Symbolic and Self-Consciously Antiquarian: The Elizabethan and Early Stuart Gentry’s Use of the Past

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ABSTRACT In this essay, Jan Broadway considers the imaginative engagement with medieval England among the Elizabethan and early Stuart gentry and their use of certain forms to convey messages about their families and communities. The discussion focuses on two material art forms: a particular style of funeral monument and the genre of narrative painting. Broadway concludes that the most obvious engagements are those that were deliberately designed to convey false messages, while subtler uses of the past are more difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, there is evidence of the gentry’s genuine and self-conscious engagement with the past as a means of establishing and maintaining status. KEYWORDS: early modern funerary monuments; medieval chivalric symbolism; melancholic knight pose; Elizabethan narrative paintings; William Dugdale

THE TRAPPINGS OF THE CHIVALRIC TRADITION—the coats of arms, the armored figures on funeral monuments—were ubiquitous in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. They were the accepted symbols of ancestry and status, and as such their popularity did not necessarily imply an active engagement with the past or a conscious intention to convey a particular message. Such medieval visual symbols continued in use largely because no alternatives had acquired sufficient significance to replace them. Hence, when Charles I was executed in 1649, a sheet of verses entitled The True Manner of the Kings Tryal at Westminster-Hall was adorned with the figures of two heralds in funeral garb because they were the recognized signifiers of noble death, not because the heralds had played any part in the king’s trial, execution, or funeral.1 These verses commemorated tumultuous events, but even change on this

1. Helen Pierce, “Artful Ambivalence? Picturing Charles I during the Interregnum,” in Royalists and Royalism during the Interregnum, ed. Jason McElligott and David L. Smith (Manchester, 2010), 71–72. The blank shields of the heralds’ banners suggest that this was a stock image, perhaps used on single sheets printed for heraldic funerals with the appropriate arms added.
scale did not lead the king’s opponents to jettison medieval ceremonial forms. The hurried appointment of heralds to marshal the funeral of the Earl of Essex, just two days before the event in October 1646, suggests a lack of obvious alternatives to the traditional forms at a time of national mourning. At the same time, the continuity implied by traditional ritual forms helped to obscure the extent of political and social rupture.

The malleability of historical forms was subsequently demonstrated on various state occasions. When Henry Ireton was buried a few years later, in 1651, the royal arms were replaced by those of the Commonwealth on the heralds’ tabards, but the role of these figures in their archaic garb remained essentially unchanged. Upon Oliver Cromwell’s inauguration as Lord Protector, his titles were proclaimed by a herald in Westminster Hall just as if he had been a king, and his funeral was modeled on that of James I. Unsurprisingly, the restoration of the Stuarts witnessed a reinvigoration of medieval ceremonial forms, to which the Glorious Revolution and the Hanoverian succession offered no serious challenge, since the appearance of continuity remained important. In their rituals, human societies tend to perpetuate ancient traditions, not simply through habit but also as a means of assimilating social and political change.

While traditional ritual helps societies to accommodate change, any use of the past to negotiate present difficulties is invariably complicated by contested interpretations of both symbolism and historical events. In deciding to raise his standard in 1642 on the anniversary of the battle of Bosworth, August 22, Charles I appears at first to have been inviting comparison to Henry Tudor—except that the standard was raised at Nottingham, where in 1485 Richard III had rallied his forces before battle. An astute and historically minded observer might have seen an ill omen when the king, faced with the threat of usurpation, chose to raise his standard on that day in that place. Since Clarendon dated the event three days later in his history, the parallel seems to have escaped his notice. If the king’s actions did constitute, as Donald Pennington has suggested, “a symbolic and self-consciously antiquarian summons” to the gentry, then the symbolism had clearly not been thought through. Nor did the parallel with Richard III go unnoticed at the time, even if Clarendon missed it. A London pamphleteer told his readers that Richard III set up the “first standard which was ever raised in the bowels of this Kingdom” in 1485, warning:

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2. *Journal of the House of Commons*, 4:700–701, October 20, 1646. Edward Bysshe, who was appointed Garter, was a new entrant to the College of Arms, but Arthur Squibb (Clarenceux) and William Ryley (Norroy) had served Charles I.


if any King doth proclaim War, and set up his Standard within his owne
Kingdome and against his owne people and Nation, not having just occa-
sion, but only a rash humour and desire of revenge . . . that such a king
ought to be dispossessed.6

The utility of history to contemporary politics was fully appreciated by both sides in
the opening stages of the Civil War. At Nottingham, the king deployed the pageantry of
banners, drums, and heralds to appeal to the traditional loyalty of the English gentry.
Contemporary accounts of the raising of the standard suggest that it was achieved with
more successful pomp than allowed by Clarendon’s later recollections, which have
become the accepted account.7 Nevertheless, the disturbing historical parallels drawn
by the king’s opponents indicate how very differently symbols may be interpreted,
regardless of their intended meaning.

This essay seeks to explore the ways in which the Elizabethan and early Stuart
gentry imaginatively engaged with the medieval past and, through their use of certain
forms and symbols, conveyed messages about family status and community cohesion
in the face of social, economic, and religious change. I shall concentrate on two types
of artifact, predominantly visual and intended for public display: a particular style of
funeral monument and the genre of narrative painting. I shall attempt to show that
the gentry who commissioned the works under consideration were not simply fol-
lowing fashion or precedent, but were actively engaged in selecting elements of
medieval gentry culture to convey messages about themselves, their families, and
their communities. In general, medieval chivalric symbolism was used to assert a
family’s membership within the honor community. In some cases a more specific
claim of steadfast loyalty was made by drawing on the visual imagery of medieval
chivalric service. Such imagery could be particularly useful to recusant gentry seek-
ing a means to demonstrate both their aristocratic credentials and their loyalty to the
Crown. Since both forms under consideration here were created for the gentry by arti-
sans, it is impossible to discount entirely the influence of professional artists on such
artifacts. Although wealthy patrons could commission the latest fashionable forms
from London-based artists and stonemasons, the majority were reliant on provincial
practitioners of less ability and greater conservatism. The gentry would not, however,
commission, pay for, and preserve works that were not to their liking. Choice was
constrained, but it was exercised. These artifacts therefore allow us to explore the
ways in which some members of the Elizabethan and early Stuart English gentry
manipulated symbolic elements of the medieval chivalric tradition to establish an
active engagement between past and present.

Funeral monuments provide the most common and widespread evidence of the
way that a significant proportion of the gentry viewed and symbolically expressed a

6. A True and Exact Relation of the Manner of His Maiesties Setting up of His Standard at Nottingham
   (London, 1642).
sense of connection to their medieval forebears and to the contemporary honor community. A widespread but comparatively unusual group of Elizabethan and Jacobean monuments have effigies that are variations of what I shall call the melancholic knight pose: the figure is clad in armor, lying on one side facing the viewer, with his head propped on one hand. Sometimes he holds a sword, or his head rests uncomfortably on a helmet (figure 1). The form is sufficiently uncommon to suggest deliberate selection by those who commissioned such monuments. Some effigies have their legs crossed, echoing a pose associated with knights of the fourteenth century. This pose was mistakenly thought to have been exclusively reserved for crusading knights, adding a further layer of symbolism to certain melancholic knight memorials. In a monument at Brading, on the Isle of Wight, the antiquary Sir John Oglander is depicted with crossed legs and a shield over his right arm, with his hand clutching his sword. This effigy and a smaller, similar one of his son George were carved from oak in a conscious archaism. In his “Advice to his Descendants,” Oglander claimed that his family arrived with the Norman Conquest but admitted that their status had declined from their medieval heyday. His monument was erected in 1640, immediately after the completion of his term as sheriff, while he was still alive. The effigy’s evocation of a family tradition of military service provided an indirect commentary on Sir John’s zealous collection of ship money.

In Elizabethan and Jacobean England the melancholic knight pose could be used to convey a variety of messages about individuals and their families. It provided a shorthand, a means for a family to represent its lineage in a single monument where there were no medieval tomb chests available. At Swinbrook in Oxfordshire, three generations are stacked on top of each other on the monument to Sir Edmund Fettiplace. The figures lie with their elbows resting on pillows, their swords at their sides. There is no attempt to differentiate the armor of the successive generations. The message of long chivalric service is reinforced by the display of coat armor. The monument’s erection corresponds to the family’s relocation from Childrey in Berkshire: the memorials to earlier generations remained in the church at Childrey, so at Swinbrook Sir Edmund ensured that a monument was erected to give an immediate impression of the family’s lineage. Although the physical evidence was inconveniently located elsewhere, in this instance the lineage claimed was legitimate. This was not always the case, however,

8. Nigel Llewellyn, “Claims to Status through Visual Codes: Heraldry in Post-Reformation English Funeral Monuments,” in Chivalry in the Renaissance, ed. Sydney Anglo (Woodbridge, U.K., 1990), 145–60. Although there are large numbers of extant and recorded monuments, the burial places of the majority of the English elite are unmarked, as Peter Sherlock reminds us; Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England (Aldershot, U.K., 2008), 20–21.
Figure 1. The monument to Francis Smith (d. 1605), St. Peter’s, Wootton Wawen, from William Dugdale, The Antiquities of Warwickshire (London, 1656).
and the melancholic knight form provided a convenient vehicle for parading antiquity and continuity where these did not exist. An example is found at Little Rollright, also in Oxfordshire, where the Dixons used the melancholic knight for the monument to William Blower, from whom they had inherited the manor in 1618. Blower lies less comfortably than the Fettiplaces, his head on his helmet and his sword held stiffly in front of him. The earliest monument in the church, it was placed in the sanctuary. The effigy’s pose, the use of Latin in the inscriptions, and the quartered arms all convey the impression of established gentility. It was designed to be misleading. Blower, the younger son of a London goldsmith, had bought Little Rollright only seven years before his death. His elder brother had been granted the family coat of arms as recently as 1597. The other arms on the monument were presumably those claimed by his Flemish mother. There was no medieval knightly ancestor to whom Blower’s effigy was paying homage, or any family tradition of chivalric service. Nor, because the manor had been in monastic hands until the Dissolution and was then acquired by a branch of the powerful Throckmorton family, could a claim to descent from the medieval owners be made. The Dixons, the family into which Blower’s sister had married, claimed descent from a Scottish family “of good account.” However, because they purchased the manor of Hilden in Kent in the mid-sixteenth century, their entry into the English gentry was recent. As they were newcomers to the county upon their inheritance of Little Rollright, the erection of Blower’s monument was a way of establishing themselves in Oxfordshire gentry society. On each of the four corner panels, above the names of his sister’s four sons, was a Latin verse extolling Blower’s virtues. The Dixon family, whose inheritance of the manor was disputed by Blower’s elder brother, was making a complex claim to descent and honor through this monument. Its effectiveness depended upon the Dixons’ neighbors understanding and appreciating the imagery employed.

The comparative restraint of the heraldry may reflect a sensitivity to the feelings of the local gentry. A somewhat different claim, though also restrained, was made by the adoption of the melancholic knight pose for the effigy of the Jacobean mayor and MP Sir John Pettus in St. Simon and St. Jude, Norwich. Conventionally, one might expect Pettus to be commemorated kneeling in aldermanic robes, as was his father on a monument in the same church. Sir John, however, had been knighted by Elizabeth I and acquired an estate at Rackheath, some five miles outside the city. The medieval martial imagery on Sir John’s tomb symbolically demonstrated the rise of this family of cloth merchants into the gentry and their consequent absorption into the honor community. The location of the monument in their old city parish indicates that its message was directed toward their old neighbors rather than to the county gentry or their

12. At nearby Chastleton, Elinor Pope, the daughter of a Flemish immigrant, used the arms of the Popes of Wroxton; for the chimneypiece in the Great Chamber, see the National Trust guide, Chastleton House (2001), 22.
new tenants at Rackheath. The use of heraldry is appropriately restrained. This is a claim to the honorable status of an individual acknowledged by his monarch and to a symbolic inheritance of the virtues of medieval knights, rather than to an actual lineage. Again, its effectiveness depended on its symbolism being understood by viewers.14

Although many monuments featuring the melancholic knight pose are characterized by restrained heraldry, this was not invariably the case. The Elizabethan monument to Robert Steward in Ely Cathedral extended its extravagant display of heraldry to the effigy itself by covering the armor with a surcoat showing a coat of arms with nine quarters. This monument and a later one, also at Ely, to Robert Steward’s elder brother, Sir Mark, illustrate the evolution of a family’s lineage claim. The Stewards were a branch of the Norfolk Styward family, who in the sixteenth century established themselves on the Isle of Ely, altered the spelling of their surname, and manufactured a spurious claim of descent from the Scottish royal line. The imposture appears to have originated with Robert Steward, the last prior and dean of Ely before the Reformation. Supported by forged documents, the family’s claim to Scottish royal ancestry was accepted by the notoriously amenable Robert Cooke, Clarenceux king of arms in Elizabeth’s reign. The Robert Steward commemorated by the melancholic knight monument at Ely was the prior’s cousin, who died in 1570. The nine quarters on his surcoat, which are repeated on the shields decorating the interior of the monument, do not include the Stewart arms. The eleven quarters of the shield on the tympanum above, however, do, suggesting that this was a later addition to the monument after Cooke had validated the claimed descent during the 1575 heralds’ visitation of Cambridgeshire. Sir Mark Steward died thirty years later, and his grandiose monument in Ely includes an inscription describing the spurious genealogy, a coat of twenty-three quartered arms rising above the entablature, supported by two standing figures and fourteen separate coats on the front of the tomb chest. By such means a branch of an obscure Norfolk family appropriated a spurious royal descent as part of their claim to status within the county community of Cambridgeshire. The acceptance of the monuments by the cathedral represented an implicit acceptance of the family’s manipulation of history by at least one section of the community, that attached to the cathedral. Classically inspired monuments with restrained heraldry would not have served their purpose so well.15

With my final example of the melancholic knight, I want to explore the way such a monument could interact with other manifestations of a family’s manipulation of their lineage. The monument is that to Francis Smith at Wootton Wawen, Warwickshire, who died in his eighties in the autumn of 1605 (see figure 1). The Smiths were Catholics, although each head of the family in turn practiced the minimal observance of Protestant rites necessary to avoid recusancy fines. The monument provided a

vehicle through which the past could be used to stress a Catholic family’s status as loyal and honorable subjects of the Crown. Francis Smith left instructions in his will that he should be buried “within the chappell of the parish church of Wawens Wooton aforesaide and before the place where I have usuallye satt and as high and near to the great windowe within the same Chappell as conveniently may be.” His son George died two years later and instructed in his will that “[a] toombe in good and convenient sorte with portraitures and inscriptions that shalbe thought fitte be made over the bodye of my Father Fraunceys Smithe.” The monument was subsequently erected by George’s son Sir Francis. It includes the quartered arms of Smith and Harewell, both alone and impaled with the arms of Francis Smith’s second wife, Elizabeth Brudenell. For a Jacobean monument, the heraldry is restrained, and there is no elaborate pedigree, placing greater emphasis on the message conveyed by the effigy. The strapwork is typically Jacobean and the inscriptions are in Latin. The effigy is rather stiff and the pose looks uncomfortable; his head rests on a helmet and the position of his hand suggests he originally held a sword in front of him. The monument is contemporary with and very similar to William Blower’s in Little Rollright, which is around twenty-five miles from Wootton Wawen. Francis Smith had been sheriff of the combined counties of Warwickshire and Leicestershire in 1565, but there was little else in his long life that justified a martial presentation. Indeed, given the Smith family’s Catholicism, martial associations might have been deemed inappropriate by his neighbors—especially in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot.

The design of the monument and its effigy were clearly intended to establish Francis as the inheritor of the medieval gentry’s tradition of military service and, by extension, of loyalty to the Crown. In fact, he was the son of Sir John Smith of Cressing Temple, Essex, a baron of the Exchequer in Henry VIII’s reign. The peacocks on the Smith coat of arms indicate the Tudor origins of their gentility. Sir John had acquired a manor in Wootton Wawen by his marriage to Agnes, one of the five daughters and co-heirs of William Harewell. This was his third marriage, and he already had an heir to Cressing Temple by his first wife. The canting arms of the Harewells with their hares’ heads indicate that they too were not of the ancient gentry. In fact the family’s association with Warwickshire originated in the late fourteenth century, when John Harewell was a royal administrator and bishop of Bath and Wells. In the fifteenth century William Harewell fought for the Lancastrian cause and was taken prisoner at Barnet. This was pretty much the extent of the martial inheritance of the Smiths of Wootton Wawen. The Smiths were not, however, content to be known as Tudor upstarts, and at the end of the sixteenth century a spurious narrative was concocted that showed the Smiths of Cressing Temple to be lineally descended from Sir Michael Carrington, standard-bearer to Richard the Lionheart. The antiquarian community was suspicious of

such a convenient narrative, but this did not prevent the Smiths from presenting themselves visually as descended from the medieval gentry. Moreover, once the relationship was endorsed by the College of Arms, they began in certain contexts to use the Carrington arms, though they did not replace their Tudor coat.\(^{18}\)

The heraldry on Francis Smith’s memorial does not include the arms of his first wife and mother of his children, Mary Morton, an heiress through whom the family acquired the manor of Ashby Folville in Leicestershire. By the time the monument was erected at Wootton Wawen, the Brudenells of Northamptonshire were a far more significant connection. Nevertheless, Ashby Folville was the preferred home of the next two generations, and it was there that George Smith directed that his own monument be erected. This monument and that to his son, Sir Francis, in the same church, have effigies of the deceased dressed in armor, lying on their backs beside their wives. By the time Sir Francis died in 1629 this style was becoming old-fashioned, but the monuments fulfilled the function of visually establishing this newly arrived family firmly within the Leicestershire gentry. At the heralds’ visitation of Leicestershire in 1619 the Carrington alias Smith family recorded the twelve-quartered coat that appears above the inscription on the monument to Sir Francis. In fact, the Carrington alias Smith pedigree appears twice in the visitation, since the Cressing Temple branch had acquired the manor of Neville Holt through marriage to an heiress. They too claimed twelve-quartered arms. Both pedigrees recorded that their ancestor Sir Thomas Carrington was knighted by the Black Prince. The Neville Holt pedigree also noted the presence of Carringtons at specific battles and traced their line back to Richard I’s standard-bearer. Thus, the two branches of the Smith family used history to bolster their status as belonging to the gentry of Leicestershire and to support claims that were potentially undermined by their comparatively recent acquisition of land in the county and the adherence of both branches to Catholicism.

Despite the family’s creation of a martial tradition, Sir Francis Smith discouraged his youngest son, John, from pursuing a military career. The family would have preferred that he enter the priesthood, but when he was sent abroad to pursue his education he defected to serve in the Spanish army in Flanders. He subsequently returned to fight in the Bishops’ Wars and joined the royalists at the outset of the Civil War. At Edgehill he retrieved the royal standard after Sir Edmund Verney was killed. For this he was knighted on the field, probably the last knight banneret to be created in England. Ironically, the Smith family acquired a proper chivalric hero just as the medieval military ethos was in its death throes. When John died from wounds sustained in action in 1644, he was buried in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, with full military honors. His elder brother, Sir Charles Smith, supported the king with money rather than arms and consequently acquired a title in 1643. He chose to become Baron Carrington, showing his attachment to the family’s myth of its origins. In 1656 the family

ensured that the myth of their descent was recorded in *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, along with an engraving of Francis Smith’s monument at Wootton Wawen (see figure 1).\(^{19}\)

The Elizabethan and early Stuart gentry decorated their homes as well as their funeral monuments with displays of coat armor. Many demonstrations of lineage survive in stained glass and overmantels, while others are recorded in antiquarian collections.\(^{20}\) The dissemination of stories associated with these coats of arms reveals both the gentry’s imaginative engagement with the medieval past and its utility in supporting claims to aristocratic social status. Particular emblems, augmentations, and crests were believed to record a family’s involvement in the Crusades or the Hundred Years’ War, or perhaps their close relationship with a particular king or great medieval lord. Some of these myths originated with the heralds. Others came from within the families themselves but were accommodated by the heralds, who were reluctant to overturn their clients’ cherished traditions.

In the case of the Pelham family we can date the creation of a myth with some precision. In 1611 the patent for Sir Thomas Pelham’s baronetcy referred to his ancestor’s service to Henry IV, Henry V, and James I of Scotland. Sir Nicholas Pelham was sword-bearer at Henry IV’s coronation and began at this time to use the emblem of a buckle on his seal. His service to James I was actually as his jailor, which presumably accounts for the cage in the Pelham crest. In 1620 Sir Thomas “conferred with a skilful herald” at the request of his cousin. He complained: “They have added to the Buckle a part of the girdle, . . . which I did never see in all the seals of arms I have, or in any escutcheon.” A new narrative of the origins of the family’s arms was being created, one that replaced a Lancastrian henchman with a chivalric knight who captured the French king at Poitiers. A strong Lancastrian association was less desirable in Jacobean England than it had been under the Tudors, while greater antiquity was always desirable. In 1630 John Philipot manipulated the available records to graft the Sussex Pelhams onto Hertfordshire medieval stock. This notorious creator of myths is undoubtedly implicated in the sleight of hand over the buckle, but the family is not free from suspicion. If Philipot manufactured the Poitiers legend, the family paid him to do it—and perpetuated the myth into the twenty-first century.\(^{21}\)

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Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century it became increasingly common for the gentry to have their portraits painted, and it also became fashionable to amass collections of paintings that portrayed family members, monarchs, and other notables. Narrative paintings were far less common. Daniel Woolf describes the lack of an English tradition of narrative history painting as one of the unsolved mysteries in the history of Western art. However, this seems to me to be a case where absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.  

There are well-known examples of narrative art with royal associations, such as the paintings of Henry VIII’s various engagements with France and the Armada tapestries commissioned by James I in 1617. The chance survival of a few less prestigious examples suggests that narrative art did flourish to some extent in England. The Protestant “deliverances” from the Armada and the Gunpowder Plot form the subjects of a diptych presented to Gaywood Church, King’s Lynn, by Thomas Hares, rector there from 1598 to 1634. Another diptych, now in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries, shows scenes of a procession to St. Paul’s and a bishop preaching a sermon there as imagined by John Gipkyn, an artist regularly employed in pageants for the Lord Mayor’s shows. At Lichfield during Elizabeth’s reign, there remained in the hall of the bishop’s palace “excellently well painted, but now much decayed, the coronation, marriage, wars, and funeral of Edw. I., and some writing, which there is also yet remaining, which expresseth the meaning of the history.” This example of secular art in an ecclesiastical setting survived until the Civil War. In The Description of England William Harrison described how the walls of houses “be either hanged with tapestry, arras work, or painted cloths, wherein either divers histories, or herbs, beasts, knots, or suchlike are stained, or else they are ceiled with oak of our own or wainscot.” There are comparatively few surviving English tapestries from this period, let alone the cheaper and more fragile painted cloths. There are also a few examples of painted ceilings and paneling, but most have been lost as a result of changing tastes and modernization. The surviving


25. Sampson Erdeswicke, A Survey of Staffordshire, ed. Thomas Harwood (Westminster, 1820), 211. The murals were created for bishop Walter Langton (d. 1321).

examples and references to those that do not survive suggest a preponderance of biblical and mythical narratives, but the popularity of Robin Hood, Guy of Warwick, King Arthur, and Bevis of Hampton in other forms suggests that medieval subjects would also have had their place.27

The most popular genre of painting displayed in the long galleries that increasingly featured in gentry houses was undoubtedly the portrait.28 This was also the kind of painting most likely to be preserved and displayed by successive generations, yet it is probable that depictions of medieval scenes were more common than we tend to think. One indication that the gentry’s interest in illustrations of the past extended beyond coats of arms is found in the decoration of contemporary maps. Over 40 percent of John Speed’s maps of English counties include illustrations and short descriptions of medieval battles. The map of Hampshire, for example, illustrated the story of Empress Matilda being carried out of Winchester in the face of her enemies, concealed in a coffin. The military vignettes range chronologically from the Roman occupation to Kett’s rebellion of 1549, although the formations and dress are contemporary with the maps.29 Half of the battles described belonged to the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses, which remained a resonant part of the comparatively recent past. Writing in the reign of James I, John Smyth of Nibley was able to name eleven witnesses who claimed to have received accounts of the 1470 battle of Nibley Green from parents, relatives, and neighbors who had fought in the skirmish. The Leicestershire historian William Burton credited one of his ancestors with providing Henry Tudor with the local knowledge by which he “got the advantage of the ground, winde and sunne” at the Battle of Bosworth, and referred to secondhand accounts similar to those mentioned by Smyth.30 For Burton and presumably the other families that quartered this ancestor’s arms, the story added to the social prestige of his descendants. Christopher Saxton produced the first English wall map in 1583, and from the evidence of contemporary inventories we know that maps were often displayed in gentry houses. In 1588 the Warwickshire gentleman Ralph Sheldon had his new mansion hung with tapestry maps woven at his family’s own works.31

One of the few surviving narrative paintings from this period is the Unton memorial, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. It is almost certainly representative of a much larger body of works that have been lost. Andrew Graham-Dixon describes the Unton memorial as “a thoroughly intriguing bad picture. . . . A narratively ambitious, rather dark and quaintly intricate depiction of an Elizabethan gentleman’s birth, life and death,” and he goes on to suggest that “the painter was a distinctly rusty religious artist . . . suddenly called back into service to paint a rather different, secular subject.” The detailed representation of the funeral suggests that it may actually be the product of a herald painter. There were artists in provincial towns of any size who would undertake the painting required for heraldic funerals and monuments. Their artisanal skills would have been particularly appropriate to the production of large-scale painted cloths to decorate gentry homes. The vignettes that appear on the sizable pedigrees that were produced by the London herald painters, presumably for display in their clients’ houses, show that they were comfortable with the narrative form. Henry Lilly, one of the more talented artists among them, included a small battle scene at the foot of the title page of his genealogy of the Howard family to supplement the heraldry and portraits. The herald painters were also responsible for the visual records of state occasions and noble funerals, which were intended to guide later heralds in the proper marshaling and correct display of heraldry for events, which occurred infrequently.

The archaism of the Unton painting was presumably deliberate. His widow had close connections to Elizabeth’s court and could have employed a fashionable artist. Here the archaic form, however, implicitly links her husband’s life to a largely spurious family tradition of public service. The Untons rose into the gentry in the sixteenth century, and it was only the accident of Sir Henry’s father marrying Protector Somerset’s daughter at the nadir of her fortunes that raised them above the minor gentry. The painting carries a message concerning the subject’s lineage and service to the Crown similar to that of the melancholic knight pose—which was indeed the form of effigy Lady Unton chose for her husband’s funeral monument. The Unton memorial was apparently not the only narrative painting Lady Unton owned. In her will she left all her “story pictures” in the gallery at Farringdon to Sir Robert Pye, excluding only the Unton memorial, which descended to her niece. The subject of the majority of the pictures, tapestries, and painted hangings in her inventories remains unknown.

33. Illustrated in David Howarth, Images of Rule (Basingstoke, U.K., 1997), 258.
34. See the details of funeral processions in Clare Gittings, Death, Burial, and the Individual in Early Modern England (London, 1984), plates 5 and 6. The hearse for the Earl of Essex in 1646 was based on one used for Prince Henry in 1612; Howarth, Images of Rule, 172–73.
The importance of narrative images related to ancestors led some families to sponsor their appearance in print in the seventeenth century. The various branches of the Astley family all seem to have drawn pride from the fifteenth-century illustrations of the chivalric exploits of Sir John de Astley of Patshull, Staffordshire, and engravings of them were consequently included by William Dugdale in his account of the senior branch in *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (figure 2).37 The original source of the illustration is the miscellany known as Sir John Paston's "Grete Book," which passed through the hands of several Tudor and early Stuart heralds.38 A sixteenth-century painting of the illustration was moved from Astley Castle in Warwickshire to Arbury Hall in 1773. A copy at Everleigh House, home of the Wiltshire Astleys, was destroyed by fire in 1881. Dugdale's engraving was sponsored by Sir Isaac Astley of Melton-Constable, Norfolk, and it is possible that a further copy belonged to this branch of the family. These paintings were preserved because they related directly to a gentry family's own history and various branches of that family survived to appreciate them. The shared history represented by the paintings also served to emphasize the ties between the different branches of the family, as did their shared coat of arms.

The Cheshire royalist Sir Richard Grosvenor displayed a similar attachment to a picture of the Norman earl Hugh Lupus in Parliament. After a protracted legal dispute in the late fourteenth century, the Grosvenors had been ordered to stop using a coat of arms claimed by the Scropes. During the dispute a spurious lineage was concocted, claiming that the family was descended from Gilbert le Grosvenor, who came over with his uncle Lupus at the Conquest. Required on losing their case to adopt a new coat of arms, the family chose one based on those of their supposed ancestor. When Daniel King published the *Vale Royall of England* (1656), Sir Richard Grosvenor paid to have the engraving of Hugh Lupus included, thus ensuring that a narrative image supporting his family's spurious lineage was preserved in print.39

At Coughton Court in Warwickshire, there survives a striking example of an Elizabethan narrative painting that related medieval history to the contemporary sufferings of the recusant community. This is a painted canvas measuring nine feet by seven, known as the *Tabula Eliensis*. The canvas, dated 1596, recalls the quartering of forty knights on the monastery of Ely by William the Conqueror. At the center of the picture is a painting of the abbey, flanked by a text recounting the events commemorated. Below are the heads of the Norman knights and their arms along with the heads of the English monarchs from William Rufus to Elizabeth. Beneath that are the arms of the Catholic gentry imprisoned for recusancy in the 1590s at Ely, Broughton Castle, or Banbury, grouped according to their place of imprisonment.40 In the story told in the *Tabula Eliensis*, a garrison of knights was imposed on the monks of Ely by William the Conqueror. As the knights and monks lived and ate together, friendship and respect

grew. After five years the garrison was removed, causing consternation among the monks for the loss of their friends and the protection they provided. The departure of the knights was solemnly celebrated by the monks, who, “returning home, took order that the arms of each soldier should be lively depainted upon the wall of the common hall, where they took their repast together, to the perpetual memory of the customed kindness of their soldierlike guests.” The original *Tabula Eliensis*, apparently painted on the wall of the monastic refectory at Ely in the early fourteenth century, was destroyed at the Reformation. The Tudor version, on which the Coughton canvas was based, may have been made at the instigation of Robert Steward, the last prior. It shows forty pairs of monks and knights flanking forty coats of arms (figure 3).41

Given the enthusiasm among the Tudor gentry for tracing their lineage back to the Conquest, the accuracy of the coats of arms in the copy must be open to doubt, particularly in view of the possible involvement of Robert Steward, with his record of altering and forging documents to support his own royal descent. The Coughton version of the *Tabula Eliensis* is associated with Thomas Throckmorton, an obstinate recusant who was the owner of Coughton in 1596, although it may have been commissioned by another member of the recusant community. The story of unwanted guests who come to be appreciated and understood by their reluctant hosts had an obvious

appeal to the embattled Catholic minority, who often found themselves in the custody of Protestant bishops and gentlemen. The Coughton canvas was a reminder of the sufferings of the imprisoned recusants that simultaneously symbolized the hope of the eventual triumph of Catholicism. It also firmly associated their community with the Norman conquerors, in a parallel to the county-history staple of a list of families that came in with the Conquest. Since William's knights were the loyal servants of the king, the canvas also had a message of loyalty, reinforced by the images of the monarchs it incorporated. The canvas was thus both a martyrology and an assertion of the recusant gentry’s hereditary membership of the honor community. The canvas survived by chance, a fragile testimony to the use of history to negotiate a problematic present by a particular gentry community.

A full appreciation of the Elizabethan and early Stuart use of the past requires an understanding of the audience for these works as well as their commissioners. Consequently, we must consider the intended recipients of the messages of artifacts such as the gentry’s funeral monuments and narrative representations. The simple answer is that the messages were intended for other members of the contemporary gentry, who would have had the necessary understanding of and engagement with the past to interpret them correctly. The funeral monuments would have carried a wider message concerning an individual’s standing and a family’s lineage to a church’s regular congregation, but the interpretation of coats of arms and Latin epitaphs was the province of the gentry. The vast majority of the gentry would themselves have been unable to interpret heraldic displays accurately, but they would have recognized the coats of leading noble houses and local families. Since heiresses all carried their arms into their husbands’ families, the quartered arms of the local gentry frequently shared the same medieval coats, fostering a sense of common ancestry. The location of these artifacts also emphasizes that their messages were predominantly intended for the gentry. Many monuments were within the sanctuary or family chapels, where the details of their composition were obscured from the view of most parishioners. Narrative art clearly had a public function, but the finest examples, as with the grandest heraldic overmantels within private houses, would have been reserved for the state and private rooms penetrated by the gentry only, rather than the more egalitarian great hall. The Unton memorial picture was probably designed for Lady Unton’s chamber, which Dudley Carleton described as a house of sorrow. There it would have been seen by her family and close acquaintances. The Coughton painting would have been restricted to those who were sympathetic to the old religion. When families allowed their narrative paintings to be published as engravings, they appeared in books directed at the gentry, and their message was reinforced by the inclusion of a dedication.

42. Broadway, _Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History_, 130–32, 164–56.

43. William Salmon, in _Polygraphice_ (London, 1685), directs that “histories” should be hung in the Great Chamber and Gallery.
More importantly, perhaps, the messages conveyed by the media discussed in this article were meant to be read by posterity. When the Dixons erected William Blower's monument at Little Rollright, his neighbors knew he was a newcomer to the county. The contemporary success of such messages relied on a degree of collusion between a family's neighbors and the wider gentry community in allowing that their status was compatible with the claim being made. Seventeenth-century county histories demonstrate that such collusion was not always forthcoming, and the attempt to use the past to bolster a claim to current status might be rejected. Later generations, however, would be more likely to take the monument's message at face value. The meanings conveyed by these artifacts were not intended to be deconstructed, as I have done here. Their symbolism, already archaic when they were created, was intended to convey a broad sense of continuity with the past. In this they were largely successful.

The majority of examples considered in this essay involve engagements with the medieval past that relied on misrepresentation. This should not be taken to mean that it was only the newly risen gentry or those wishing to perpetuate a myth who consciously used and, in some cases, misused history. Those engagements that involve a spurious claim to lineage are generally the most straightforward to identify and to deconstruct. A gentry family who lived in the same parish as their medieval forebears and had a church full of genuine monuments to their ancestors might repaint, recarve,

44. For an exposition of the relationship between a monument and posterity, see Sherlock, Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England, chap. 8.
or move those monuments to make subtle adjustments to the messages they conveyed. They might design or place their own monuments in conscious relationship to those of their ancestors. Other families, inheriting a church full of another family’s monuments, might adopt them as their own by amendments to the heraldry or epitaphs. These actions are equally engagements with the medieval past for a present purpose, but they are more difficult to detect—and when they are detected, it is not always clear who instigated them. It is easier to detect a new family actively forging a claim to lineage than to decide on the motives of a long-established one, whether they were adopting archaic forms out of a wish to convey a message relating to their history or doing so from ingrained habit or laziness. The chance survival of the Coughton version of the *Tabula Eliensis* shows how an embattled recusant community drew imaginatively on the history of medieval England. My research into the sources and sponsorship of engravings in county histories suggests that the importance of using the past to establish and maintain a family’s social status was felt quite widely within gentry society. For example, only a handful of families lacked a representative willing to pay William Dugdale to include engravings of their ancestral monuments in *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*. The evidence is elusive and can be difficult to interpret, but it is clear that a significant proportion of the Elizabethan and early Stuart gentry believed that a self-conscious engagement with the real and imagined medieval pasts of their families and their communities had a present purpose.

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46. The Wellesbourne family of Hughenden, Buckinghamshire, are notorious for having forged their medieval monuments, but many English parishes contain examples of more subtle manipulations of a family’s past; see Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, 34.

47. There were three monuments included where engravings were not paid for and four were omitted for want of sponsorship. Dugdale detailed these in his preface, naming and shaming the leading representatives of the families concerned; Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, sig. b3.