

Jaguars, Maidens Issuant, Counter-Ermined: Heraldry in Contact in 20th Century Brazil

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Among 20th century Brazilian novelists and playwrights, few have devoted as much attention to heraldry as Ariano Suassuna. The *Romance d'A Pedra do Reino* (*Romance of the Stone of the Realm*), the author's major work in this literary genre, is explicitly inscribed as the heir to medieval Portuguese and European novelism, filtered through the popular tradition of Northeast Brazil. As in medieval chivalry novels, the presence of heraldic allusions and descriptions is constant, serving as elements of characterization of the characters and anticipation or explanation of the plot.

The importance of heraldry reveals itself immediately in the novel, which begins with a *cavalcada* scene, i.e. one of those festive cavalcades in Northeast Brazil, generally opposing two groups, the blue and the red, associated respectively with Charlemagne's twelve peers and twelve Moorish princes, or with the Virgin and Christ (or sometimes the Devil). In *The Stone of the Realm*, the attention of the spectators of this cavalcade is drawn to a mysterious young man on a white horse, whose unknown identity is nevertheless indicated by his red mantle and by a standard, both of which bear the same coat-of-arms: a shield *impaled*, or *with three jaguars gules and counter-ermined*; having for crest a maiden issuant dressed in counter-ermined (fig. 1).

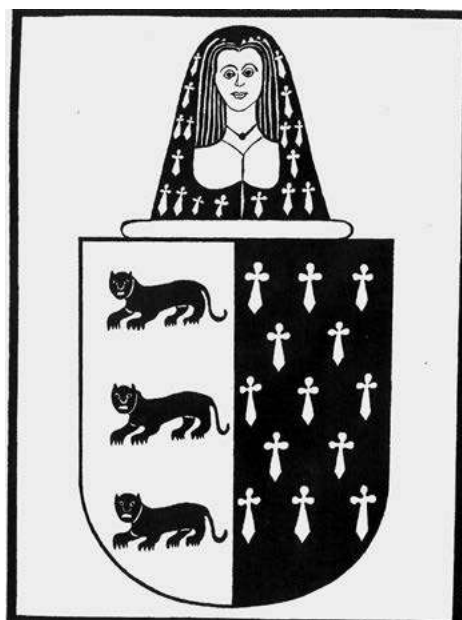


Fig. 1: Coat-of-arms of the young man on a white horse, in the *Romance d'A Pedra do Reino* by Ariano Suassuna, 1971.

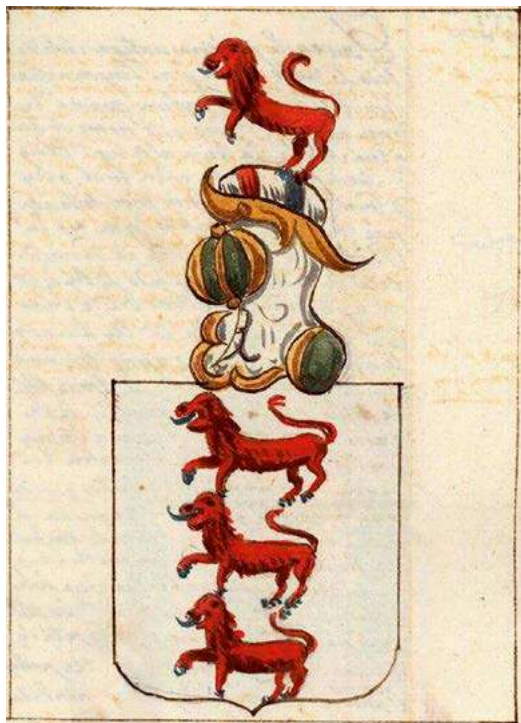


Fig. 2: Arms of the Garcia de Gondim family from the *Tesouro da nobreza de Portugal* by Frei Manuel de Santo António e Silva, c. 1783, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo.



Fig. 3: Arms of the Barreto family from the *Livro da nobreza e da perfeição das armas dos reis cristãos e nobres linhagens dos reinos de senhorios de Portugal* by António Godinho, c. 1521–1541, Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo.

This first coat-of-arms sets the tone for the use of heraldry throughout the novel. It provides the reader with a series of clues that will allow him to discover the plot of the story, while at the same time identifying the character of the actors, or the role they play in the novel. But in this novel nothing is ever what it seems at first glance.

So, coats-of-arms, if they end up being identifiable, always have a hybrid character that allows them to play on several levels. The same applies to those of the young man on the white horse: the first field is inspired by the arms of the Garcia de Gondim family (fig. 2); the second by those of the Barreto family, whose crest is also used (fig. 3). This first identification allows us to understand that the young man places himself as the legitimate heir (thought to be dead) of the immense fortune of the Garcia-Barreto family, the most prestigious in the province of Paraíba. But, in both cases, the reprise is not complete: the Garcia de Gondim bear *argent three lions passant guardant gules, armed and langued azure*; the Barreto bear *ermine plain*, having for crest a maiden issuant dressed in ermine. Where do these modifications to the original coat of arms come from?

For the first one, it is a question of replacing animals (lions) that Pedro Dinis Quaresma, the narrator of the story, classifies as »foreigners«, with truly Brazilian animals, the *onças* or jaguars. This substitution is in keeping with the very principle of the novel, which is to find in the past – and in all the plastic and sonic manifestations that it has bequeathed to the present – the

key to an in-depth understanding of contemporary society, which will in turn enable its projection towards a substantial future. For the second ones, the ermine transformed into a counter-ermine symbolizes the capacity for reversion that the narrator presents as typical of Brazilian society: a *parda* (brown) society, where the mixture of European, African and Indian blood ends up producing a general »miscegenation«. The Garcia-Barreto and the narrator himself may present themselves as heirs of Portuguese lineages whose origins date back to the Middle Ages, but they are no less aware of the African and Indian blood that runs in their veins. And they take from this triple heritage the consciousness of constituting a unique culture, replete with heraldic images that translate precisely the idea of a generalized fusion.

However, these heraldic images do not have the value of a simple mirror. They also have a double, more active and more performative function. On the one hand, they are the means used by the narrator and all the characters to transform the perception of their society: as Pedro Dinis affirms, »All this helped me, little by little, to understand better each time the history of the stone of the realm and to be proud of the royalty and chivalry of my ancestors. It also made my world, this world of the Sertão [semi-desert part of northeastern Brazil] raw, dirty and rocky, into an enchanted kingdom, similar to the one that my great-grandparents had established and that illustrious poet-academics had burned forever in my blood. My life, greyish, naughty and petty, as a child of the Sertão reduced to poverty and dependency by the ruin of my father, was filled with the gallops, colours and flags of the cavalcades, the heroism and chivalry of the leaflets«. An oneiric dimension, therefore, but which nevertheless acts on reality.

Indeed, heraldic images are also the instrument used by the narrator to understand not only his origins, but also his deepest nature. It is through armed objects that the narrator builds his individual and collective self-awareness, and it is also through them that he seeks to act on the society around him. Heraldry, thus, in this context (and in Suassuna's romance) has a much broader value than that of scholarly knowledge: it serves to characterize the cultural, social, political and ideological spheres that the figures represent, either confronting each other or merging. Thus, the two other main characters, the narrator's masters of thought, are identified with opposing ideological currents that take the name of Brazilian native animals: while Samuel Wan d'Ernes identifies with white »Tapirism«, Clemente Hará de Ravasco Anvérsio with black »Oncism« (Jaguarism). But, in the end, only the narrator proves himself capable of overcoming the contrasting opposites and proposing his own identity valid for the whole of North-Eastern, and even Brazilian, society. For he alone can discover and explain to everyone the heraldic signs that surround them: it is not in vain that he presents himself as »king-of-arms of the Sertão«.

Heraldry therefore makes understanding possible; it makes it possible to live. Rooted in the past, it provides the indispensable elements for individual self-awareness while at the same time helping to project the individual into the future, whose cultural and social cohesion it ensures. For the narrator, it is the very essence of a cosmogony of its own: In this Catholicism of the Sertão, »God Himself was not that simple breath present in other religions: He appeared to me as the Holy Trinity of the Sertão, an ardent and glorious Sun, formed by five animals in one. It was the spotted Jaguar of the Divine, integrated by five beasts: the Red Jaguar, the Black Jaguar, the Brown Jaguar, the White Deer and the Golden Sparrowhawk, that is, the Father, the Leathered One, the Son, the Compassionate One and the Holy Spirit« (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Spotted Jaguar of the Divine, integrated by five beasts, in the *Romance d'A Pedra do Reino* by Ariano Suassuna, 1971.

The *Stone of the Realm* has, therefore, two highlights. The first is verified when each of the three aforementioned main characters receives their coats of arms, which make it possible to situate their role in the developing story and simultaneously, by metaphorical projection, in the history of Brazil. The second takes place during an initiation ceremony that the narrator undertakes himself at the top of a mountain: the armorial objects hold a function that culminates in a kind of heraldic Eucharist.

This salvific function of heraldry, Ariano Suassuna did not limit himself to pointing it out in his novel. He wanted to constitute it as an artistic and cultural movement. With this in mind, in 1970 he founded the *Movimento Armorial*, which sought to create a scholarly art based on the popular culture of north-eastern Brazil. One of its originalities being the idea of fusion between the visual, acoustic, and performative arts through heraldry located half-way between the Middle Ages and the present but also, at the same time, understood as a means of saving this same past for the (re)con-

struction of the Brazilian cultural identity. A contact tool, therefore, between past, present, and future, at the heart of the individual and collective self-awareness process.

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