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The Mantled Hour-Glass Escutcheon: A Snapshot of Court Fashion c.1480–1510?

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As Woodcock and Robinson explain in their *Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (1988), ‘the shape of shield [used in heraldry] is a question of artistic licence, and various forms have been favoured in different countries and different centuries’.¹ A particularly notable shape—the barbed ‘hour-glass’ shield—came to prominence in Tudor England; an interesting example is used for the royal achievement of Henry VII displayed on an early sixteenth-century earthenware cistern now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (**Fig.1**).² This barbed hour-glass shield was incorporated also into the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York tomb chest and associated high altar, both by Pietro Torrigiano (1472–1528) and installed in the Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey.³ The barbed hour-glass escutcheon can, however, be traced back much further, for it is found integrated within the complex heraldic decorative scheme applied to the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed (**Fig.2**) re-discovered around a decade ago and currently in The Langley Collection, Hexham. This bed is mentioned as having been made for the couple’s wedding in January 1486; ‘a marriage bed and other suitable decorations [...were] prepared’ for the event,⁴ and it is also recorded in the wardrobe account by Alfred Cornburgh, along with ‘i chair of state’, as ‘i great bed’.⁵ Discussed at length in my essay in the 2021 issue of *The Coat of Arms*, the most heraldically significant parts of the bed were removed, apparently in the eighteenth century, and incorporated by George Shaw (1810–76), an antiquary, architect, furniture designer, and forger from rural Uppermill in Saddleworth, on the border of Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, into his own house (**Fig.3**) and also a sideboard that he supplied to Chetham’s Library, Manchester, in 1847/8.⁶

Integrated within the marriage bed’s headboard are four shields: those on the flanking panels of the triptych are charged with France (modern) and England and they are of the bed’s typical barbed hour-glass shape (**Fig.4**); those applied to the headboard posts’ knops are more unusual (**Fig.5**). Instead of matching the remainder of the bed’s shields finished with barbs, these escutcheons on the knops are augmented with organic mantling that act like fringes to the chief and base. This, of course, predates the sixteenth-century strapwork settings for shields, seen, for example, on the Edward VI overmantel at Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire, and on the title page to the *Whitchurch Book of Common Prayer* (1549), or the exuberance of eighteenth-century heraldry where escutcheons could be surrounded by Rococo scrollwork.⁷

¹ Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 50.

² London, Victoria and Albert Museum, C.85-1933.

³ Phillip Lindley, “‘The Singuler Mediations and Praiers of al the Holie Companie of Heaven’: Sculptural Functions and Forms in Henry VII’s Chapel,” in *Westminster Abbey: The Lady Chapel of Henry VII*, ed. T. W. T. Tatton-Brown and Richard Mortimer (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), pp. 259–93.

⁴ Bernard André, *The Life of Henry VII*, trans. by Daniel Hobbins, (New York: Italica Press, 2011), p. 34.

⁵ William Campbell (ed.), *Materials for a History of the Reign of Henry VII: From Original Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, vol. 2, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, vol. 60 (London: Longman & Co., 1877), p. 174.

⁶ Jonathan Foyle and Peter N. Lindfield, “A Forger’s Folly?: George Shaw’s Productions for Chetham’s Library, Manchester,” *The British Art Journal* XXI, 3 (2020–21), pp. 42–50.

⁷ Charles Hasler, *The Royal Arms: Its Graphic and Decorative Development*, (London: Jupiter Books, 1980), p. 138; see also Michael Snodin and Elspeth Moncrieff, eds, *Rococo: Art and Design in Hogarth’s England* (London: Trefoil Books and the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984), pl. 4.

These mantled hour-glass shields were also included in a matching suite of wainscot posts made from the same oak timber as the bed; charged with a single *fleur-de-lis* or a Gothic letter h—for Henry—these are a subtle and contemporary variation upon the bed’s posts (**Fig.6**).

A series of tester beds imitating the royal example made for Henry VII and Elizabeth of York—save for the redemptive, Christological headboard panel—were produced around 1500 for several families in Lancashire. The Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed and its decorative vocabulary appear to have had visual currency in Tudor England; these ‘copy beds’ reproduce not only its diaper-carved posts that were fashionable at the time, but also the mantled hour-glass shields.⁸ Fragments from one of the beds made for the Stanley family (shields charged with T and S for Thomas Stanley), now in the V&A (**Fig.7**), also incorporates this decorative escutcheon; unlike those on the royal bed and associated wainscot posts where the mantling is finely scalloped, the fragments’ shields are fringed with perfunctory and flat leaves demonstrating a difference in craftsmanship and expense between the royal and provincial workshops.⁹ Another of these copy beds, the ‘Adam Hulton bed’, now converted into a bookcase and gifted to Chetham’s Library in April 1827, also includes these fringed hour-glass shields on the posts (**Fig.8**), and, like those on Stanley fragments, this mantling lacks the sophisticated details found on the royal bed. Another of these copies, ‘the Lovley Hall bed’, included in Meyrick’s and Shaw’s *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836), also includes these distinctive shields, but this time on all four posts.¹⁰

These copy beds record and perhaps preserve a momentary fashion at court that spread elsewhere where mantling was incorporated into hour-glass-shaped escutcheons as fringing. Indeed, the influence of this decorative ‘enhancement’ to the hour-glass shield can be seen outside Lancashire around 1500: a series of painted glass armorials now at the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, also employ this type of mantled escutcheon.¹¹ Thought to date to around 1510,¹² they include the Royal arms of England (**Fig.9**) and came from Fawsley Hall in Northamptonshire. Another example is the gartered escutcheon at the heart of the *Tapestry with Armorial Bearings and Badges of John, Lord Dynham* (c.1488–1501) (**Fig.10**); this is fringed likewise, but with mantling proper, and thus demonstrates how the knops’ fringed escutcheons on the royal marriage bed were derived from the language and formalities of heraldry.

During the nineteenth century, George Shaw also reproduced this shield type when he copied the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed and used it also as the basis for a range of fake ancestral furniture produced for and used to dupe several English aristocrats the 1840s, most noticeably Algernon Percy (1792–1865), fourth Duke of Northumberland (**Fig.11**). This Tudor shield was consequently revived along with its enhanced decoration 350 years after it appears to have emerged on the royal marriage bed. Other, and, perhaps, earlier examples survive: the author would be very pleased to hear about any.

⁸ Coin: London, British Museum, GHB.374; posts: London, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.18-1911, W.40-1914, W.40A-1914.

⁹ London, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.33-1929.

¹⁰ Henry Shaw and Samuel Rush Meyrick, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture Drawn From Existing Authorities*, (London: William Pickering, 1836), ‘bedstead of the time of Henry 8th’.

¹¹ Glasgow, Burrell Collection, 45.249 (Richard Knightley); 25.307 (royal arms of England); 45.308 (Catherine of Aragon); 45.317 (Skinnerton).

¹² They are also thought to date to 1537–42: Richard Marks, Paul Williamson, and Eleanor Townsend, *Gothic: Art for England 1400–1547*, (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2003), pp. 288–89.

Image Captions

Fig.1: *Early Sixteenth-Century Water Cistern*. C.85-1933. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig.2: *Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed*, 1485–86. © Ian Coulson.

Fig.3: *Front Cresting from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed*, 1485–86. © Author.

Fig.4: *Headboard of the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed*, 1485–86. © Ian Coulson.

Fig.5: *Headboard Knops of the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed*, 1485–86. © Ian Coulson.

Fig.6: *Details of the Knops on Associated Wainscot Posts*, 1485–86. Private Collection.

Fig.7: *Bedpost Fragments from a Stanley Bed*, c.1500. W.33-1929. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig.8: *The 'Adam Hulton Bed' and Detail; Now a Bookcase*, c.1500. © Chetham's Library.

Fig.9: *The Royal Arms of England from Fawsley Hall, Northamptonshire*. c.1510. 45.307. Glasgow Life, The Burrell Collection, (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Fig.10: *Tapestry with Armorial Bearings and Badges of John, Lord Dynham*, c.1488–1501. 60.127.1. www.metmuseum.org.

Fig.11: George Shaw, *Detail of the Side of a Buffet Supplied to the Duke of Northumberland*. 1847. © Ian Coulson.