

*The vulgar history of the Order of the Garter**Stephanie Trigg*

The Order of the Garter is one of the most familiar, but one of the most enigmatic, traces of ritual practice to survive from the medieval period. Edward III founded his great order of knighthood in 1348 in the wake of his military success at Crécy, but his reasons for choosing the emblem of the garter and its oblique motto – *Honi soit qui mal y pense* – remain uncertain. Could such a venerable institution truly have taken its origins from a careless moment of sexual innuendo amidst the public exposure of a woman's underclothes? Different accounts of the Order offer competing explanations of its insignia, motto and origins, in a pattern of attraction and resistance to the traditional story, in which Edward III gallantly retrieved a lady's dropped garter and silenced the laughter of his courtiers by promising to found a chivalric and military order that would elevate the little item from a despised object of shame and ridicule into a privileged sign of honour.

The stakes in interpreting this foundational moment have always been very high. The Order of the Garter is one of the pre-eminent sites for distributing and regulating the symbolic and mythic capital, as I call it, of the British monarchy; one of the key instruments by which the monarchy constructs and rebuilds its relationship with medieval tradition. This tradition is a key factor in the ongoing mystique, even the charisma, of the royal family. At the same time, the monarchy insists on its capacity to reform, modify or modernise this heritage, whether for reasons of religious, political or more general cultural reform. The history of the Order is one of periodic negotiations between tradition and modernity, between the inheritance of fourteenth-century ritual practice, and the renewal and reform of that practice.¹ Questions of origins are crucial to these debates.

This essay considers some of the narrative and historiographical dynamics around the various accounts of the Order's origins from the late medieval period into the early eighteenth century. These accounts, whether in narrative histories, heraldic treatises, poems or other works, provide an instructive

example of the way early modern writers produce and shape their ideas of the Middle Ages. All our reconstructions of the past are partial, of course, and invested with a range of ideological, emotional and psychological charges that are played out in a variety of ways in the institutions and structures of our academic work. The essays in this volume are concerned with some of the early historical moments in the formation of those structures. That is, these readings of medieval culture are not historically discrete: they look forwards as well as backwards, exerting a powerful influence on the cultural trajectories of the medieval into modernity and post-modernity. In the case of the Garter, I will suggest that early modern historiographical method sought to expel or repress the more fantastic aspects of medieval court culture, while still being drawn to the narrative impulses of its romance. The resultant opposition, between the romantic or sexualised story of Edward's garter and the more sober military explanation that came to displace it, has had the effect of dividing scholarly and popular opinion about the Order, in a way that continues to blind us to the nature of Edward's evocative speech-act.

There is little doubt, now, about Edward III's foundation of the Order in 1348;² about the institution of St George as the Order's patron saint, and its connection with Windsor Castle. On 23 April 1349, the first formal celebrations of the Feast of St George were held at Windsor, when the Wardrobe accounts record that John of Cologne provided 'six garters and twenty-four robes powdered with garters bearing the motto of the Order, together with matching altar hangings for the Chapel'.³ The Garter device consistently appears in the form of a buckled blue circle, with the motto spelled out in gold letters. The Garter appears, with the earliest English version of the motto, *Hethyng haue the bathell that any harme thynkes*, in the Middle English poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, dated between 1352 and 1370.⁴ However, there is no medieval English explanation of the Order's origins. The earliest text in English that seems to invoke the narrative of a woman's garter is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its suggestive parallel of the garment transferred from a female to a male body, which is then also transformed from a sign of personal shame to one of courtly honour, with the official sanction of heraldic symbolism. Someone, indeed, appended the Garter motto (as '*Hony soit qui mal pense*') to the only surviving manuscript of this poem.⁵

There is no hint, moreover, in the Order's earliest Statutes, dating from the reign of Henry V,⁶ that would resolve the question of why Edward should have taken a garter as its emblem. Significantly, the Statutes are principally concerned with practices and systems, and less with origins.

Most discussion of the Order's origins takes place in heraldic or other histories, in poems or prose fictions, while the mystery around the story seems to license narratives that foreground the opposition between reverence for the 'most noble' Order, and fascination with the possible trivial, 'vulgar' or even 'sordid' nature of its origins. My concern in this essay is less to uncover the historical truth of the Order's foundation than with the exercise of scholarly judgement and narrative compulsion in the early modern accounts of that moment.

Joanot Martorell's epic romance of chivalry, *Tirant lo Blanc*, begun in 1460 and published in Valencia in 1490, offers the earliest recorded version of the Order's origins. Martorell claims the text was translated first from English into Portuguese, and then into the Valencian vernacular, or Catalan, excusing himself for any defects since 'the blame lies with the English language, some words of which are impossible to translate'.⁷ No record survives of this putative English original; it may function here as an untraceable, but authorising fiction. Martorell's romance was not known to most historians of the Order, so it plays little or no part in the dominant trajectory of the story, but as the earliest and most comprehensive narrative, it commands our attention. David Rosenthal's translation of 1984 makes the task much easier.

Martorell's narrative is a deeply embedded one, framed by the distancing fictions of romance, though it is also situated with some precision around the marriage of an English king to a French princess. Martorell did spend some time in England, so if we seek a historical point of reference, we may suppose the king represents Henry VI, and the princess, Margaret of Anjou: they were married in Tours in 1444, and the king held a three-day tournament to celebrate her coronation at Westminster in 1445.⁸ In Martorell's romance, the Breton nobleman Tirant recounts the story of the wedding, and then Diaphebus, another knight, takes over the narration to recite the praise of Tirant, who had been the tournament's champion. He then tells of an order of knighthood the King of England established, 'similar to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table in olden days'.⁹

The wedding festivities lasted a year and a day (a clear enough signal that this world is governed by the conventions of romance, not history), but the king asked everyone to stay on a little longer, as he wanted to announce his founding of a new order. 'This order's inspiration, as I and all these knights heard it from the king's own lips, came from an incident one day when we were dancing and making merry.' This detailed narrative includes most of the central elements in later versions of the story: a dropped garter; an embarrassed woman; a chivalric king; and, most significantly, the ease with

which the king is able to transform a trivial object into a sign of greatness, a sign of shame into a sign of honour.

'Many knights were dancing with ladies, and by chance one damsel named Honeysuckle [Madresilva] drew near the king. As she whirled, her left garter, which was trimmed with silk, fell off. Those nearest His Majesty beheld it on the floor, and do not imagine, my lord, that she was fairer or more genteel than others. She has a rather flirtatious way of dancing and talking, though she sings reasonably well, yet one might have found three hundred comelier and more gracious damsels present. All the same, there is no accounting for men's tastes and whims. One of the knights near the king said: "Honeysuckle, you have lost your leg armor. You must have a bad page who failed to fasten it well."

'She blushed slightly and stooped to pick it up, but another knight rushed over and grabbed it. The king then summoned the knight and said: "Fasten it to my left stocking below the knee."

The king wore this garter on his leg for four months, until finally one of his favourite servants tells him how concerned everyone is.

'The king replied: "So the queen is disgruntled and my guests are displeased!", and he said in French, "*Puni soit qui mal y pense*. Now I swear before God that I shall found a new knightly order upon this incident: a fraternity that shall be remembered as long as the world endures."

'He had the garter removed and would wear it no longer, though he still pined for it in secret.'¹⁰

Diaphebus then recounts how the king dedicated a chapel at Windsor to St George, and established an order of twenty-four knights, describing their robes, capes, hoods and garters, and mentioning the rule that they must always wear their garter below the left knee. He recounts the oaths they swear, their ceremonial processions, the rituals for the Installation and Degradation of a knight (which involve dressing a scarecrow in his armour). He also cites the vows sworn by ladies of the Order (that they will never urge their male relatives to return from war; they will do all they can to aid any such relative starving under siege; and that if they are taken prisoner, they will spend up to half their dowry to ransom them). Finally, he comments that the ladies must always wear their garters on their left sleeves.¹¹

This account is much fuller than the better-known version recorded by Polydore Vergil in the early sixteenth century. Its historical context bears little relationship to the court of Edward III, while its list of knights in the Order, including the fictional Tirant, matches neither the original company nor the Order under Henry VI. The King's motto is also different, as he invokes punishment, not shame (*Puni*, not *boni*) on any who might think ill of his Order. Most accounts do not foreground the queen's anger or

displeasure, as this one does; and it is also alone in making overt the nature of the garter as fetish, as the king pines for it in secret long after he has had it removed from his clothing. Martorell is also unique in naming the lady as Madresilva. In other versions, the lady is not named, or is vastly elevated in status, as Queen Philippa, or the French queen, or more frequently, the Countess of Salisbury, with whom Edward is or is not in love, and whom he did or did not rape.¹²

If there is any kind of kernel of truth in this story, that truth is probably rather a symbolic than a historical truth; that is, the story embodies a first-order truth about the king's power to make symbolic meaning, elevating what is ostensibly humble, even trivial, into what is most worthy; and a secondary truth about that power being beyond the comprehension of many of his courtiers.

This is certainly Susan Crane's view, though she also emphasises the risks the king takes in 'cross-dressing', in transferring the female garment to his own leg.¹³ Crane also cites C. Stephen Jaeger who emphasises the king's power to translate signs and symbols from one sphere to another, from what is 'vulgar, obscene and illicit' into what is 'noble, and worthy of veneration'. Jaeger writes of the 'enchantment', the magic circle that surrounds the body of the king and gives additional force to these 'social acts' that reinforce inherent values.¹⁴

The very richness of the story, and the risks it dramatises for the honour of the court, invites its perpetual re-telling, though the textual tradition of the narrative remains obscure: there is no direct or obvious line of transmission from Martorell's romance to later accounts. His version is unique, too, in being a 'straight' telling of the story, without any anxiety about its veracity as a historical record, or its worthiness as a foundational narrative. Far more common are historical or antiquarian accounts that make apology for the story, dispute its veracity or even discredit its plausibility as an unworthy origin for so great a chivalric order. Whatever their final conclusion, these accounts rehearse the scepticism that characterises much humanist response to medieval or ancient legends, while at the same time gladly succumbing to the narrative pleasures of the story.

For many centuries, the earliest known account was that of Polydore Vergil, who positively relishes the doubt about the story, in his *Historia Anglica*, written around 1512.¹⁵

But the reason for founding the order is utterly uncertain; popular tradition nowadays declares that Edward at some time picked up from the ground a garter from the stocking of his queen or mistress, which had become unloosed by some chance,

and had fallen. As some of the knights began to laugh and jeer on seeing this, he is reputed to have said that in a very little while the same garter would be held by them in the highest honour. And not long after, he is said to have founded this order and given it the title by which he showed those knights who had laughed at him how to judge his actions. Such is popular tradition [*fama vulgi*]. English writers have been modestly superstitious, perhaps fearing to commit *lèse-majesté*, if they made known such unworthy things; and they have preferred to remain silent about them, whereas matters should really be seen otherwise: something that rises from a petty or sordid origin increases all the more in dignity.¹⁶

Vergil implies that the tactful silence of the English commentators on the matter is further proof of the story's veracity, or plausibility, but his central point is the metamorphosis of this very humble object into a sign of honour and dignity. In other writings, Vergil had been dismissive of many of the traditional and popular British myths of Trojan settlement and the Arthurian legends.¹⁷ Set against his reputation for scepticism, even irreverence, his apparent support for the popular tradition of the garter narrative sparked equal measures of fascination and resistance: for every writer who accepted the story and revelled in its narrative possibilities, there was another who took a scholarly delight in its vigorous rebuttal.

Perhaps in response to Vergil's story, the *Liber Niger*, or Register of the Order, prepared under Henry VIII, offers an alternative account of its origins. Like many heraldic histories, it constructs a chivalric and military lineage that stretches from the knights of Troy to the warriors of the Old Testament and to Christianity. This tradition passes to Arthur, and then for the first time Richard I at the siege of Acre appears in the context of a Garter history. The siege is proceeding slowly, and to encourage his troops, Richard takes a leather strap, and promises to found an elite order of knights for those who fight most valiantly, promising to reward them with a strap – or garter – of more luxurious form. The *Liber Niger* says Edward III was merely reviving this older order, and emphasises its importance as cementing the affinity and loyalty amongst the Companions.

Not all those who reject Vergil's narrative about the countess accept this retrospective origin for the Order, though its saving emphasis on the Garter's capacity to symbolise loyalty and chivalric brotherhood became an important theme in later commentaries. Vergil's account continued to intrigue, remaining the standard point of reference, either explicitly, in the historiographical discourse of later writers, or implicitly, in the many poetic and fictional accounts of the story.

Elizabethan writers in particular are happy to accept Vergil's account, even if they present variations in the story, or alter his emphases. So

Holinshed reasons, in 1577. He accepts the tale's popular origin ('there goeth a tale amongst the people'), and moves quickly, echoing Vergil's citation of Ovid, to counter any suggestion that this might denigrate the Order:

Though some may thinke, that so noble an order had but a meane beginning, if this tale be true, yet manie honorable degrees of estates have had their beginnings of more base and meane things, than of love, which being orderlie used, is most noble and commendable, sith nobilitie it selfe is covered under love, as the poet Ovid aptlie saith,

Nobilitas sub amore iacet.¹⁸

Similarly, George Peele's romantic vision poem, *The Honour of the Garter*, from 1593, narrates the story of the queen's garter and concludes 'This beginning had / This honourable order of our time.'¹⁹

The story's origins in popular tradition (*fama vulgi*) and its associations with romance would count against it, however, amongst those writing from an antiquarian or heraldic context, where there is a discernible transference of 'vulgarity' between the story's mode of transmission, in popular tradition, and the sexualised, or 'sordid', content (Vergil's term) of the story. William Segar can find no alternative account in his *Booke of Honour and Armes* (1590) but gives a brief version of the story: 'thus haue I heard it vulgarlie reported'.²⁰ Twelve years later, in his *Honor Military and Ciuill*, he expands his discussion, mentioning both the Countess of Salisbury ('of whom the King was then enamored'), and the queen's displeasure. In this more expansive mode, Segar also dutifully reports an alternative explanation: 'Some rather thinke it was made to remunerate those Noble men and Knights, that had best endeouored and deserued in his most Royall and Martiall affaires of France, Scotland and Spaine, with all which Nations he then had warre and triumphed.'²¹ Segar does not choose between these accounts, but as the traditional story expands in its scandalous detail, the more it seems to require the counterweight of scholarly discourse and an alternative account, no matter how unpersuasive.

The most severe account of the matter comes from Peter Heylyn in his *Cosmographie*, first published in 1652. Heylyn dismisses Vergil's account as mere 'popular tradition', in emphatic terms which would be echoed by many later writers:

Of S. George, called commonly the Garter, instituted by King Edward the Third, to increase vertue and valour in the heart of his Nobility; or, as some will, in honour of the Countess of Salisburies Garter, of which Lady, the King formerly had been enamoured. But this I take to be a vain and idle Romance, derogatory both to the Founder, and the order; first published by Polydore Virgil, a stranger to the affairs

of England, & by him taken upon no better ground than *fama vulgi*, the tradition of the common people; too trifling a Foundation for so great a building; Common bruit, being so infamous an Historian, that wise men neither report after it, or give credit to any thing they receive from it. But for this fame or common bruit, the vanity and improbabilities thereof have been elsewhere canvassed.²²

Heylyn offers an influential revisionary reading of the Order as an emphatically masculine and chivalric brotherhood, requiring a serious, fully considered and dignified foundation.

In 1670, Elias Ashmole, writing as the 'Windesor Herald at Armes', summarises Heylyn's view with approval, consolidating the pattern of dismissing the story as 'the vulgar and more general' view, and echoing Heylyn: 'And yet hath it so fallen out, that many learned men, for want of reflection, have incautiously [*sic*] swallowed and run away with this vulgar error; whereupon it hath come by degrees to the vogue it is in now.'²³ Ashmole dutifully reports a number of variants on the story: that the king picked up the queen's garter as he followed her to her room; or that the motto was the queen's own response to the king, when he asked her, what men would say about her losing her garter in such a manner.

In Heylyn and Ashmole we witness a dramatic shift in historiographical method. Both make a virtue of comparing and weighing sources for their accuracy and plausibility, and Ashmole in particular delights in adopting a second-order analytical position:

But both these Relations are remote from truth, and of little credit; nevertheless, they give us opportunity to note here, that it hath thus fared with other Orders of Sovereign Foundation; and an Amorous instead of Honorable Account of their Institution, hath by some been untruly rendred.²⁴

Ashmole is emphatic in his dismissal, however, of the 'groundless imagination' that could suppose King Edward might have 'founded this most famous Order . . . to give reputation to, or perpetuate an effeminate occasion'.²⁵

By 1724, John Anstis, Garter King of Arms, could confidently describe this and other similar stories as 'absurd' and 'ridiculous', as 'romantick Fancies'.²⁶ This strategy of associating these stories with a world of fantasy, romance and femininity remains a powerful technique for the Garter's modern historians, for whom this austere view continues to dominate. Accordingly, the Order's recent official historians, Peter Begent and Hubert Chesshyre, quote Anstis with approval, saying it is better such stories be 'left in the dark'.²⁷ They also comment, 'it is most unlikely that Edward, concerned with his public image, would have adopted an item of a lady's

underclothing as a device to be displayed firstly upon a major military expedition and later as a symbol of heroic chivalry'.²⁸ Hugh Collins, too, in the most recent study of the Garter's early history, is relieved to be able to dismiss this account in terms perfectly reminiscent of Heylyn and Ashmole. 'Although popular in the fifteenth century, this elaborate version of events lacks credibility. It is hardly likely that Edward III, given the serious intent underlying his conception, would have risked trivializing it by selecting such an inappropriate badge.'²⁹ This is virtually an unbroken trajectory from the early antiquarian, heraldic and historical discourse into the late twentieth century, with a similar pattern of citing the feminised story only to displace it with the voice of masculine common sense and reason.

Nothing short of relief is palpable in such commentators, when they can discover alternative accounts of the Order's foundation, of the motto, and even of the way medieval women held up their stockings. Mercifully, it turns out that the Garter is 'really' a piece of military equipment, 'a small strap, possibly used to attach pieces of armour', or a version of the knight's belt, not a piece of underwear at all, neither men's nor women's.³⁰ Once the Garter is explained, though, these apologists must still account for the 'shame' and the 'evil' invoked in the motto,³¹ and so this is said to be a defiant reference to Edward's claim to the French crown, one of the central contentions of the Hundred Years War. The quartering of the French with the English coat of arms on the royal coat of arms dates from this period, while the Garter's colour, blue, signifies the French coat of arms: blue with the gold *steurs-de-lys*.³² The imperialist drive to conquer France is seen as the less shameful act, while this alternative derivation, from a tiny and unspecific 'strap', is not seen as shameful at all, especially if it can displace the woman's garter from the centre of the narrative.³³ Curiously, however, Martorell invokes the link between the two forms of the garter; we recall that the courtier who first mocks Madresilva makes this connection between the woman's garter and the piece of armour: 'Honeysuckle, you have lost your leg armor. You must have a bad page who failed to fasten it well.'

In addition to this trajectory from the early modern antiquarians to contemporary historians, however, there is also a counterpoint sequence of alternative narratives that are compelled to dramatise the central scene. These versions have received little or no discussion in the history of the Order, since they are imagined variations on a theme, rather than offering any certainty as verifiable records of fourteenth-century events. I suggest, however, that in their fascination with the motto, and with visualising or dramatising the scene of the woman's garter, they represent a fuller,

even a truer response to the king's enigmatic pronouncement. In these more detailed versions, the motto becomes a kind of textual machine for generating both narrative and interpretation, playing a role closer to its original intent. That is, the motto may have been coined and adopted precisely because it is so elliptic, capable of generating such a wide range of interpretations. Those historians who compare the Garter motto with other mottos favoured by Edward – 'It is as it is' or 'Hay, hay, the White Swan, By God's soul I am thy man' – certainly recognise the elliptic nature of courtly play.³⁴

Polydore Vergil's *Historia Anglica* was willing to accept that popular tradition might have a purchase on some kind of truth. His anonymous, rather expansive sixteenth-century English translator similarly defends the story of the woman's garter, while also attributing it to 'the ruder sorte'. He continues with a remarkable account of the king's courtiers making sport with the retrieved garter:

that the Kinge on a time tooke upp from the grounde the gartere of the queene or som paramoure which she beefore hadd loste, and that divers of his Lordes standinge bie did pulle it in sonder in ieste or sport for the peaces therof as ~~it has been a~~ [cancelled] men are wonte sometime for a jeuill of small importance in somutche that the Kinge sayde unto them. Sirs the time shall shortlie comme when you shall attribute muche honor unto suche a Garteir, whearuppon he didd institute this order and so intituled it. That his Nobles might understand that they hadd caste them selves in their owne Judgement.³⁵

This narrative addition conjures up an extraordinary image of courtly play, with the bored knights tossing the garter to and fro, pulling it apart for sport, perhaps to tease the woman who had lost it. This translator is more interested in these lordly games with expensive trifles (the oxymoronic 'jeuill of small importance') than the identity of the woman; and deeply concerned with what their levity reveals about their ungallant attitude. Expounding on the nature of the shame that the king invokes, he emphasises the ethical nature of the king's lesson to his court.

A rather different version is offered by André Favyn, in 1620, a version that is similarly startling in its concrete detail, and its willingness to expose, as it were, the secret source of shame. Where many accounts show the king tying the garter around his own leg – as a trophy, a fetish or a playful symbol of cross-dressing – Favyn has the besotted king attempting to replace the garter, as high as possible, around the countess's leg.³⁶ The English translation of 1623 (under the name 'Andrew Favyn') expands the narrative even further, with a shocking glimpse of white underwear:

Forasmuch as King Edward being wounded with love of faire Alix, the Countesse of Salisbury, one day as hee was devising with her, the left Garter (of Blew Silke) of this Lady, hung loosely down upon her shooe. King Edward, ready at the Ladies Service, and to take up the Garter; by little and little lifted her cloathes so high, that the Courtiers had some sight of her white Smock, & could not refrain from smiling. The Lady reprehended the King for this publick fault before his own people (who carried good lookes, but bad thoughts, and pleased their owne opinion so much, that they made an Idoll of their vaine conceits:) King Edward therefore, to cover his owne honour, stopt all their mouthes with these few French words; Honny Soit Qui Mal y Pense.³⁷

This re-telling foregrounds the secret of women's privity that underlines all versions of this story, but which is rarely exposed as dramatically as it is here. Favyn precedes the story with an account of the king's infatuation with the countess, who comes bidden to the festivities, the tournament, and the feasts, dressed as simply as possible (*le plus simplement atournée qu'elle peust*).

In contrast to Favyn's novelised account, other writers are concerned with the question of motive. Richard Johnson, for example, attributes the motto to the Queen of France, in his 'Gallant Song of the Garter of England', from 1620. When her garter falls during a feast, the snickering courtiers seem to accuse her of dropping it deliberately to attract the king's attention, so it is she who coins the motto in their reproof:

But when she heard these ill conceits
And speeches that they made,
Honny soyt qui mal y pens,
the noble Princes said.
Ill hap to them that evill thinke,
In English it is thus
Which words so wise (quoth Englands King)
shall surely goe with us . . .³⁸

Even when commentators dismiss any association with women, the invocation to shame still proves problematic, and capable of generating alternative explanations. In his history of St George, for example, from 1633, Peter Heylyn prefers to think of the motto and the garter symbolising the knights' loyalty to their king, and to each other, citing the Register of the Order:

that as by their order, they were ioyned together as in a fast tye of amitie and concord: so by their Garter, as a bond of love and unitie, they might bee kept in minde to effect each other. *Sic huic ordini cum nominibus, vestes et ornamenta coaptavit, ut omnia hec ad amicitiam, concordiam, et reliquam virtutem tendere, nemo non intelligat.* Which combination of mindes, and association of affections,

lest possibly it might be thought to have some other end in it, then what was just and honourable, *ad adversandum in omni re non male facta malam interpretationem*, as the booke hath it: hee caused that French Motto or Impresse to be wrought in with it, which is still observed: that *viz* of *Honisoit, qui mal y pense*, Shame bee to him that evill thinketh.³⁹

In raising the possibility of an unjust, or dishonourable reading of the 'combination of minds, and conjoyning affections', Heylyn seems to countenance a homosexual or homosocial connotation. It is an intriguing instance of the motto's extraordinary capacity to generate interpretation: in defying shame, the motto invokes shame, generating a whole series of shameful possibilities.

This play of heterosexuality and homosociality is seen most dramatically in William Fennor's poem, recited before James I in 1616.⁴⁰ Fennor's narrative emphasises the king's chivalry to the countess, then Edward's capacity to turn from courtly dalliance to military endeavour in France, to the greater glory of the Order:

Saint Patrick's Crosse did to the Garter vayne,
 Saint Jaques' Order was with anger pale;
 Saint David's leeke began to droupe i'th'tale,
 Saint Dennys he sate mourning in a dale;
 Saint Andrew lookt with cheereful appetite,
 As though to th'Garter he had future right.

Fennor then tracks a chivalric analogy between the heterosexual transfer of woman's garment to male body, and the presentation of a similar token from king to his knights.

Say that a man long languishing in love,
 Whose heart with hope and feare grows cold and warme;
 Admit some pittie should his sweethearte move,
 To knit a favour on his feeble arme;
 All parts would joyne to make that one joint strong,
 To oppose any that his love should wrong.
 The Garter is the favour of a King,
 Claspng the leg on which man's best part stands;
 A poesye in't, as in a nuptiall ring,
 Binding the heart to their liege Lord in bands;
 That whilst the leg hath strength, or the arme power,
 To kill that serpent would their King devoure.

Fennor's analogy is only partly successful, of course, in defending the chivalric masculinity of the Order: the garter, 'claspng' the knight's leg 'as a

'nuptiall ring', seems inevitably to invoke the erotic imagery of marriage and sexuality.

Other writers are less defensive about the Order's origins. John Selden, in his *Titles of Honour*, from 1631, attempts to weigh the evidence, but does not mind admitting defeat in the face of contradictory evidence: 'In this uncertainty of the Occasion, our common stories give us but little light. Nor know I whence wholly to cleere it.'⁴¹ In reporting the story of the countess's garter, Selden compares the Order's motto to the words of Philip upon sight of the Regiment of Lovers slain at the battle of Charonea, as reported in Plutarch's *Pelopida*: 'Ill betide them that thinke any ill of these men.' This is clearly a story of homosexual love and affection, as these were soldiers who fought all the more valiantly to impress the ones they loved in the same division of the army. Selden's final solution to the dilemma is to propose instead that the Order arose at the same time as Edward III's institution of the Round Table at Windsor, suggesting that the story of the garter might have arisen at a later date after some event at the festivities. Significantly, for my purposes, his easy invocation of homosocial love as an analogy for heterosexual desire and courtly play (both defying condemnation) indicates how closely these two are linked, despite the attempts of so many historians to establish an exclusive opposition between them.

For most of the Garter's commentators, then, the problem of origins takes a doubled form. The first problem is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the motto; and the second is the triviality of the Garter as emblem, whatever its original form. If the motto raises the spectre of shame, then sexuality of one form or another is the most persistent scenario to be overcome, but even the other explanations (brotherly companionship; a king's claim to a foreign throne) all seem to invoke more shame. However, the most shameful, the most problematic scenario of all seems to be that Edward could indeed have established such a great Order out of such a small item. Not all the earnest arguments of Vergil and others can write away the oddness of this feature of the Order. And that, after all, is the point. Not being kings, we cannot conceive a sign of such mobility. We are indeed *boni*, shamed, or condemned out of own mouths, as soon as we start to rationalise the king's choice of emblem and motto.

In the face of the Order's success, the only position left to us, as historians and commentators, is to marvel and to wonder, since it makes little difference what we think Edward had in mind. In 1631, Charles Allen throws the whole question open into an issue of careless choice. He gives a brief account of the story about the countess, then summarises the rival account:

Some the beginning from first Richard bring,
 (Counting too meanelie of this pedegree)
 When he at Acon tyde a leather string
 About his Soldiars legges, whose memorie
 Might stir their vallour up, yet choose you whether
 You'll Edwards silke prefer, or Richards leather.⁴²

In offering us a choice of explanations, displaced on to a consumer choice of luxury fabric or utilitarian skin, Allen indicates the insignificance of that choice, and the glamour of the former.

Of all writers, Michael Drayton is the most insouciant about the uncertainty. In the 'Illustrations' to the fifteenth book of his *Poly-Olbion*, published in 1613, which describes the area around Windsor, he comments on the Order:

Whether the cause were upon the word of Garter given in the French wars among the English, or upon the Queens, or Countes of Salisburies Garter fallen from her leg, or upon different & more ancient Original whatsoever, know cleerly (without unlimited affectation of your Countries glorie) that it exceeds in Majestie, honour, and fame, all Chivalrous Orders in the world . . .⁴³

Like George Puttenham and Peele, Drayton is writing under the signs of poetry and rhetoric, whereby it seems natural to extol the power of the spoken or written word in the form of the motto to make meaning, and to exercise its capacity to transform the trivial into the magnificent. Any scepticism about the historical origins of the Garter takes second place to these more rhetorical concerns, and the transfer of royal authority from Edward III to James I.

In the move away from antiquarian, chronicle or romance narratives in the seventeenth century, we can identify the emergence of a self-consciously modern scholarly method, taking active pleasure in sifting and sorting various medieval accounts. It is a historiographical method far removed from Polydore Vergil's, replete with marginal annotations, full of respect for historical (that is, written) authority, medieval and classical analogue, and deeply self-conscious about scholarly decorum. At the same time, the narrative impulses of poetry and fiction generate a different kind of pleasure in spinning out more and more complex stories from the merest hint of the shame invoked in Edward's motto.⁴⁴ In retrospect, it is easy to see that its very ambiguity, itself a common feature of many mottos, may have been a large part of its appeal for the king. His social power is affirmed once he coins the phrase that leaves us guessing.

The motto thus encapsulates the mixed inheritance of the medieval past for early modernity. Its historians are drawn to the idea of continuity with a national tradition, but they are determined to enact their own critical judgements on that past and its mythologies, attempting to sift truth from rumour, or *fama vulgi*. In doing so they are both producing the medieval period as a historical object worthy of study and dispute, and affirming their own role as modern historians or antiquarians, distinguishing themselves from the poets who are less anxious about the romantic narrative. But there is no reason why they should thereby deny themselves the narrative pleasure of repeating the story about the countess and her garter. Indeed, there is every reason, with Vergil, Heylyn and Ashmole, to articulate a hierarchy of knowledge. There is popular tradition, and there is the academic discussion of popular tradition, just as there is also a hierarchy of sexual and social desire.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, these debates were also played out in the context of an additional dispute about the Garter which deserves brief mention here. William Fenner's poem of 1616 closes with a defence of 'the George', the image of a mounted knight worn on the golden chain of the Order since the reign of Henry VII: 'God keepe our King and them from Rome's black pen', he writes, 'Let all that love the Garter say, Amen!' He was presumably referring to the controversy surrounding the abolition of St George as the Order's patron saint. St George's Day was abolished by Parliament in 1552; and Edward VI had established a commission to reform the Order's Statutes in 1549.⁴⁵ Edward himself re-drafted the 'somewhat mangled text' of the statutes to remove all references to St George, and to restore them to their original purity, only to have his reforms thrown out when Mary became queen six months later.⁴⁶ In the 1540s, too, the wearing of the George had been taken up as an example in the Reformation debate about images and idols.

In these discussions of the Order's rituals and formalities, the affiliations of the Order with St George play a part analogous to that of the motto and the emblem: all three features signify a medieval past that bespeaks ancient tradition but that also necessitates reform and explanation. The disputes about the meaning of motto and emblem are powerful examples of the potential of medieval tradition itself to confer both shame and honour, both in the regulation and reform of ritual practice, and in the exercise of historical scepticism and explanation.



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