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Allegorising Heraldic Animals in Two Laments by the Dutch Poet Jan Knibbe

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Summary

There are two known laments by Brabantian poet Jan Knibbe, one for Duke Wenceslas of Brabant († 7/8 December 1383) and one for the Flemish Count Louis of Male († 30 January 1384). The poet allegorises both rulers' heraldic animals and gives them a speaking part. The heraldic animals thereby function as a trait d'union between the deceased ruler, his successor, the territory, and the subjects. The manner in which heraldic symbolism is employed conforms to contemporaneous methods of portrayal which enjoyed widespread recognition in society at large.

Introduction

Animals have been used as charges since heraldry first arose in Europe in the first half of the twelfth century.¹ Besides lions and eagles, other animals entered into the heraldic tradition as well, both real animals and fabulous creatures.² A perusal of any medieval armorial will demonstrate the creativity at the heart of this remarkable signifying system, as shown by the range of geometric shapes as well as numerous examples taken from the animal kingdom.

Authors soon found that heraldry could have a reality-enhancing effect on the courtly and knightly texts they wrote.³ Warriors from before the rise of heraldry were provided with imaginary coats of arms appropriate to them. Authors made use of the heraldic jargon that had risen alongside heraldry. Early heraldic descriptions are usually modest. They grew more detailed in the course of the thirteenth century.⁴ 'Blasinieren' [blazoning], the describing/explaining of a coat of arms, was raised to a 'conste' [art form]. Heralds developed into specialists in this area.⁵

In this contribution I will focus on the allegorisation of heraldic animals in literary texts. A coat of arms is principally connected to a territory, and worn by the lord or lady of the land. Upon their death, the territory passes into the hands of a successor, along with the right to bear the coat of arms. A coat of arms represents its bearer but also refers to the land he rules over. In the examples discussed below, the heraldic animals begin to speak on the occasion of the lord's passing, as a representative of the land previously ruled by the deceased. Such speaking heraldic animals occur in two Middle Dutch laments which were probably written in close succession, one on Duke Wenceslas of Brabant († 7/8 December 1383) and one on Louis of Male, Count of Flanders († 30 January 1384).⁶ Both texts are by Jan Knibbe.

Jan Knibbe and the transmission of his poetry

Little is known with certainty about the life of Jan Knibbe. He lived in the second half of the fourteenth century and came from Brabant, more specifically Brussels, as he himself indicates in the poem on the Duke of Brabant (l. 121). The texts discussed here are his only known works. Both

1 Pastoureau M., *Traité d'héraldique* (Paris: 1979) 133-158.

2 For an overview see Dennys R., *The Heraldic Imagination* (New York: 1975) 87-195.

3 Brault G.J., "Literary Uses of Heraldry in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century", in Altmann B.K. – Carroll C.W. (eds.), *The Court Reconvenes: Courtly Literature Across the Disciplines* (Cambridge: 2003) 5-26.

4 Seyler G.A., *Geschichte der Heraldik (Wappenwesen, Wappenkunst, Wappenwissenschaft)* (Neustadt an der Aisch: 1970; repr. ed. Nuremberg: 1885-1889/1890) 216-225.

5 For more on heralds, see Stevenson K. (ed.), *The Herald in Late Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: 2009).

6 Hogenelst D., *Sproken en sprekers : inleiding op en repertorium van de Middelnederlandse spreek, Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen* 16, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: 1997) R100 en R108. The poems have been edited in Brinkman H. – Schenkel J. (eds.), *Het handschrift-Van Hulthem : hs. Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, 15.589-623, Middeleeuwse Verzamelhandschriften uit de Nederlanden* 7, 2 vols. (Hilversum: 1999), II, 618-622 and 642-646. This edition is referenced throughout this article.

survive in a single copy in the so-called Van Hulthem Manuscript (1405/08). This manuscript was written by a single copyist and was presumably realised in the vicinity of Brussels, Jan Knibbe's city of origin.⁷ The Van Hulthem Manuscript is one of the foremost manuscript compilations from the Low Countries and was aimed at an urban audience.

Jan Knibbe's poems are recitation texts, which appear to have been read by the poet, possibly from a loose leaf or a handy booklet.⁸ He may be counted among the so-called 'sprooksprekers', travelling poets who recited their works at court, in cities, and occasionally in monasteries. The 'spoken' genre flourished in the Low Countries between circa 1350 and 1420. Hogenelst compiled a repertoire of the genre and names 358 examples.

In the lament for the death of the Brabantian duke, Jan Knibbe gives the impression that he is accustomed to performing for the upper classes, referring to Wenceslas of Brabant as 'mijne here' [my lord]. For this special occasion, however, he envisions a broader audience:

Jan Knibbe van Brusel
Waert hem bequamelijc ende lief
Ware gherne metten heren wel,
Al spreect hi int ghemeine desen brief.
God bringhe die ziele uut alle meskief,
Want hi mijn here was al mijn leven.
Elc moet hem volghen wie leet of lief,
God wille ons sijn ewegen rike gheven. (ll. 121-128)

[Jan Knibbe from Brussels was fond of being in the company of noble lords, if they so pleased, though he (currently) recites this text in public. May God receive the soul (of the Duke of Brabant) out of this unhappy state; he (the duke) was my lord during my entire life. Each (of us) must follow him, whether they want to or not. May God grant us his eternal kingdom.]

This may indicate that the poem had an informative function and was intended for a broader and less prestigious audience than the poet was used to, which might have been an urban audience, though initially limited to the duchy of Brabant. By extension, something similar could be supposed of the poem written by Jan Knibbe on the occasion of the death of Flemish Count Louis of Male. Remco Sleiderink considers it a possibility that duchess Joanna of Brabant commissioned both works: she was the wife of Wenceslas of Brabant and sister-in-law to Louis of Male.⁹

If we follow Sleiderink's reasoning, then that means that Jan Knibbe did not consider the literary device of allegorising heraldic animals to be overly sophisticated for his intended (most likely urban) audience. This corresponds to what we know from other sources from the Low Countries and beyond: heraldic knowledge had, by the fourteenth century, spread among various layers of society and was no longer confined to the nobility.

The lament for Wenceslas, Duke of Brabant

The poem on Wenceslas of Brabant opens with the four lions which appear as heraldic animals on the ruler's arms of alliance, as the son of John 'the Blind' of Bohemia (1st quarter) and Duke of

7 Brinkman H., "Het wonder van Molenbeek: de herkomst van de tekstverzameling in het handschrift-Van Hulthem", *Nederlandse letterkunde* 5 (2000) 21-46.

8 Hogenelst, *Sproken en sprekers* vol. 1, 67 and 106.

9 Sleiderink R., *De stem van de meester : De hertogen van Brabant en hun rol in het literaire leven (1106-1430)*, *Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen* 25 (Amsterdam: 2003) 136-137.

Luxembourg (3rd quarter), and as husband to Joanna of Brabant and Limburg (2nd and 4th quarters, respectively).¹⁰ The four lions are allegorised and depicted as speaking:

Vier leuwen claghen alte gadre
Die waren ghedraghen teenre dracht.
Si hebben verloren haren vadre,
Dies maken si rouwe ende hantgeslach. (ll. 1-4)

[Four lions lament together, which were worn in one coat of arms. They have lost their father, for which reason they grieve and wail.]

As the continuation of the poem clarifies, these are the lions of Bohemia, Brabant, Luxembourg and Limburg. They grieve for Wenceslas in familial terms as their ‘father’.

The opening stanza tells of Wenceslas’s death in Luxembourg. The poem then proceeds to describe Wenceslas’s final moments: Mary appears to him in a vision, he confesses and prays to God; everyone present is in deep mourning. Stanza 6 serves as a transitional stanza, in which the poet expresses hope that Mary has received Wenceslas’ soul, and also reveals that there were four women by the deathbed who did not partake in the general atmosphere of grief, but paradoxically exhibited joy. These are the female personifications of Justice, Loyalty, Patience, and Sincere Repentance. The description of the death scene thus gains an allegorical dimension. Each Lady explains in turn that alongside all this grief, there is also cause for happiness, for Wenceslas served them each in life, which will earn him a place in Heaven! The Ladies all let one of the lions from the beginning of the poem speak.

The lion of Bohemia laments Wenceslas, ‘Want ic bi hem clam ter rechter ziden’ [for I climbed (on his shield) with him on the (heraldic) right side] (l. 58).¹¹ The emperor, too, ‘ende al mijn maghe’ [and all my kin] (l. 59) lament Wenceslas, the lion proclaims. The emperor refers to Wenceslaus of Luxembourg (1361-1419; King of the Romans from 1378) – a grandson to John ‘the Blind’ of Bohemia – who succeeded his father, emperor Charles IV, as King of Bohemia in 1378. Among those mentioned as kin are the King of France, along with his nobles and entourage, as well as the queen of England. The King of France refers to Charles VI (1368-1422; king from 1380), who was still underage at the time of the poem’s composition and was assisted by a regency council consisting of Louis I of Anjou, John of Berry, and Philip the Bold (brothers of Charles V of France). Charles VI’s grandmother was Bonne of Luxembourg, daughter of John ‘the Blind’ of Bohemia and sister of the Wenceslas lamented by Jan Knibbe. The Queen of England refers to Anna of Bohemia (1366-1394; queen from 1382), spouse to Richard II of England and granddaughter of John ‘the Blind’ of Bohemia. In short, the lion of Bohemia emphasises Wenceslas’ dynastic relations within the poem.

The lion of Brabant (ll. 73-80) laments Wenceslas as ‘minen here’ [my lord] and ‘minen behoedre’ [my protector]. ‘Nu hebbic verloren onsen roedre’ [now I have lost our rudder; ‘rudder’ is to be taken metaphorically, as ‘head’ or ‘leader’], his ‘riddren, knechten’ [knights and squires] are saddened. May ‘mijn volc’ [my people; the people of Brabant] continue to live as brothers, I hope to maintain my honour. The Brabantian lion represents the territory and laments Wenceslas as lord of the land. That can also be seen in the phrase ‘Hi behuede mi vaderlec aen mire moeder’ [he (Wenceslas) protected me (the territory) fatherly for my mother (Joanna of Brabant)]. Notably, the Brabantian lion does not speak of losing ‘mijn’ (my) but ‘ons’ (our) rudder. Not only the territory

10 The coat of arms may be found in this form in the late fourteenth century Bellenville Armorial, cfr. Jéquier L. (ed.), *L’armorial Bellenville* (Paris: 1983) fol. 38r nr. 1 (p. 101).

11 In heraldry, left and right are indicated from the perspective of the one carrying the shield. When the lion says that he ‘clam ter rechter ziden’ of the duke, he would have appeared on the left side of the coat of arms to an onlooker, here in the first quarter (upper left).

but also the people of Brabant have lost their ‘head’ or ‘leader’. The fate of the Brabantians is tied, as it were, to the fate of the territory: when Brabant thrives, the Brabantians thrive.

Like the Brabantian lion, the Luxembourgian lion (ll. 89-96), too, represents the territory. The Luxembourgian lion calls Wenceslas ‘minen here’ [my lord] and observes that Luxembourg faces great hardship. ‘Mijn volc’ [the people of Luxembourg] was so greatly attached to him that it would not have preferred any riches over the greatest duke to have ever lived.

The Limburgian lion (ll. 105-112) posits that he will find ‘nemmermeer soe edelder here’ [nevermore so noble a lord]. This once again emphasises the territorial aspect and laments Wenceslas as lord of the land. The lion also expressly acknowledges ‘mijn vrouwe’ [my lady; Joanna of Brabant], who is now widowed, and says that he, alongside ‘den broeder mijn’ [my brothers; i.e. the other three lions], will ‘verwaren’ [protect] her. As with the Bohemian lion, the dynastic aspect takes prominence again.

Thus, in the laments of the four allegorically represented heraldic animals in the poem on Wenceslas, Duke of Brabant, Jan Knibbe incorporates both dynastic relations (Bohemia) and territorial rights (Luxembourg, Brabant, and Limburg). The Limburgian lion also re-emphasises the dynastic aspect to Wenceslas’ widow, Joanna. The fate of the Brabantian people is depicted as contingent on the fate of the territory.

The lament for Louis of Male, Count of Flanders

In the first stanza (ll. 1-8), the speaker encounters within a ‘liliengaert’ [lily garden] a ‘swerten libaert’ [black lion; symbol of Flanders] who laments the death of his lord, whom he – as in the previous poem – refers to in familial terms as ‘father’:

Hi sprac: ‘Nu es hi te Gode waert,
Mijn vader die mi heeft ghedraghen.
Sijn goede volc dies sere mesbaert,
Ach riddren, knechten sellene claghen.’ (ll. 5-8)

[He spoke: ‘Now he is gone to God, my father who bore me (in his coat of arms). His good people are very saddened by it. Oh, knights and squires must lament him.’]

Subsequently, the speaker notices two ladies, one clad in black, the other in red. He sees golden lilies light up within a blue sky, hears music, and smells a sweet scent, originating from an angel who is vainly trying to console the lion and the others present.¹² The angel reassures the lion that the soul of the departed was received in Heaven and says that the two ladies will tell him what became of Louis of Male. After the angel suddenly vanishes, the lion addresses the lady in red. He would like to know where she is from and who she is. The woman introduces herself as the lion’s ‘werdinne’ [hostess; a caretaker] and the lion is her ‘gast’ [guest] (l. 34). Her name is ‘Werelt ter Aventuren’ [the World of Adventure; the comings and goings of the world; destiny] (l. 35). She has stood by the late count during his life’s journey.

The lion asks for her support to Louis of Male’s successor, and continues:

Och Vlaendren lant, ghi mocht wel clagen
Want ghi sijt wese, u vader es doot. (ll. 47-48)

[Oh Flanders, it is right that you lament, for you are an orphan, your father is dead.]

12 Here, the poet seems to be alluding to the heraldic legend claiming the divine providence of the arms of France.

The lion refers to Louis of Male as ‘vader’ (father) of Flanders, which is left a ‘wese’ (orphan). In the poem (unlike the poem on Wenceslas of Brabant), the ruler-subject relationship is described in familial terms. The lion had also referred to the Count of Flanders as ‘vader’ already in the beginning of the poem.

Lady World of Adventure imparts the following council on the lion with an eye to the future (ll. 49-56): be loyal to France, maintain the bonds of friendship with your neighbours, give the ‘quade venijn’ [evil poison] no chance, do not defy your rightful lord, honour your cities, and foster unity. In his reply (ll. 57-64) the lion speaks of ‘mijns heren doot’ [the death of my lord], referring to Louis of Male in territorial terms, as he does several more times in the poem (l. 96 and l. 107).

Then the lady in red points to the lady in black. The lion wishes to do battle with her, Death, with ‘Mijn lijf, mijn lant, mijn volc algader’ [My life, my land, and all my people] (l. 74), because the lady in black has taken ‘minen vader’ [my father] (l. 76). The ruler-subject relationship is once again characterised like a family tie, like in the poem’s beginning. Death declares she is acting on orders, and according to her the lion should reconcile itself with the inevitable. Finally, in l. 109, the speaker resumes his narration. He describes the count’s final moments and final words, in addition to the funeral procession (which the red and black ladies take part in) that takes the count to Rijsel, where he is buried, but not before a herald has listed all his dignities.

In the lament of the allegorically represented heraldic animal in the poem on Louis of Male, Jan Knibbe mostly emphasises the territorial aspect (Flanders). Unlike the poem on Wenceslas of Brabant, dynastic relations play no part here. Flanders and the Flemish both mourn the loss of the count.

Heraldry and the experience of identity

As noted above, Jan Knibbe did not consider the literary device of allegorising heraldic animals to be too sophisticated for his intended (wide) audience. This manner of depiction conforms to a contemporaneous iconographic complex in which heraldic representations are connected to realistically depicted animals.¹³

The Gelre Armorial (Gelre/Holland, c. 1395-1414), for example, contains an image of a sitting boar wearing a mantle showing the quartered coat of arms of Brabant/Limburg [Fig. 1]. The image is an illustration accompanying the poem ‘Van den Ever’ [About the Boar], which is connected to a coalition war against Brabant in 1334. Duke John III of Brabant is depicted in the poem as an ‘ever’ (boar), who, within the literary framework of a courtly hunt, contends with seventeen hounds, representing his military opponents. In the Gelre Armorial, each opponent’s speaking part is accompanied by an image of his coat of arms.

In the Bellenville Armorial (vicinity of Cologne/Maastricht, last quarter of the fourteenth century) the Count of Flanders is depicted as a griffin carrying a shield and a helmet including mantling, crown, and crest [Fig. 2]. Just as in ‘Van den Ever’, the animal depicted does not correspond to the actual heraldic animal (a lion for both). The depiction of the Duke of Gelre in the Bellenville Armorial is different, however: he is represented as a lion carrying a shield with helmet, mantling and crest, in addition to a banner.

In Flanders, a similar manner of depiction appears on coins in the time of Louis of Male. In 1365, both the ‘plak’ [plaque] [Fig. 3] and the ‘leeuw’ [lion] [Fig. 4] were minted. The designs of these coins both show a sitting lion, with helmet and heraldic devices, which represents the Count of Flanders. The ‘plak’ was soon followed in the Low Countries by the Dukes of Brabant and Gelre, the Dukes of Holland, the Bishops of Utrecht, and various others.¹⁴

13 For further documentation of all examples discussed in this section, see Anrooij W. van, *Numismatiek en heraldiek: een kleurloze geschiedenis*, Van Gelder-lezing 3 (Leiden: 2004) 26-33.

14 Gelder H.E. van, *De Nederlandse munten*, 7th ed. (Utrecht – Antwerp: 1980) 34.

The combination of heraldic animal with corresponding heraldic mantle is seen from 1389 on the ‘botdrager’ [pot bearer] [Fig. 5], a coin minted during the reign of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The design shows a sitting lion with a mantle displaying the quartered coat of arms of France/Burgundy. The sitting lion may be interpreted as the lion of Flanders and symbolises Philip the Bold in his capacity of Count of Flanders. The slightly earlier ‘dubbele helm’ [double helm] (from 1386) [Fig. 6] displays the arms of France/Burgundy and Flanders, both with heraldic helmet, mantling, wreath (France/Burgundy), crown (Flanders) and crest, side by side.

Conclusion

The manner in which Jan Knibbe employed heraldic symbolism in his laments for Wenceslas of Brabant and Louis of Male was not an invention of the poet’s, but rather a manner of depiction which enjoyed broad societal recognition. The commonality between both laments and depictions in armorials and (everyday) objects like coins is that in each case, the ruler is represented by a realistically depicted animal, which is a living version of the heraldic charge born by the ruler. In Knibbe’s poems, the realistically depicted animals are portrayed as speaking, allowing them to function as a living trait d’union between the departed ruler and his successor. In both poems, the mourning animal fulfils the function of linking the departed and succeeding ruler, the territory, and the subjects, and thus has an integrating role in the rise and development of feelings and experience of identity.

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Fig. 1. Unknown, Duke John III of Brabant, depicted as a boar (c. 1400). Miniature accompanying the poem 'Van den Ever' [About the Boar] (1334) in the Gelre Armorial. Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, 15.652-56, f. 2v.

Fig. 2. Unknown, the Count of Flanders (upper left) depicted as a griffin (last quarter of the fourteenth century). Miniature in the Bellenville Armorial, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 5230, f. 36r.

Fig 3. Unknown, 'plak' [plaque], with a design showing a sitting lion with helmet and heraldic devices (1365). Coin. Amsterdam, National Numismatic Collection.

Fig 4. Unknown, 'leeuw' [lion], with a design showing a sitting lion with helmet and heraldic devices (1365). Coin. Amsterdam, National Numismatic Collection.

Fig. 5. Unknown, 'botdrager' [pot wearer], with a design showing a sitting lion with heraldic mantle displaying the quartered coat of arms of France/Burgundy (1389). Coin. Amsterdam, National Numismatic Collection.

Fig. 6. Unknown, 'dubbele helm' [double helm], with a design showing the coats of arms of France/Burgundy (left) and Flanders (right) (1396). Coin. Amsterdam, National Numismatic Collection.