Heraldry flourished on medieval battlefields for military reasons. However, scholars recognize that its largest social expansion in Western Europe occurred during the seventeenth century, which was a time when coats of arms were essentially obsolete in warfare. This essay will tackle the apparent paradox of heraldry’s non-military expansion by discussing the social and symbolic reasons that led people to create and assume arms for themselves and their families in modern France (c.1500–1789), and how this process is reflected in shields. It identifies the commoners who adopted arms, and the messages the bearings were designed to carry. The answers to these questions lie not only in armorial records, but also in situ: the widespread use of heraldry in public and private spaces, in urban and rural landscapes, in profane or sacred contexts, still brings us valuable information towards understanding the visual role and language of heraldry. The choice of valorizing — often canting — charges by the bearer of the name reflects a claim for a specific social status. However, a close study of symbolic allusions ranging from professional and dynastic to religious or even apotropaic, suggests a far more subtle combination of meanings, in close interaction with social, cultural, political, and vernacular context.

Being an Armiger in Modern France: Law and Practice
In modern France (c.1500–1789), the vast majority of coats of arms were self-assumed, which implies that they were composed within the family circle. Royal heraldic concessions and augmentations were but few, and never seem to exceed one per cent of the total number of coats of arms in use within the realm. In 1620, André Favyn, the author of a treatise called Le théâtre d’honneur et de chevalerie, wrote: ‘today even the lowest merchants and craftsmen wish to counterfeit the nobleman by assuming arms’. Although stating that coats of arms are solely for noble use is false and reflects a reactionary trend quite commonly expressed among the nobility at that time, Favyn is not the only heraldic theoretician of his time to deplore the fact that the use of coats of arms had become widespread among commoners. Favyn’s opinion reflects an ideological trend shared by many other modern authors of heraldic treatises who considered that the use of coats of arms should be restricted to nobles only, because they were the ones who invented heraldry to magnify their exploits, virtues, and lineage. This claim, nevertheless, cannot be supported by any legal statement: since the Middle Ages, heraldry had been used in France by nobles and commoners alike. However, pressure concerning heraldic matters exerted on the king by the nobility since the beginning of the sixteenth century led François I to issue an edict in 1535 prohibiting the use of insignia such as helmets, crests, and crowns by commoners. This legislation was reiterated over the course of the century, thus demonstrating its ineffectiveness. During the États généraux of 1614, the nobility firmly denounced two widespread heraldic abuses: some commoners were using homonymy to usurp coats of arms belonging to noble families, while others were displaying insignia restricted to the nobility. Such grievances led Louis XIII to create, in January 1615, the office of Juge général d’armes de France, with more extensive judicial rights than former...
kings of arms. The first judge appointed was François de Chevriers de Saint-Mauris, who held the office until his dismissal in 1641. He was then replaced by Pierre d’Hozier, first of the six members of that family to hold the position before 1789.

The most prominent member of the family was Charles d’Hozier, who gave his name to the famous Armorial général, also known as Armorial d’Hozier. In 1696, Louis XIV issued an edict suppressing the post of juge général d’armes and ‘creating a general and sovereign supervisory authority, and establishing an Armorial général in Paris, as a public register of arms and blazons of the realm’. While the right of commoners to bear arms was confirmed, the decision was nevertheless innovative because it restricted heraldic augmentation to those registering their arms in the Armorial général. Officially, the aim of this edict was to put an end to heraldic abuses, and thus to pacify the relations with the old nobility. But the hidden goal was financial: all registrations were taxed, every individual armiger being charged twenty livres. This measure was intended to refill the royal treasury, desperately depleted by the military campaigns led by Louis XIV.

In 1697, intendants in each province were ordered to establish rolls detailing the names of individuals and communities who were deemed sufficiently honourable (solvent) to register arms and, above all, to pay the tax. Those who failed to register arms, whether wilfully, through negligence, or just because they did not have any, had to pay first, and then wait until they would receive so-called ‘armoiries d’office’, attributed to them by the office clerks of the Armorial général. Many of these coats of arms were canting or allusive, being merely inspired by the names and professions listed in the rolls. The increase in the number of new arms led to the creation of mechanically made combinations, consisting of alternation in ordinaries, charges, and tinctures (Fig. 1). On the c.120,000 entries registered in the Armorial général, about half were ‘armoiries d’office’, which were, in general, never used by their unfortunate owners.

Under the pressure of the intendants who reported more and more troubles and riots, the tax collection element began to be suspended in 1700, though the registration of both real and ‘d’office’ coats of arms continued for several years. In 1701 the office of juge general d’armes was reintroduced ‘in order to put things, in this respect, to the same state as they were’ before the 1696 edict. Registered arms were confirmed, and the right to assume new ones freely was restored, provided they were not usurped. This legislation would prevail until the Revolution.

**Bearing Arms in Modern France: a Growing Social Use**

During the Middle Ages, heraldry first appeared among the nobility, before spreading, with the use of arms on seals, to non-fighting people. Women, the clergy, rich merchants, and craftsmen began to adopt coats of arms during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Peasants’ heraldry, as mentioned by Michel Pastoureau in Normandy, may have constituted an exception, for most French provinces at that time seem to have completely ignored it. More generally, the development of commoners’ heraldry during the Middle Ages seems tightly linked with active commercial cities and highly urbanized areas (Ile-de-France, Flanders, Alsace), where social competition and the need for identification were higher than in more rural provinces. But further research is needed to determine precisely the social and geographical expansion of heraldic practice in medieval France, especially among commoners.

The spread of heraldry throughout society during modern times is attested by different sources confirming Favyn’s assertion. For instance, in several regions, the tombstones of rich

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9 Front page of the edict of 1696, ibid., p. 37.
14 Ibid., pp. 51–2.
Fig. 1 : "Armoiries d'office", Armorial général, vol. III (Béarn), p. 49 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32230).
commoners, which had been devoid of heraldic ornaments during the last centuries of the Middle Ages, tended to display coats of arms during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The recognition of such general practice among well-off people was certainly one of the main causes of the 1696 edict. Notwithstanding its imperfections and coercive dimension, the Armorial general offers a nationwide picture of heraldic practice among society during the reign of Louis XIV. Combined with other heraldic sources and observations made in situ, it allows us to set up a global survey of the social use of heraldry in modern France.

On a general basis, in the urban context, coats of arms were borne by all the nobles and political elites (members of parliament, other royal jurisdictions, city councils), by officers and lawyers acting for royal, seigniorial, and local administration, by rich merchants and craftsmen (gold and silversmiths, drapers), medical doctors, and wealthy surgeons. The urban clergy usually bore arms as well.

In villages, heraldic practice differed highly from one place to another. In the poorest areas, without any resident lord, there might be no armigers at all (but even in the case of their physical absence, the lords’ coats of arms would be displayed to show seigniorial domination). In many villages, armigers would be the local landlords, if they lived in the village, as well as lawyers and higher seigniorial officers (fiscal procurators, judges), priests, coqs de villages (the one or two richest peasants family, often seeking social ascent by becoming seigniorial officers, lawyers, bankers, or merchants) and, in some cases, well-off craftsmen or millers, sometimes a medical doctor or a wealthy surgeon (although such practitioners tended to belong to urban élites and the rural ones were usually poorer). In the county of Burgundy, a comparison between the 1688 census data and the numbers of coats of arms registered according to the 1696 edict suggests that armigers did not exceeded three per cent of the whole population, with great diversity between localities: armigers concentrated in the main cities, while some remote rural areas almost completely ignored heraldic practice, its presence being limited to the manifestation of seigniorial and royal authority.

This survey suggests some of the reasons why heraldry spread amongst France’s commoners during modern times: medieval and early modern wars (including the Hundred Years’ War, and Religion Wars) eradicated many of France’s old, noble, families. At the same time there developed both local and royal administration — a basis for the setting of Modern state — that called for new and learned élites who were eager to access nobility and adopt its social codes: becoming an armiger, along with owning a manor and seigniorial rights, was part of the social habitus of these rising individuals and families. Heraldry reflects social competition at different levels: if, in a small borough, one craftsman decided to indicate his workshop by painting tools inside a shield, his neighbours would do the same to avoid being perceived as having a lower status. Moreover, modern heraldry retained an aesthetic dimension which contributes to its success among commoners eager to adorn their goods with vividly coloured or finely engraved coats of arms.

New Sources of Inspiration
The growth of the cohort of armigers during the modern era implies new sources of inspiration for armorial design, denoting concerns unfamiliar to the old knightly class, though imitation of former noble coats of arms was not absent. Though craftsmen’s, merchants’ and even peasants’ coats of arms existed since the Middle Ages, the extension of heraldic use during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was remarkable, and led to a massive diversification of heraldic charges.

Well-off craftsmen tended to display coats of arms in the street for practical reasons. Carved and painted shields would call the passer-by’s attention and indicate to him

15 The thirty-six volumes of painted coats of arms have been consulted: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32228–32262.
what was offered in the workshop, by selecting appropriate — and quite standardized — charges: square, compass, and hammer would indicate a stone cutter or a mason, a pair of shears a draper, a linear mark or a pair of scales a merchant (Fig. 2). Although modern coats of arms with merchants’ marks and mason’s tools are still spread throughout France, craftsmen’s heraldry was most frequently found in high urban density provinces such as Flanders and eastern France, especially in Alsace, a Germanic province. Some armigers clearly derived their coats of arms from pub or hostel signs. For instance, in Marseille, the Armorial général registered the coat of arms of Giraud Martin, ‘hoste des Trois dauphins’, Per fess, the chief azure, in base the sea argent, three dolphins sable leaping from the water and embowed 2 and 1, the upper two respectant, the lower contourny, and in base a shore sable planted with three small trees vert, and the one belonging to his colleague Jean-Jacques Poulpre, ‘hoste de la Cloche’, Or, a bell azure clappered sable, in chief the two letters I and I on dexter, and the letter P sinister, all sable, and on a chief gules, three mullets or (Figs 3–4).

Fig. 2: Coat of arms including the mark of the merchant Jean Hermille, 1707, Ornans, département of Doubs (photo by Édith Montelle).

Fig. 3: Coat of arms of Giraud Martin, Armorial général, vol. 30 (Provence II), p. 1174 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32256).

Fig. 4: Coat of arms of Jean-Jacques Poulpre, Armorial général, vol. 30 (Provence II), p. 1866 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32256).

18 Ibid., pp. 29–48.
20 Armorial général, vol. 30 (Provence II), pp. 1174, 1866 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32256).
The aim of street heraldic display was not only practical. The care paid to the execution of the shields reflects a real professional pride and in some cases, a sense of superiority. In some churches, tombstones were carved with tools indicating the profession of the deceased within the community. Placing these tools inside a shield was an assertion of social superiority towards one’s colleagues, and a claim to be part of the local élite (Figs 5–6). If a family’s social ascent continued, these craftsmen’s charges were usually abandoned in favour of more noble ones.

Modern peasants’ heraldry would need further investigation because it shows important differences from one region to the other. Comparatively, wine growers were more likely to have coats of arms than ploughmen, at least in eastern France (Alsace, county of Burgundy), a fact that would suggest that professional pride was more developed in the vineyards than in the fields. In Ile-de-France, some rich farmers, managing big domains, bore arms in which plants, especially ears or garbs of wheat, were frequent. Many of these coqs de villages also acted as seigniorial or royal officers, and arms devised to adorn the seal used for judicial or fiscal functions did not necessarily denote any agrarian inspiration, and were sometimes very similar to urban elites ones. Parish priests who did not belong to armigerous families sometimes composed personal coats of arms. The chalice was generally used as a charge, associated or not with other religious motifs such as crosses or hearts, and canting charges.

The presence of tools as heraldic charges does not necessarily indicate the job of the owner. For instance, although a pair of shears usually indicates a draper, it also constitutes the canting emblem of the noble marquis of Hautefort in Périgord, bearing Or, three pairs of shears sable (in French, shears are called ‘forces’) (Fig. 7).21 Individuals with surnames evoking craftsmanship sometimes chose a tool as a canting charge, although the craft concerned had not been exercised within the family for centuries.

From Royal and Seigniorial Insignia to Personal Coats of Arms
In different regions, some families began their heraldic careers by adopting the emblems of the lord they were serving. In western France, Alphonse Angot mentioned several rural

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Fig. 5: Tombstone of a wine grower, sixteenth century, Biarne church, département of Jura (photo by the author).

Fig. 6: Tombstone of an armigerous wine grower, sixteenth century, Biarne church, département of Jura (photo by the author).

wealthy houses of the Mayenne department that displayed engraved or carved shields with fleurs-de-lys. The origin of this practice is that notaries and public officers used to indicate their function by affixing the royal arms on their houses, as a mark of delegated royal authority. Such royal arms could be depicted outside, on the door lintel, or inside, on the fireplace lintel, in front of which acts were signed. In some cases, the difference between the royal arms and the notary’s personal or — at least, functional — arms became slight. Many rural lawyers displayed a shield on which the fleur-de-lys was the main or only charge. In some cases, more complex combinations were created. In the village of Couesmes a well-off house in the hamlet of La Galardièere has its fireplace decorated with a shield (Fig. 8) sporting a rinceau of three clover stalks tied at the base debruised by a chevron, in fess point a heart reversed and in chief five fleurs-de-lis, the first and last dimidiated and issuing from the flanks. Although the origin of the clover sheaf remains unknown (a canting charge?), the heart pointing towards the fleurs-de-lys is an obvious mark of loyalty towards the king of France.

This interpretation is confirmed by similar examples throughout villages of the county of Burgundy, which was a part of the Holy Roman Empire ruled by the Spanish Hapsburgs before it became French in 1678. For instance, the door of a barn in the small village of Ménétrux-en-Joux is topped by a stone dated 1549, bearing a shield (Fig. 9) displaying a saltire surmounted by a heart.

23 Ibid., p. 138, number 220.
by a fire-steel, between a heart in chief and a hunting horn in base.24 This coat of arms can be attributed to the Roux family, the local coqs de village. In the 1540s Rolin Roux was a lawyer acting as a notary and tax officer in the name of the emperor and of the prince of Chalon in several local seigneuries. As such, he was the representative of both the non-resident lords and the emperor. By using a coat of arms, Rolin Roux asserted his social superiority within the rural community, while the chosen charges proclaimed the legitimacy of this claim: the saltire surmounted by a fire-steel was the device of the dukes of Burgundy and their Hapsburg heirs, and the hunting horn was part of the quartered coat of arms borne by the Chalon as princes of Orange. As the local representative of such lords, Rolin Roux made use of a coat of arms which recalled the source of his pre-eminence and of the respect that was his due. The heart once again can be a symbol of loyalty or piety, in both cases emphasizing the worthiness of the armiger.

In the county of Burgundy, this kind of shield with Saint Andrew’s cross was often used by local agents of the Hapsburgs. Similarly, in Brittany, a closer study of the social background of those armigers displaying ermine spots and mascles might reveal officers acting respectively for the dukes of Brittany (and their French successors) and the powerful Rohan family, who bore Gules, nine mascles or. Usually, such coats of arms are poorly personalized; they can almost be considered as insignia of office. As such, they are rarely found in armorials, because the families usually abandoned them in favour of more ennobling combination if they managed to carry on their social ascent. Thus, the Roux family, who managed to be titled ‘esquire’ as soon as the seventeenth century, adopted a shield Azure, three leopard’s heads or, usurping the coat of arms of another Roux family, originating from Provence and from an older nobility (Fig. 10).

It has to be kept in mind that dynastic emblems could be used as signs of factions during tormented periods. Thus, after the conquest of Franche-Comté by Louis XIV between 1673 and 1674, some people in Franche-Comté defied Bourbon domination by displaying a Saint Andrew’s cross in their coat of arms as a sign of loyalty to their former princes, the Spanish Hapsburgs.25 Again, from that point of view, early modern heraldry in Brittany would be worth studying.

**Piety, Vows, and Apotropaics**

A close analysis of some coats of arms in their local context shows a clear link between the armiger and the deity he worshipped. The following is a significant example, showing three stages of evolution from a cornerstone into a proper coat of arms.

Pierre Parrenin dit Mossard was a wealthy notary who settled in Le Prêlot, a hamlet which is part of the community of Maîche, a big village in the county of Burgundy, not far from the

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Swiss border. During his long life, Parrenin dit Mossard was not only a royal notary between 1652 and 1722, but also judge of the neighbouring seigneurie of Vaucluse and fiscal procurator of the seigneurie of Maîche. Inside the fireplace of the big farmhouse he built (Fig. 11), a shield still commemorates its construction: it bears the initials PPM on a fess haussée, and below it the date 1662 and a heart (Fig. 12). The content of this shield is not heraldic, but very similar to what can be seen on the lintel of many doors or fireplaces in neighbouring farmhouses, associating the date of the construction, the name or initials of the builder as proprietor and head of the family, and a heart or a cross as a generic symbol of piety towards God, the source of all blessings.

In 1685, the prosperity of the Parrenin family was demonstrated by the construction of a wooden granary, built at some distance from the house to reduce the risk of destruction by fire, as was common in mountainous regions (Fig. 13). Topping the second door of the granary is a very interesting iconographic composition, made of four registers (Fig. 14). First, on top, what is called a ‘Name of Jesus’, the monogram I H S (Iesus Hominem Salvator), the H being surmounted by a cross, and below it a heart with the three nails of the Passion, all within branches. Below is the sentence ‘DIEU SOIT BENY’ (‘God be blessed’). On the third level is a shield which could be blazoned Per fess, in chief a heart between three points 1 and 2, all between the initials P P; in base two stars linked by a crescent, with a point in chief. Finally, the ensemble has the date 1685. Charges such as points and initials do not belong to proper heraldry: here again, we find the vocabulary of stone lintels and, more generally, of founding stones.

On Parrenin’s coat of arms, see Vernot, ‘Le Cœur’, IV, pp. 863–64. Many thanks are due to Bruno Monnet for the valuable information he provided about the Parrenin family, house, and coat of arms.
The content of this second shield cannot be understood without the surrounding elements. The heart personalized with initials P.P belongs to the owner Pierre Parrenin, while the crescent with stars suggests an elevation towards God, magnified on the top of the composition. By addressing his blessings to God, Pierre Parrenin calls for divine blessings in return, thus applying the gift and counter gift principle, pervasive in many ancient societies. A non-heraldic example confirms this interpretation: in the small borough of Pesmes, also in the county of Burgundy, a stone topping a door lintel dated 1692 has a similar significance (Fig. 15): a big sculpted heart with the name of Jesus and the three Passion nails is topped with the painted motto ‘LAUS DEO’ (‘praise to God’), complemented by a second one, engraved on each side: ‘DEUS DAT QUIBVVS VULT’ (‘God gives to whomever he wants’). Below, the initials ED and ALB stand for an unidentified couple, whose elevation towards God is represented by a small crescent and painted stars. The meaning of this stone is the following: the couple owning this house, by raising their blessing towards God and being pious, receive God’s gifts in return. Thus, such a stone has a double intention: first, it is propitiatory, calling for God’s blessings upon the home, and, secondly, it legitimizes social inequality.

The third stage of the evolution of the shields used by the Parrenin family is due to Luc Antoine Parrenin, who succeeded his father as a notary and fiscal procurator of the seigneury of Maîche. In 1733, his seal shows a fess between a heart in chief and two mullets in base, in base point a crescent (colours unknown, Fig. 16).²⁷ This is the heraldic adaptation of the shield displayed by his father inside the granary: the removal of non-heraldic motifs such as initials and points, combined with the inclusion of a fess, ends up as a proper coat of arms, similar to the neighbouring noble ones. This composition seems to maintain its primitive meaning, though in a more implicit way: a heart standing high above stars is still a heart given to God.

In France, several shields including a crescent in base, a heart in fess, and charges in chief such as a cross, one or several stars, and even a rose, have the same basic meaning: by a

movement of elevation evoked by the crescent, the heart of the owner is ascending to God or to the Virgin Mary (Fig. 17). 28 This interpretation sometimes finds striking confirmation through a close study of the archives: A bar between in chief the head of a procession cross patonce and in base a heart and a crescent in pale was borne in seventeenth century by one Pierre Lambert in Guyans-Vennes, a village in the county of Burgundy: he is known as the founder and patron of a chapel under the invocation of the Holy Cross and Saint Lambert in 1636 (Fig. 18). 29

These marks of piety can almost be considered as heraldic prayers, since by devoting oneself to God, one is supposed to get divine benedictions in return. In Normandy, a family of local squires called Michel bore Sable, a cross potent or between two crescents in 1\textsuperscript{st} and 4\textsuperscript{th} and two escallops in 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd}, all argent (Fig. 19). 30 Written on the fireplace lintel of their mansion, the motto ‘CRESCIT IN CRUCE

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29 Ibid., IV, p. 841–2.
Fig. 17: Two coats of arms showing rising hearts, *Armorial général*, vol. 8 (Bretagne I), p. 171 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32235).
Nicolas Vernot

VOTU’, gives the meaning of the coat of arms: ‘it grows by a vow to the cross.’

‘It’ refers to the escallops as canting charges evoking the surname Michel, the escallop being a famous emblem associated with pilgrimage, in particular to the nearby Mont Saint Michel. In other words, the whole meaning of the coat of arms is: the Michel family rises thanks to his vow towards the cross.

Were the heraldic crosses, and in particular Saint Antony’s tau-cross (a documented apotropaic sign used against plague) and other sacred symbols chosen not only for religious reasons but for their propitiatory and apotropaic value as well? In light of the examples aforementioned, this hypothesis seems highly plausible. Approaching the matter more broadly, a close examination of the Armorial général allows us to assert that a great number of coats of arms devised during modern times were conceived with the explicit intent to display the social ascent of the family.

Coats of Arms as Pictures of Social Ascent

In modern French heraldry, assuming a coat of arms was a social act whose main goal was to assert the owner’s belonging to the (local) élites. A close examination of the content of the shields shows that tinctures and charges were often carefully chosen in order to express the social ascent of the bearer.

The Prestige of Azure

Michel Pastoureau has demonstrated statistically that the increasing use of the tincture azure in French heraldry reflected a long-term cultural evolution leading to the prominence of the colour blue at the expense of red in western societies between the Middle Ages and the present day.


To understand the heraldic success of azure in modern times, it is worth quoting the famous satirical author of *Les Caractères*, Jean de La Bruyère, who, in 1688, mocks an imaginary family of parvenus called Sannions, whose coat of arms showed *three charges or on an azure field*:

they bear, as the Bourbons, on the same tincture, the same metal; they bear, like them, two and one; they are not fleurs-de-lys, but they are a solace: maybe in their heart they find them as honourable as they, and they share them with great lords satisfied with them. You can see them on windows and glasses, on the door of their chateau, on the pillar of their high justice [...]; they are displayed everywhere, they are on the furniture and locks, they are semy on their coaches [...]. I would willingly say to the Sannions: your folly is premature: you should wait at least for this century to end with your alike: those who saw your grandfather, who talked to him, are old now and have not long to live. Who will be able to say, as they do: there was his stall, and there he would charge very high?\(^{33}\)

This example is a good illustration of *similariation*, i.e. heraldic imitation, as a concept allowing us to understand how coats of arms were created.\(^{34}\) The French royal arms, *Azure, three fleurs-de-lys or*, provided a pattern emulated in many heraldic compositions. More generally, azure, which was mainly used as a field tincture, is chosen to evoke the sky and, thus, the social rising of the armiger. Its frequent association with astronomical charges confirms this symbolic interpretation.

**The Rise of Astronomical Charges**

While astronomical charges were scarce in medieval French heraldry and usually used as marks of cadency, they acquired a new symbolic status during the modern era. Appearing in about one third of coats of arms created in the seventeenth century, they have been used to signify social ascent. In French, the word *croissant*, from the Latin verb *crescere*, means 'crescent' but also 'rising' and 'growing', and heraldic crescents usually retain that symbolic value, since they are usually placed in base point, in a position to elevate the charges above them. For instance, in Paris, one Jacques du Bois, ‘écuyer, conseiller du Roy, commissaire ordinaire des guerres’, registered in the *Armorial général* a coat of arms *Or, a tree vert surmounting a crescent sable* (Fig. 20), the tree being a canting charge for Bois (‘wood’).\(^{35}\) Throughout French armorials, there are many similar examples of canting charges, notably plants, depicted above a crescent — and even issuing from it — reflecting, in a similar way, the rise and growth of the family concerned.

In modern French heraldry, crescents and mullets usually work together, the crescent being almost always depicted lower than the stars and pointing its spikes at them, thus indicating an elevation towards the sky. Such a crescent, significantly termed ‘montant’ in French blazon, is an astronomical aberration, which can only be explained by a semantic codification whose equivalents can be found in other modern iconographic practices. In Revelation 12:1, the vision of ‘a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars’ led, in Catholic iconography, to the Ascension of the Virgin Mary depicted with her feet upon a crescent, and stars surrounding her head. Similarly, numerous coats of arms display,

\(^{33}\) ‘Ils ont avec les Bourbons, sur une même couleur, un même métal ; ils portent, comme eux, deux et une ; ce ne sont pas des fleurs de lys, mais ils s’en consolent : peut-être dans leur coeur trouvent-ils leurs pièces aussi honorables, et ils les ont communes avec de grands seigneurs qui en sont contents. On les voit sur les vitres et sur les vitrages, sur la porte de leur château, sur le pilier de leur haute justice [...] : elles s’offrent aux yeux de toutes parts, elles sont sur les meubles et sur les serrures, elles sont semées sur les carrosses [...]. Je dirais volontiers aux Sannions: votre folie est prématurée ; attendez du moins que le siècle s’achève sur votre race: ceux qui ont vu votre grand père, qui lui ont parlé, sont vieux, et ne sauraient plus vivre longtemps. Qui pourra dire comme eux: là il était, et vendait très cher?’ (Jean de la Bruyère, *Les caractères, De la ville*, number 10).


upon an azure field, a canting charge with a crescent in base and one or several stars in chief, or
on a chief. For instance, a Parisian family of lawyers named de Faverolles bore Azure, a plant of
beans fructed and leaved or, between two stars in chief and a crescent in base, all or,36 Faverolles
designating a place-name where beans grow (Fig. 21).

In few cases the elevated charge is not canting, but it instead evokes the armiger's talents. One of the most significant examples is presented by Parisian banker Antoine Flaugerques, whose recorded arms were Azure, a heart between two bezants in fess, all or between three mullets in chief and a crescent in base, argent (Fig. 22), which certainly meant something like 'trust me (the golden heart), and I will raise (the crescent) your fortune (the bezants) to the sky (the three mullets').37 In Paris and Versailles, the sun is more frequent than in many other regions, suggesting that many commoners were willing to pay court to the Sun-King, Louis XIV.
Selected Ordinaries

The presence of ordinaries in France's modern heraldry was mainly generated by a wish to imitate earlier noble heraldry and to structure the heraldic composition. But some of them have semantic value of their own. The chevron is the favourite ordinary, its prominence being thoroughly attested by such writers as Marc Gilbert de Varennes in 1635 or Pierre Palliot in 1660. Throughout France its frequency increased continuously from the Middle Ages, except perhaps in regions of Germanic culture, such as Alsace. One explanation for this success is the ability of this ordinary to express the idea of ascent, confirmed by the fact that the higher part of the chevron is blazoned 'cime', a word meaning 'peak' or 'summit'. In 1635, Marc Gilbert de Varennes writes that the chevron is 'like the rooftop of a house, because nothing comes closer to the sky'. Thus, it is no surprise that so many chevrons appear on an azure field, and so often surrounded by mullets in chief and a crescent in base. Indeed, the coat of arms Azure, a chevron or between two stars in chief and a crescent in base has been the most frequently adopted in modern France, because it constituted the generic picture of social ascent, in contrast with Argent, a lion gules which was the most common during the medieval period, a time when valorous lions were more needed than a parvenu's vanity.

To confirm this symbolic value of the chevron, it is worth considering the way it is associated with canting charges. In several cases, the charge is repeated three times, and placed around the ordinary. For instance, Jean (de) Hautecloque, ennobled in 1700, registered in the Armorial général a coat of arms (Fig. 23) Azure, a chevron or between three bells argent. 'Cloque' is a vernacular Picard word for 'cloche', in English 'bell'; Hautecloque can thus be interpreted as 'high bell', and hence three bells surrounding a chevron on an azure field. Quite often, the canting charge is to be found in base, under the chevron and two mullets in chief. For instance, in Paris, Etienne de la Roche bears (Fig. 24) Azure, a chevron or between two mullets in chief and a mount of six peaks in base, all argent.

The chief as an ordinary can also express elevation. In the Franche-Comté volume of the Armorial général, statistics show that forty-two per cent of chiefs are azure, while the average rate for all charges (including ordinaries) is twenty per cent. More than half of all chiefs are charged with at least one astronomical charge such as stars, crescent, and sun. The celestial value of the chief increases even further if birds are taken into account. Such choices reflect the fact that having the sky depicted in one's coat of arms was desirable for many armigers,
thus confirming the idea that coats of arms expressed the idea of social ascent under God’s blessing. This rise towards the sky is a common heraldic theme spread throughout the pages of the Armorial general. For instance, the coat of arms registered in Paris for Jean Le Lièvre (Fig. 25), was Azure, a hare courant and a crescent in base, all argent, and on a chief gules, three mullets or. The crescent in base and chief with mullets indicates the social rise of the bearer of Le Lièvre surname (‘hare’ = ‘lièvre’ in French), an ascent confirmed by the fact that he was registered as ‘sieur de Grandmaison, conseiller du Roy, commissaire ordinaire de ses guerres’. He was one of the many bourgeois gentilshommes gravitating around the King’s court.

Canting and Ennobling Charges
At least one third of coats of arms composed during Louis XIV’s reign are canting. This proportion, based on a close examination of the content of the Franche-Comté register of the Armorial général, can certainly be extended to most other provinces. The examples quoted above show that the canting element is usually heraldically depicted in an ascending position, illustrating not only the surname but the whole social rise of the family.

The canting charge is usually chosen with care. Sometimes, it is meant to avoid the negative connotations that the surname could inspire. For instance, families named Porc, Porcher, or Porcheron do not sport a domestic pig, but a boar depicted either in its entirety or its head only, which, as a wild game and a hunting trophy, was more suitable for armigers aspiring to nobility than a farm pig (Fig. 26). Many families with surnames derived from the crafts would tend either to conceal that origin, or to evoke it in the most prestigious possible way. For instance, those with names deriving from Latin faber (‘smith’), such as Faivre, Fèvre, or Lefèvre will show no anvil and rarely hammers, but elegant golden keys or knightly swords. In Flanders, Arnoult Febvre, seigneur of Lannoy and Bary (Fig. 27), bears Or, a sword between two

Significantly, firearms are very scarce in modern French heraldry, while bladed weapons, and particularly swords, are far more in favour because of their association with chivalry.

Those animals and plants that were considered as noble or royal within their respective domains were preferred for use in arms, whether canting or not. For instance, some families whose surnames evoke the sea (beginning with Mer-) or fishing (Pêcheur...) would select a dolphin, considered as the king of fishes. Thus, Nicolas François de Lamer (Fig. 28), in Laon,

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Fig. 26: Coats of arms of Françoise and Thérèze Porcher, *Armorial général*, vol. 24 (Paris II), p. 1626 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32251).

Fig. 27: Coat of arms of Arnoold Le Fèbvre, *Armorial général*, vol. 12 (Flandres), p. 276 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32239).

eagles respectant, all bendwise, sable. Significantly, firearms are very scarce in modern French heraldry, while bladed weapons, and particularly swords, are far more in favour because of their association with chivalry.

*Armorial général*, vol. 12 (Flandres), p. 276 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32239).
bore Azure, a crowned dolphin or naiant on a sea argent, and three mullets in chief also argent. The rose, queen of flowers because of its beauty and association with Mary, has been the most common plant in French heraldry since the Middle Ages. More generally, the lexical field of nobility — and subordinate virtues like heroism, strength, boldness — would be favoured: lions, eagles and greyhounds, spur rowels and towers, ordinaries, have been particularly appreciated.

But heraldic imagination is not only a matter of snobbery; humour and self derision can also inspire coats of arms. In Soissons, a family of tax collectors called Thomas bore in the eighteenth century Argent, a fish in base supporting a mast with its tackles and pennant (colours

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unknown), and the motto 'ITA UT IMPLERETUR NAVIS',\textsuperscript{46} taken from Mark, 4:37 (‘in such a way that the boat was full’) (Fig. 29). The content of the shield is a rebus: Thomas = thon + mât (‘tuna’-‘mast’), while the motto, although taken from the Gospels, is an almost cynical allusion to the tax collection activity which enriched the family. In Besançon, the coat of arms registered by a medical doctor called Étienne Simonin is more pleasant and amusing. He bore (Fig. 30) Gules, a chevron or between two roses in chief and a monkey sejant contourné biting an apple, all argent.\textsuperscript{47} In the vernacular French of Franche-Comté, a monin is a monkey; under the peak (‘cime’) of a chevron, it constitutes another rebus: cime + monin = Simonin.

While French heraldry did not differ greatly from that of the neighbouring realms during the Middle Ages, it tended to become more differentiated during modern times. Newly created coats of arms were always a compromise between the need of diversification and the wish for imitation of the most prestigious pre-existing ones, either local or royal. But coats of arms were not simply one of the elements distinguishing the social élites, along with the towered manor, the elegant dress, and gleaming coach. In many cases, their content expressed the social rise of the armigers and, quite often, their aspiration to nobility, through a fine selection of charges. By using statistics, it is possible to identify which heraldic components were favoured: the frequency of azure fields, the use of chevrons and astronomical charges associated with canting elements reveal a global concern for the expression of the armiger’s own social elevation. A close study of the way such elements are combined reveals the existence of a true heraldic syntax: for instance, a charge placed under a chevron, or between a crescent in base and stars in chief, expresses the rising of what is conveyed by the charge. Although the heraldic language kept its own specificities, it also shared some of its codification with the contemporary iconographic practices applied in contexts such as vernacular architecture or religious depictions. In every region, the extension of the heraldic practice to new individuals and social groups led to a greater diversity of contents: piety and superstition, professional pride, and even cynicism or humour are also to be found in modern French coats of arms. As such, heraldry appears as a precious — and attractive — source for sociological and cultural history.

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\textsuperscript{46} Jean-Baptiste Auzel, \textit{L’armorial de Senlis du chanoine Afforty (XVIIIe s.)} (Beauvais; Senlis: Archives départementales de l’Oise, 2002), p. 38.

\textsuperscript{47} Armorial général, vol. 7 (Bourgogne comté), p. 456 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 32234).