Clever Dogs and Nimble Spaniels: On the Iconography of Logic, Invention, and Imagination

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In the verbal imagery and visual representation of some intellectual and artistic key concepts such as logic, dialectic, invention, and imagination, dogs play an important part. Why? In exploring this question my aim is not a study of the mind and behavior of dogs but a modest contribution to intellectual history. Looking at canine metaphors and analogies used in the past for the art of logic and related concepts may lead to a better understanding of the meanings former generations attached to such concepts. Of the many metaphors used to conceptualize the arts of discourse in the Renaissance, the image of the dog may most aptly convey the properties of those natural human faculties—reason, imagination, and memory—that search out and "retrieve" ideas. Lacking a sophisticated medical or psychological model of human cognition, this age thus attempted to explain the operations of invention through natural rather than supernatural imagery. Dog-like, the mind ranges through its memories and associations to retrieve thought otherwise hidden. The first examples are two key texts from seventeenth-century England.

In March, 1615, when James I and his court visited the University of Cambridge, an academic disputation was held between John Preston of Queen's College and Matthew Wren of Pembroke College about the question of whether dogs could make a syllogism. The subject had been specially chosen to accord with the king's love of hunting. Preston affirmed the thesis; he argued that a hunting dog progresses logically from the propositio maior of several possible escape routes of the hare and the propositio minor, eliminating those that do not give a scent, to the conclusio that the remaining route must be the right one, which it then pursues. Wren, who was, by the way, the future bishop of Norwich and uncle of Sir Christopher Wren, objected that dogs were not logici, only nasuti, endowed with a fine nose. Here the moderator, Dr. Read, wanted to close the canine debate, but the king, a great debater, huntsman, and dog lover, intervened in favour of logical dogs. He gave several pertinent examples.
from his own observation and told the assembled academics that many dogs had more sense than some professors. Wren withdrew with an elegant compliment: as His Majesty’s dogs hunted by royal prerogative and not by common law, they were no doubt able to perform a syllogism. This delightful story has often been told as an example of the custom of academic mock disputations. Richard Corbett, who had come over from Oxford for the event, wrote some humorous lines on it:

Philosophers did well their parts,  
Which prov’d them Maisters of their Arts;  
Their Moderator was no foole,  
Hee far from Cambridge kept a Schoole.  
But to conclude, the King was pleas’d,  
And of the Court the Town was easd. (111)

However, the subject of the debate stands in a long tradition of serious argument and reflects the predominant opinion of classical and medieval authors about the *sagacitas canis*. Edward Topsell, the Jacobean writer on zoology, calls dogs subtle, swift, faithful, and “smelling” and goes on:

Ælianus thinkes that Dogges have reason, & vse logick in their hunting, for they will cast about for the game, as a disputant doth for the truth, as if they should say either the Hare is gone on the left hand, or on the right hand, or straight forward, but not on the left or right hand and therefore straight forward. Whereupon he runneth fourth right after the true and infallible footsteps of the Hare. (141)

In his chapter “De canibus dialectica quodammodo utentibus,” Claudius Ælianus, the Roman compiler of animal lore, reports the same details as Topsell about the *arguta canis*, the clever dog (*De natura animalium* 6. 95). The Middle Ages, following Isidor of Seville, were convinced that dogs were cleverer and possessed better senses than any other animal: “Nihil autem sagacius canibus; plus enim sensus ceteris animalibus habent” (“There is nothing wiser than dogs; they have more senses than any other animal.” [Isidore 12:2.25-26]). Some dogs, it was stated, had even appeared as witnesses in a court of law, and another dog had shrewdly increased the level of wine in a vessel by dropping in stones so that it could drink the wine. Similar stories are told about other clever animals. The most important early authority for these opinions on the abilities of the dog is a passage from St. Basil, the great fourth-century church father, in his *Homilies on Genesis*. He stresses the natural intelligence and intuition of the dog, and the sympathetic treatment of the animal by later ecclesiastical authors