heraldic achievement have a similar military origin: the helmet with its decorative crest, the wreath, the mantling or lambrequin (in origin a piece of cloth worn to keep the sun off one's armor), and the martial war-cry. The origin of supporters is uncertain, but one idea is that they represent the faincfully-dressed figures who displayed a knight's shield to the crowd at a tournament.\(^8\)

European heraldry did not confine itself to the battlefield, however; if it had, it would most probably not have survived to the present day. It was when it came home from the wars and settled down to a respectable family life that its success was assured. Since it was the nobility and gentry who comprised the knights in armor, the possession of a coat of arms became a symbol of noble or gentle birth. Once it was associated with a man's birth and rank, the next step was making the honor hereditary, and eventually the coat of arms came to stand for the entire family line.

We do not know the origins of Elvish heraldry; however, it is a safe guess that it was not on the field of battle. In all the descriptions of battles in The Silmarillion there is no mention of coats of arms, only a few references to banners and only one mention of their colors; further more, the text does not seem to indicate that Elves or Men ever wore helmets that concealed their faces (the Dwarves did wear masks in battle, as did Túrin at one time, and this was noted as unusual\(^10\)). It would not be difficult, in any case, to tell an Elf from an Orc or a Balrog. Add to these indications the fact that Elvish heraldry does not share the European variety's penchant for simple designs and bright, flat, primary colors and it would seem that instant recognition in combat was not the original goal of these devices. One can imagine them, perhaps, meticulously embroidered on a cloak, or inlaid in the walls of a great hall, or even as stained-glass windows. The devices of the male characters, at any rate, may eventually have come into use as shields or banners, especially in Middle-earth, which may partially account for the fact that their devices are in general not as complex as those of the female characters. The stars of Gil-galad do seem to have migrated to his shield, at least by the Second Age ("The countless stars of heaven's field/Were mirrored in his silver shield\(^11\))", though the field of the device shown is blue.

Exactly when some of the devices were invented is something of a puzzle, too; if the emblems of Finwë is indeed, as Christopher Tolkien claims,\(^12\) a "wined sun," then it must have been devised after the death of Finwë himself, since the Sun was not even in existence during Finwë's lifetime. It is not unknown for later heralds to devise posthumous arms for historical figures, however—even Adam had arms attributed to him by medieval heralds—and
FIG. 4: MARSHALLING

A. IMPALED ARMS

Something of this sort may have occurred in Finwë's case. We must also keep in mind the fact that Elves can be reincarnated.

Many of the devices shown are those of Noldorin Elves, and since the Noldor were skilled in crafts it is not inconceivable that the maker's mark may have been one of the forerunners of Elvish heraldry; either the lozenge or the round shape would be eminently suitable for a stamp or imprint. Seals were a factor in the development of European heraldry, and they may have contributed to the genius of Elvish heraldry as well. There is really no evidence to support these notions, however, and neither would account for the subtle use of color in the Elvish devices. Perhaps the most likely origin for Elvish heraldic devices is simply the wish to have one's own identifying symbol, a thing of beauty that will also express something about oneself to whoever sees it. That is certainly much of the motivation behind the requests I get, as an amateur herald, to help devise coats of arms for people.

The stress placed on the individual rather than the family line in Elvish heraldry is much easier to explain than the origins of the devices themselves; it is in fact supremely logical for an immortal race. Under normal circumstances, generations of Elves do not succeed one another in the fashion of mortal races; they co-exist as equal adults for ages unbounded. An Elf's potential immortality resides primarily in himself, and only secondarily in his or her offspring. The only immortality a Man can be certain of (since his fate after death is unknown) lies in his children and his children's children. It is possible that the devices made by the Elves for their friends among Men were sometimes later adopted as family symbols: the designation "House of Haleth" seems to suggest this.

A symbol, too, you see, is potentially immortal; like a memory, it can live on long after the death of the one who inspired it. The heraldry of our world symbolizes our immortality through generation, and serves as a remembrance of bygone ages. Likewise the heraldry of the Elven peoples preserves the memory of the vanished heroes of the Eldar, though they come no more to these Hither Shores.

Footnotes


2 J. R. R. Tolkien, with Foreword and Notes by Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979): Plate No. 47. According to Christopher Tolkien, all sixteen devices also appeared in The Silmarillion Calendar 1979 published by George Allen and Unwin. Since it is impossible to reproduce these devices adequately in black and white, it would be most helpful for the reader to have one of these sources available.


4 And yes, for the heraldic purists among you, I am also leaving out the rare colors "sanguine" and "tenns," as well as the Continental "cerulean."

5 Mentioned by Christopher Tolkien in Pictures, in the notes to Plate 47.

6 A good example of the genesis and results of such a "patchwork" appears in Simple Heraldry Cheerfully Illustrated by Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk, B.T., O.S.T.J., Ph.D., F.S.A., Advocate, Albany Herald of Arms and Don Pottinger, O.S.T.J., M.A.(hons), D.A., Unicorn Pursuivant of Arms (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979): pp. 23-25. The book is one of the liveliest, most colorful and most painless introductions to heraldry that I have run across.


8 A. C. Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry (New York: Bonanza Books, 1978): p. 407. The story may not in fact be true, as Fox-Davies points out, but even that it was suggested is indicative of the atmosphere surrounding the development of heraldry.


11 J. R. R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring (Boston: continued on page 36
undergo in order to become ingestible by humans, requires
time and knowledge. Its consistency alters from hard to
fluid; its color, from black to red, similar to Vainamoinen’s
nervous system which was heated and burned with ardor for
love of Louhi’s daughter. The redness or fire of passion he
felt in her presence had aroused sparks within him, influen-
cing his countenance as well as his actions. Its incandes-
cence had liquefied what had been solid within him, spreading
courage and arrogance nearly severed his knee—his personal-
extreme attention,—there first emerges the bow of a boat.

In time, Vainamoinen learns the secrets of iron. He
returns to the Old Man and tells him: “I know the origin of
his object will satisfy his creative urge.

Ilmarinen's forge is reminiscent of the great furnaces
worked by the Taiost masters, those organisers of the created
world, fashioners of so many wonder-working instruments. It
also recalls the Mibelung dwarf who shaped the magic helper,
Tarnhelm, and the mysterious sword, Nothing, in Wagner’s
Ring cycle.20 As the fire blazes, the bellows sound, the
avril rings, so the Finnish counterpart of the Greek Gold
Nepheustes, indulges in the alchemical dictum: Solve et Coa-
gula—notting substantial and valuable can be made until the
hardest of elements can be made to flow like water; only then
are new forms and alloys brought into existence; psychologi-
ically speaking, a reconstituting of visions and attitudes to-
ward life.

Ilmarinen’s forging of the Sampo ushered in a whole new
dimension into The Kalevala: the personification of metals,
the humanisation of inanimate forces. Nature, both within
and without the earth seems to awaken, to tingle with life and
activity, energized as if by some spectacular force. As
the fire burns and glares, the molten metal acquires an
audible voice. The air seeks the metal as it burns, and then
is hammerd and shaped, is again symbolic of the difficul-
ties involved in trying to change one’s life course, in
altering the accustomed thrust of certain habits and relation-
ships. The Sampo, like the Philosopher’s Stone, is a
complex opposition. Within its essence lies a treasure, a
mysterious alligation, a meditative device similar to a man-
dala, healing those who see into it and learn from the ex-
pience.

Ilmarinen, the Master Smith, brings the Sampo into
being on the third day.

Ilmarinen arrives at North Farm and goes to work to
bring the Sampo into existence. In a breathless excitin
gbravo and arrogance nearly severed his knee—his personal­
extreme attention,—there first emerges the bow of a boat.

Footnotes
18. The occult and Curative Powers of Precious Stones,
p. 466.