

Medievalism, the Queen and the Dandy

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"It was only in those too rarely required robes that he had the sense of being fully dressed."

Zuleika Dobson

In 1938, Virginia Woolf heaped a pile of perfectly modulated ironic marvel on the "clothes worn by the educated man in his public capacity":

Now you dress in violet; a jewelled crucifix swings on your breast; now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine; now slung with many linked chains set with precious stones. Now you wear wigs on your heads; rows of graduated curls descend to your necks. Now your hats are boat-shaped, or cocked; now they mount in cones of black fur; now they are made of brass and scuttle shaped; now plumes of red, now of blue hair surmount them. Sometimes gowns cover your legs; sometimes gaiters. Tabards embroidered with lions and unicorns swing from your shoulders; metal objects cut in star shapes or in circles glitter and twinkle upon your breasts. Ribbons of all colours - blue, purple, crimson - cross from shoulder to shoulder. After the comparative simplicity of your dress at home, the splendour of your public attire is dazzling.¹

Woolf points out that while the fanciful dress of women is an easy satirical target, men in public office regularly indulge in similar, or greater excesses. The essay is illustrated at this point with photographs of judges in wigs, academics in procession, and highly decorated members of the military and the church. Woolf goes on, mockingly defamiliarising the ceremonies and ritual practices associated with the institutions of public office:

Here you kneel; here you bow; here you advance in procession behind a man carrying a silver poker; here you mount a carved chair; here you appear to do homage to a piece of painted wood; here you abase yourselves before tables covered with richly worked tapestry. And whatever these ceremonies may mean you perform them always together, always in step, always in the uniform proper to the man and the occasion.²

It is always easy and pleasant to mock the pretensions of public office, the archaic rituals and excesses of its costumes, and its performances of embodied public display. Woolf's scorn was directed along gendered lines, but is still part of a long tradition of ridicule directed against the formalities and apparent pretensions of office.

The rituals associated with the English monarchy are some of the easiest targets of all, and have been so for many centuries. Critiques of courtly display, especially the excess and conspicuous consumption of the tournament, are a regular feature of medieval political and religious writing, although it is a characteristic trope of modernist writers to think of themselves as the first to see clearly through the velvet robes, glittering jewels and the popular adulation of the monarchy to the true nakedness beneath: the Emperor without his clothes.

John Osborne, for example, the original "angry young man," author of *Look Back In Anger*, in 1957 wrote an impassioned defence of working-class socialism and an impatient critique of the English adulation of the royal family, of its "protocol of ancient fatuity," and the "political and literal horseplay of a meaningless symbol."³ "I can't go on laughing at the idiocies of the people who rule our lives," he writes:

My objection to the royal symbol is that it is dead; it is the gold filling in a mouthful of decay... When the mobs rush forward in the Mall they are taking part in the last circus of a civilisation that has lost faith in itself, and sold itself for a splendid triviality, for the 'beauty of the ceremonial' and the 'essential spirituality of the rite.' We may not create any beauty or exercise much spirituality, but by God! We've got the finest ceremonial and rites in the world! Even the Americans haven't got that.⁴

A more recent and influential exponent of this critique, Tom Nairn, has taken up the charge, writing in *The Enchanted Glass* of "the sociology of grovelling" that characterises the British cult of celebrity, and the seductive enchantments of the royal family, its pageants and processions:

... these emblems are guaranteed harmless and merely 'colourful': not badges of inward shame and hopelessness, but the insouciant symbols of a society so confident of its modernity that it can afford to play charades with the imagery of the past.⁵

Nairn draws attention to the play of the archaic and the modern in contemporary royal ritual, the historical backdrop to this insouciant modernity, and its invocation of tradition and heritage culture.

Much of the 'imagery of the past' invoked by modern ritual and court practice - the famous ceremonial of the British monarchy that is so crucial to contemporary heritage tourism - is medieval in origin. The name generally given to these revivals and invocations of the medieval is 'medievalism.' The study of medievalism typically involves the analysis of changing representations of medieval literature and culture in post-medieval forms, often with a view to understanding the way modernity and post-modernity use the medieval to articulate their difference from the past. Key traditions here are the vast archives of Arthurian revivals from the fifteenth century through to the present; the many re-tellings of the Robin Hood legend in fiction, film and television; the medieval *mise-en-scène* of many fairy-tales, operas, ballets, films and fantasy novels; the recovery of a medieval aesthetic in pre-Raphaelite art; and the 'gothic revival' in architecture. Moving beyond these cultural examples, medievalism can also involve the study of political and social forms, and the sometimes uncanny similarities between medieval and postmodern sensibilities.⁶ Some intriguing recent work also uncovers the foundational role played by medieval literature, theology and philosophy in the intellectual training, development and thought of influential twentieth-century theorists of psychoanalysis, philosophy and literature.⁷

This essay is concerned with medievalism in the ritual practice associated with the Order of the Garter, and pays special attention to the exhibitionism, and the courtly and social excess of this most extreme form of ritual play. The Order of the Garter is the pre-eminent English order of chivalric honour, and one of the institutions that is most susceptible to the kind of mockery exemplified by the writings of Woolf, Osborne and Nairn. Its traditions represent some of the oldest continuous ritual practices of the contemporary monarchy, with the exception only of the coronation rites; while the narrative of the Order's founding is suitably both bizarre and hotly contested.⁸ Most importantly for this essay, the Garter's regalia and its sartorial traditions push to an extreme the capacity of the monarchy and the court to maintain their dignity under the pressure of the seemingly archaic and quaint traditions of the past.

The highlight of the Garter calendar is the annual feast at Windsor Castle, followed by a procession to St George's Chapel, the home of the Order, where any new Companion Knights are installed during the service of thanksgiving. Crowds gather to view the procession, which is led by heralds and members of the Queen's household. After the service, cars transport the members back up the hill to the Castle. Members of the Order wear their full regalia for this procession: a long blue velvet mantle, trimmed with white ribbons and long gold

ties and a red hood; a black velvet bonnet adorned with white heron and ostrich feathers; and a heavy gold chain of roses and gold knots, from which hangs a ceramic model of St George, the patron saint of the Order, slaying the dragon. The Duke of Edinburgh has one page to carry his train: the Queen, as Sovereign of the Order, has two.

The Garter itself, the blue band with the motto, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, knotted below the left knee, is rarely worn as such, and the Queen and other members often wear their Garter in the form of a diamond-encrusted starburst bearing the motto. In the past, when men wore armour, or court clothes that featured tight-fitting hose, the garter sat neatly just below the left knee, helping to define a well-turned calf muscle. It was sometimes itself heavily adorned with jewels, spelling out the words of the motto in hundreds of diamonds. But as soon as loose-fitting trousers became customary male attire, the wearing of the Garter became a sign of archaism, as an ever-increasing gap opened up between medieval and modern clothes, and between court dress and street wear. The garter now bears no relation to the everyday or the ordinary; and its primary sense as a marker of royal favour has been overtaken by its secondary significance as a marker of traditional ritual practice and English royal heritage culture.

We will come to some examples shortly, but first it is worth mentioning the special situation of women in the Order, since the traditions of the way they wear its regalia is quite different. The history of women's participation in the Order is a discontinuous one of changing conventions and practices, of resistance to their involvement, reluctant accommodations when queens have presided over the Order (for nearly a third of its history) and the re-invention of tradition. Yet despite this discontinuity in their relationship with the institution, there is remarkable stability in the way women wear their Garters.

Since at least the fifteenth century, women who were associate members of the Order, or *Les Dames de la Fraternité de St George*, have worn their Garters around their left arm, and this is true too of the three women who have been made full Companions of the Order since the current Queen emended the Statutes in 1987 to allow their full election: Lavinia, Duchess of Norfolk; Margaret, Baroness Thatcher; and Lady Soames, the daughter of Sir Winston Churchill. The complex story of the involvement of women in the Order of the Garter – as audiences for and participants in the tournaments held in medieval times, as associates, as Sovereigns, as royal consorts, princesses, and mothers – cannot be told here.⁹ Suffice to point out the irony that for all the variations of their status within the Order, and the constant 'newness' of their participation each time a woman ascends the throne, the form in which they wear their garter, and its relation to everyday fashion has actually changed less than that of the male tradition, which will be my focus in this essay.

Why a Garter? At some point in the late 1340s, so the story goes, King Edward III was presiding over a dance at court, perhaps to celebrate the recent victory of the English over the French at Crécy in 1346, when the garter of a lady who was dancing slipped to the ground. The courtiers began mocking her, but Edward gallantly retrieved the garter, tied it around his own leg, and said, "Honi soit qui mal y pense," *Shamed be he who finds any evil here*. He then promised to found a chivalric order so great that all those now mocking the lady would soon be clamouring to join it. True to his word, he did go on to found such an Order, which has always been restricted to no more than twenty-six members, with the addition of various members of the royal family, and foreign members – the 'stranger knights.'

The Order of the Garter still bears this motto, and remains the pre-eminent order of English chivalry, with a more or less continuous history of over 650 years. Prince William was installed in 2008 as its 1000th member. On being installed into the Order, new companions are presented with a blue garter with the motto spelled out in gold letters to wear on their leg, or on their upper arm, if they are female.

This story of the Order's origins is a deeply contested one, and many of the details vary in the re-telling. Was the lady the Queen, a girl named Madresilva [Honeysuckle] or the Countess of Salisbury? Was Edward in love with the Countess? Or did he rape her? Did Edward tie the garter around his own leg, or the woman's? More seriously, many of the Order's official historians and heralds dispute the story altogether as a late invention. It was very popular in the sixteenth century, as told by Polydore Vergil in his history of England, and there is a fifteenth-century Portuguese romance by Joanot de Martorell, *Tirant lo Blanc*, which gives an elaborate account of the story as a chivalric romance. But there are no fourteenth-century versions of the story, and the heraldic tradition prefers to explain the Order's famous motto as a defiant call to arms, in defence of Edward's claim to the French crown which sparked the Hundred Years' War. The garter itself is rationalised as a small military strap or a heraldic band. In 1652, for example, Peter Heylyn dismissed the story of the lady's garter as "a vain and idle Romance, derogatory both to the Founder, and the order"; and in 1724, John Anstis, Garter King of Arms, was drawing on a long tradition when he confidently described this and similar stories as "absurd" and "ridiculous", as "romantick Fancies."¹⁰ Since then, many antiquarians, heralds and historians up till the present day have similarly resisted the idea that Edward could have founded so great an order of knighthood on an item or event so trivial, or, we may say, so shameful as a 'wardrobe malfunction' of this kind. 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."¹¹

Whatever the origins of the Order, the story of the King's gallant rescue of the lady in distress is irresistible: even the doubters take pleasure in its rehearsal. The King takes up the Lady's garter and ties it, still warm from her body, around his own leg (or in some versions, back around her leg). In the English translation of André Favyn's 1620 French narrative, the King pushes the dropped garter back up the lady's leg: "little by little lifted her cloathes so high, that the Courtiers had some sight of her white Smock, & could not refraine from smiling."¹² It is easy to read the king's appropriation of the garter as a relationship akin to that of the fetish: the garter stands in for the unattainable woman's body, and inaugurates its own rituals of possession and desire (in *Tirant Lo Blanc*, the King wears the garter for two weeks before a courtier intervenes and counsels the king). The idea of intimate or sexualised 'touch' between man and woman is thus heavily mediated or displaced onto the touch of the garter as it encircles the male limb.

The story is also powerful because it dramatises a king at the height of his powers risking humiliation, lowering his body to the floor to the laughter of his courtiers, and then turning this abjection into triumph. It testifies to the royal capacity to make meaning, to invest the smallest, most insignificant item of clothing with significance, and to turn the embarrassment of losing one's underwear into a national symbol of courtly elegance and achievement. The blue garter, with its motto spelled out in gold letters, encircles the personal coat of arms of the monarch, which is also used as the coat of arms of the United Kingdom, so it is a widely disseminated sign in both courtly and state contexts. But the full complement of Garter robes is rarely worn beyond this high ceremonial occasion.

When it is, it is often accompanied by signs of strain. In a recent example, filmed as part of the documentary, *Monarchy: The Royal Family at Work* (2007), Annie Liebowitz was preparing to photograph the Queen, and was prepared to embrace the traditional aspects of the task. "I like tradition. Cecil Beaton's pictures - they're very important to me," she said at a reception at Buckingham Palace; but when it came to the photo shoot, she found the full complement of Garter robes and tiara excessive. She asked the Queen to remove the tiara, but the Queen interrupts her request, with a bemused and not altogether friendly expression, "Less dressy? What do you think this is?" pointing to what she was wearing. The Queen's response is spoken from a position firmly inside the ritual, a position in which the perfection and the completion of the robes is self-evident. Yet in the same documentary, we also see her own impatience with dressing up in the elaborate robes. The voice-over commentary describes Liebowitz and her assistants waiting for the Queen:

But the Queen's elaborate costume has taken longer than expected to put on.
... She will be wearing the full regalia of the ancient Order of the Garter,

complete with tiara. Few royal outfits could be more complicated, or more cumbersome.

The Queen then appears walking down the corridor wearing the Garter robes, saying impatiently, "I'm not changing anything. I've done enough, dressing like this, thank you very much."¹³

Notoriously, these scenes were spliced out of sequence in the promotional trailer to suggest that the Queen had walked out on Liebowitz. The BBC was later to apologise for the implication.¹⁴ Clearly, the wearing of the robes, and the touchiness of the Queen on the subject is a very sensitive issue.

Leibowitz was later to express admiration for the Queen's impatience:

She entered the room at a surprisingly fast pace ... and muttered: 'Why am I wearing these heavy robes in the middle of the day?' She doesn't really want to get dressed up any more. She just couldn't be bothered and I admired her for that.¹⁵

The opposition in style between the Queen in her traditional Garter robes and the tiara that cannot be removed, and Liebowitz in her loose-fitting pants and shirt, with long hair flowing loose, could not be greater. Liebowitz's comments seem to embrace the modernity of the Queen: "She just couldn't be bothered and I admired her for that."

The Garter traditions are often coded as immutable, but in fact they are often marked by change, by reform, or an antiquity so outmoded it leads to parody. Early historians were quick to disconnect the Garter from its mythic origins, to disentangle it from the world of the boudoir or dance-hall, and to fix it firmly in the heraldic or military sphere, either as a formal version of a personal badge, or the strategic elevation of a tiny item of clothing or armour into a richly symbolic sign. But even these apologists have to concede that the Order's insignia is a bodily one. Whatever the origins of the Garter, its proper place is inescapably an embodied one; and not just *on* the body, but in a constrictive form *around* the leg. Perhaps for this reason, the Garter itself does not persist for very long as the sole indicator of membership in the Order; its signifying force is rapidly dispersed among the mantle and robes, the great chain of office and other insignia such as the star, which all draw attention to the upper part of the body.

When female bodies are involved, either as recipients or bestowers of the garter, another series of difficulties is put into play, because this differently sexed body transforms the relationship of exchange as the Garter is given, and worn, and as the act of exchange draws attention to the bodies participating in the ritual. Over the centuries, too, as fashions and costumes change, the nature of the ritual body's relationship to the Garter, and the relationship between ritual and everyday costume also undergo subtle modification. For example, the great

plumed hat of the Order is rarely worn in formal portraits: it tends to sit on a table next to the sitter, or be held in the hand. Instead of wearing the heavy chain of office – the ‘great George’ – the Garter can also be worn, more practically, as the ‘lesser George’, a medallion with an image of St George and the dragon strung on a blue ribbon. For ease of riding, too, it was permissible to sling this under one arm. It was this George that was the last thing Charles I removed at his execution, handing it to William Juxon, Bishop of London with the single word: “remember.” It is thought this was a reminder to pass the George on to his son.

This reminds us that in spite of the dominant official reception of the Order as enjoying a continuous history, there have been a number of periods of disruption to its tradition, or the radical changes proposed to its religious practices in the Reformation.

Certainly Charles’ son “remembered.” On his Restoration in 1660, no detail of costume or ceremony was too small for the restored honour of the monarchy, the coronation of Charles II and the Order of the Garter. One intriguing detail concerns us here. Until 1661, none of the early Statutes prescribed the wearing of any particular clothes under the Order’s surcoat. But Charles was of the view that “constancy and immutability” added greatly to the “luster and dignity of our most noble order” and commissioned an inquiry

to see if possible length of time, and change of customes might have introduced any thing in them which might make them swerve from the ancient rules so farr as they were not inconsistent with the present usance. Wee have thought it not unworthy our care to descend unto the particulars off its clothing. And therupon having found that in what concerns the underhabits used by the companions att the solemnising of enstalments or the celebration of St Georges feast they followed too much the modern fashion, never constant and less comporting with the decency gravity and stateliness of the upper robes of the order.

Instead the Companions “shall be obliged to a certain and immutable form and fashion for their underhabits,” viz. “the old trunke hose or round breeches”, to be made of cloth of silver. This Statute was passed on the 10th May, 1661.¹⁶

The fascination with getting the right underhabits resonates suggestively, though unconsciously, with the myth of the Order’s founding and its own repressed fascination with the movement of garments and items of clothing between unofficial to official usage. If Edward had the capacity to transform a woman’s garter into a heraldic insignia, so too does Charles have the capacity to render everyday fashion unacceptable for the Garter rituals, and to introduce an outmoded fashion into official costume. This example also betrays the Order’s contradictory desires in a most instructive way. Seeing the current Companions following modern fashion, and identifying the absence of a tradition, Charles

seeks to find an “immutable ... fashion,” a delightful contradiction in terms. We may speculate that the use of everyday fashion is too much of a reminder of the modernity of the Restoration; that Charles sought to make the Order *look* as old as possible. Hence the appeal to “the old trunk hose.” This is rather a Tudor than a medieval fashion, with less medieval precedent than the revival of the women’s convention of wearing the garter around the arm. Its deliberately outmoded style is designed to signal the play of tradition across the bodies of the many new Knights. In a restored monarchy, the Order of the Garter cannot appear entirely new, any more than it can appear entirely old.

Charles’ wax effigy is preserved in Westminster Abbey. In Begent and Chesshyre’s description,

The breeches are of cloth of silver and are decorated with lace, ornamental buttons and bunches of silk and silver ribbons. They hang low upon the hips and button from top to bottom on the back with a single button in front. The material is set in very full pleats which pouch and hand over the lower edge. There are no divisions for the legs and the impression is given of a very short skirt... Under the breeches are white silk drawers to which the long white silk stockings are sewn, rather like modern ladies’ tights.¹⁷

This remained the arrangement of stockings, garter and silver underhabit of official Garter dress from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth century, right through the period of neglect and revival of monarchic tradition in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the early days of the Restoration, the new Garter robes were enthusiastically embraced by the King and his Knights. In 1667, Samuel Pepys describes “a most scandalous thing”:

the ridiculous humour of our King and Knights of the Garter the other day, who, whereas heretofore their robes were only to be worn during their ceremonies and services, these, as proud of their coats, did wear them all day till night, and then rode into the Park with them on. Nay, and he tells me he did see my lord Oxford and Duke of Monmouth in a hackney coach with two footmen in the Park, with their robes on; which is a most scandalous thing, so as all gravity may be said to be lost among us.¹⁸

Pepys’ comments remind us that ritual costumes rapidly lose their dignity when worn out of context; and similarly, that there is nothing so ridiculous as a love of ritual costume for its own sake. The ridicule directed at ritual costume is often predicated on its archaism, relative to contemporary dress. Charles’ revived Garter costumes, while being modelled on an older fashion, were still redolent of the restored and renewed monarchy, and Pepys is scornful not of their fanciness, but of the Knights’ immoderate pride in their new Garter robes.

I turn now to the world of fiction, and an account of an extreme form of dressing-up: the Garter knight as dandy.

Max Beerbohm's satirical novella, *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), tells the story of the young Duke of Dorset, an Oxford undergraduate who is also a Knight of the Garter, who falls in love with Zuleika, the niece of the Warden of Judas College. After a desultory career as a governess, moving from family to family as the young men in each household invariably fall wildly and unsuitably in love with her, Zuleika steals one such young man's box of party magic tricks, and establishes herself with great success in the music-hall world. She has never felt love for any of her many conquests, until the Duke of Dorset ignores her on her triumphant entry into Oxford. When, over the course of the next day, it becomes clear that he does in fact love her, she is repelled, and dismisses him, refusing his vast estates and spectacular wealth.

In despair, the Duke says he will drown himself for love of her, at which news she is delighted, and wants to make sure only that he will call out her name as he plunges into the river after the college boat race. Hundreds of other youths make the same pledge, and the Duke attempts unsuccessfully to dissuade them, just as he unsuccessfully invites Zuleika to release him from his vow. On the morning of the fateful day, the Duke tries on his Garter robes one last time, and is so captivated by his magnificent appearance in the mirror that he decides to make his grand gesture of love thus adorned. Once the boat race is finished it starts to rain and, fearing becoming a sorry, soggy, bedraggled lump of heron feathers, the Duke plunges in to the river. His Garter mantle floats a while on the surface before finally sinking along with its wearer. Hundreds of other young men similarly drown themselves; and we last see Zuleika asking her maid to commission a special train to Cambridge.

At one level, the Garter robes are only incidental to this story, but they play an important role in the characterisation of the Duke as a dandy. We learn that the young Duke became a Knight of the Garter after making an impassioned impromptu speech in the House of Lords that resulted in a Bill being deferred for six months. Nervous, the Prime Minister "procured for him, a month later, the Sovereign's offer of a Garter which had just fallen vacant".¹⁹

But you must not imagine that he cared for [the insignia] as symbols of achievement and power. The dark blue riband, and the star scintillating to eight points, the heavy mantle of blue velvet, with its lining of taffeta and shoulder-knots of white satin, the crimson surcoat, the great embullioned tassels, and the chain of linked gold, and the plumes of ostrich and heron uprising from the black velvet hat - these things had for him little significance save as a fine setting, a finer setting than the most elaborate smoking-suit, for that perfection of respect which the gods had given him.

The narrator explains, "It was only in those too rarely required robes that he had the sense of being fully dressed" (20). This is the paradox of the supplement: once the Garter is added to the Knight's body, that body appears underdressed

without it. But Beerbohm's parody goes further, suggesting that it is only on the body of the dandy that the Order's robes and insignia are worn in their full glory. The ultimate destiny of the Duke is to wear his Garter robes to his death; but by the same token, the Garter robes only attain their full glory when worn by someone of the Duke's perfection.

... it was as a Knight of the Garter that he had set the perfect seal on his dandyism. Yes, he reflected, it was on the day when first he donned the most grandiose of all costumes, and wore it grandlier than ever yet in history had it been worn, than ever would it be worn hereafter, flaunting the robes with a grace unparalleled and inimitable, and lending, as it were, to the very insignia a glory beyond their own, that he once and for all fulfilled himself, doer of that which he had been sent into the world to do (155).

Beerbohm adds:

he cared for his wardrobe and his toilet-table not as a means to making others admire him the more, but merely as a means through which he could intensify, a ritual in which to express and realise, his own idolatry.

On the fateful morning of his death, the Duke reflects. He is not afraid of dying, and compares himself to Shelley and Byron, whose middle age would have been appalling in its mediocrity. And then he is seized by the idea of seeing himself in his Garter robes once more. I quote this passage of his enrobing at length, because it explores the idea of the Duke's dressing up as a kind of technology of the self, a technology that is characteristic of the dandy, whether his clothes be simple or elaborate.²⁰ The Duke's pleasure is both childish and vaguely sexual. Beerbohm insists on the singularity of this Garter Knight, in contrast to our general sense that such a Knight, much older, might have "doddered hopeless in that labyrinth of hooks and buckles."

His eyes dilated, somewhat as might those of a child about to "dress up" for a charade; and already, in his impatience, he had undone his necktie.

One after another, he unlocked and threw open the black tin boxes, snatching out greedily their great good splendours of crimson and white and royal blue and gold. You wonder he was not appalled by the task of essaying unaided a toilet so extensive and so intricate? You wondered even when you heard that he was wont at Oxford to make without help his toilet of every day. Well, the true dandy is always capable of such high independence. He is craftsman as well as artist. And, though any unaided Knight but he with whom we are here concerned would belike have doddered hopeless in that labyrinth of hooks and buckles which underlies the visible glory of a Knight "arraied full and proper," Dorset threaded his way featly and without pause. He has mastered his first excitement. In his swiftness was no haste. His procedure had the ease and inevitability of a natural phenomenon, and was most like to the coming of a rainbow.

Crimson-doubled, blue-ribanded, white-trunk-hosed, he stooped to understrap his left knee with that strap of velvet round which sparkles the proud gay motto of the Order. He affixed to his breast the octoradiant star, so much larger and more lustrous than any actual star in heaven. Round his neck he slung that long daedal chain wherefrom St. George, slaying the Dragon, dangles. He bowed his shoulders to assume that vast mantle of blue velvet, so voluminous, so enveloping, that, despite the Cross of St. George blazing on it, and the shoulder-knots like two great white tropical flowers planted on it, we seem to know from it in what manner of mantle Elijah prophesied. Across his breast he knotted this mantle's two cords of gleaming bullion, one tassel a due trifle higher than its fellow. All these things being done, he moved away from the mirror, and drew on a pair of white kid gloves. Both of these being buttoned, he plucked up certain folds of his mantle into the hollow of his left arm, and with his right hand gave to his left hand that ostrich-plumed and heron-plumed hat of black velvet in which a Knight of the Garter is entitled to take his walks abroad. Then, with head erect, and measured tread, he returned to the mirror (156).

The Duke stands before the mirror, disturbed by the thought that he must "presently put off from him all his splendour, and be his normal self," until the thought comes to him that he would wear his robes to his death.

The shadow passed from his brow. He would go forth as he was. He would be true to the motto he wore, and true to himself. A dandy he had lived. In the full pomp and radiance of his dandyism he would die.

... what he loved best he could carry with him to the very end; and in death they would not be divided.

In one sense, Beerbohm's parody represents a comprehensive corruption of the Garter honours, as the entire system of courtly, chivalric and military honours is reduced merely to the appearance of its admittedly magnificent robes, themselves seen here, somewhat perversely, as the perfect expression of dandyism. On the other hand, like other invocations of the Garter in fiction and poetry, *Zuleika Dobson* captures some of the unofficial force and strength of the Order's capacity to seize the imagination. In the most forceful way conceivable, the novel dramatises the idea of the Garter as that which invests the ordinary man with extraordinary charisma. Similarly, the Duke's decision to walk to a watery death for unrequited love, wearing his robes, is presented here as perfectly characteristic of the Order and what it stands for. "He would be true to the motto he wore, and true to himself." The invocation of the Garter motto - *honi soit qui mal y pense* - reminds us that the Order is founded on a history of men doing foolish things for love. Whether they are picking up a dropped garter or throwing themselves in the river, the Garter motto distinguishes those who wear it with this heightened capacity for greatness, for transcending the ordinary mockery of mere mortals who cannot comprehend its greatness.

The moment of the Duke's death is worth pausing over, too. He is surprised to find, "standing as he did on the peak of dandyism, on the brink of eternity," that his attention is distracted by the question of who would win the boat race: Judas or Magdalen? But it starts to rain, and he is impelled to action.

His very mantle was aspersed. In another minute he would stand sodden, inglorious, a mock. He didn't hesitate.

"Zuleika!" he cried in a loud voice. Then he took a deep breath, and, burying his face in his mantle, plunged.

Full on the river lay the mantle outspread. Then it, too, went under. A great roll of water marked the spot. The plumed hat floated (165-6).

But before he dies, the Duke's face appears beside the Magdalen boat; his eyes meet those of the Magdalen cox; and as a consequence, one of the Magdalen rowers misses his stroke, and the Duke's college, Judas, win the race. "A white smiling face, anon it was gone."

Beerbohm's parody of romanticism, dandyism and medievalism is truly gothic: the dying Duke's face a ghostly vision of excess that nevertheless propels his college to victory.

Ellen Moers describes *Zuleika Dobson* as "the very last of the dandy novels", and its hero as "fabulously wealthy, miraculously gifted, consummately dandified"; and "wholly insufferable."

Like Disraeli, Beerbohm saw in the dandy hero a natural subject for romance; unlike Disraeli, whose lasting respect for the English aristocracy approached adoration, Beerbohm used the gilding of fantasy primarily to evoke laughter. *Zuleika Dobson* was written both as a devoted return to the tradition of full-fledged dandy fiction, and as an outrageous farce with a noodle of a dandy for its hero.²¹

Beerbohm's own writings on the dandy emphasise the importance of contemporary costume, but he does also open up a space for the costume, and the rituals of the past. "Of course, the dandy, like any other artist, has moments when his own period, palling, inclines him to ancient modes."²² Beerbohm's Duke, in despair of his life, evokes this ancient mode in the form of his medieval robes.

The primary function of the clothing and the rituals of the Order of the Garter is to symbolise election to this most élite company, but their secondary functions are more complex and more intriguing, and shared by much greater numbers. When we observe the Companions in their robes, when we speculate about their attitudes to wearing their robes, when we mock them for wearing them at the wrong time and place, and even when we research their cultural history, we give

ourselves license to play with the idea of medievalist exhibitionism from the safety of our own modernity.

NOTES

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited with an introduction by Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 177.

² Woolf, 178.

³ John Osborne, "And They Call it Cricket," *Encounter* 9 (1957), 25.

⁴ Osborne, 24.

⁵ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Radius, 1988), 120.

⁶ See for example, Umberto Eco, "Towards A New Middle Ages," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 488-504; and for a study of medievalism in Australian political tradition, see Paul James and Stephanie Trigg, "Rituals of Nationhood: Medievalism, Neo-Traditionalism and Republicanism," in *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*, ed. Stephanie Trigg (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005; Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 255-75.

⁷ See Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁸ See Stephanie Trigg, "The Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter," in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 91-105.

⁹ See, however, J.L. Gillespie, "Ladies of the Fraternity of Saint George and of the Society of the Garter," *Albion* 17 (1985): 259-278; and Hugh Collins, *The Order of the Garter 1348-1461: Chivalry and Politics in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie* (London, 1652), 321-2; *Register of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*, edited with introduction by John Anstis, in two volumes (London: 1724), 1.62.

¹¹ Peter J. Begent and Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter: 650 Years* (London: Spink & Son Ltd, 1999), 15. See also Collins, 12.

¹² Andrew Favin, *The Theatre of Honour and Knighthood* (London, 1623), Book IV, 14.

¹³ The relevant portion of this documentary can be viewed on YouTube, at http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=_LAY3qWFC8Y

¹⁴ "BBC apologises over Queen clips," 12 July 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6294472.stm>

¹⁵ "Leibowitz: The Queen and I did not fall out in BBC 'tantrum' film," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-467754/Leibowitz-The-Queen-I-did-fall-BBC-tantrum-film.html>

¹⁶ Windsor Castle, MS. X.21.F.9 (this is the version signed by the King himself)

¹⁷ Begent and Chesshyre, 153-5.

¹⁸ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London: Hayes Barton Press, 1912), 1708.

¹⁹ Max Beerbohm, *Zuleika Dobson* (1911; rpt Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), 17. Subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition.

²⁰ Ellen Moers reminds us that the original dandy, Beau Brummell, was famous not for the elaborate excess of his dress, but for its immaculate simplicity. *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 31. "The popular version has always been that he dressed too obviously well, with fantastic colours and frills, exotic jewels and perfumes. The accurate (and important) report declares

that he dressed in a style more austere, manly and dignified than any before or since."

²¹ Moers, 327.

²² Max Beerbohm, "Dandies and Dandies," in *The Incomparable Max*, a selected edited by S. C. Roberts (1962; reprinted London: Icon Books, 1964), 22.

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Author/s:

TRIGG, S

Title:

Medievalism, the Queen and the Dandy

Date:

2009

Citation:

TRIGG, S. (2009). Medievalism, the Queen and the Dandy. *Antithesis*, 19, pp.41-55

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/33178>

File Description:

Medievalism, the Queen and the Dandy