

Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter

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The Order of the Garter has enjoyed a continuous existence since King Edward III founded it in the late 1340s, and membership remains the highest honour an English sovereign can bestow. Throughout its history, much of the scholarship on the Order has been rather antiquarian in tone, concerned with such things as its membership, procedure or regalia; Peter Begent and Hubert Chesshyre's *The Most Noble Order of the Garter: 650 Years* (1) is the most recent example of this genre. More recently, historians have begun to examine how the Order has functioned in its social and political context, particularly Hugh Collins in *The Order of the Garter 1348–1461: Chivalry and Politics in Late Medieval England* and Antti Matikkala in *The Orders of Knighthood and the Formation of the British Honours System, 1660–1760*. (2) Stephanie Trigg's *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* is firmly in the latter camp. The book deals with the Order from its foundation to the present, although not chronologically or comprehensively, and from the perspective of a literary critic (Trigg is Professor of English Literature at the University of Melbourne). As the word 'vulgar' in the subtitle indicates, this is by no means a triumphal or admiring history of the Garter, but one that is also concerned with gossip and innuendo, particularly the rich possibilities afforded by the Garter's myth of origin. Whether one sees this as a good thing will depend on one's temperament, although such an 'outsider's perspective' (her words) has the potential to be very valuable. Unfortunately, the potential is only partly realized here.

The first chapter considers the related concepts of ritual criticism, medievalism, and mythic capital, the theoretical framework for Trigg's investigation of the Garter. Trigg focuses on the office of Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, who was associated with the Garter from 1399, but who became more important as

the chief ceremonial officer of parliament; as such, other parliaments in the Westminster tradition, such as that of Trigg's Australian state of Victoria, adopted their own versions of the office. Since 1642, Black Rod has famously had the doors of the House of Commons ritually slammed in his face at the state opening of parliament in order to symbolize parliamentary independence from the monarch; only when he knocks three times with his rod is he admitted. To Trigg, this is a perfect example of ritual practice, 'where actions that might seem bizarre in reality are planned with precision and performed with solemnity ... and where active pleasure is taken in rehearsing gestures and words that took place or were spoken long ago' (p. 20). It is also an example of medievalism, whereby medieval institutions that survive into the present acquire further layers of meaning, producing a dialectic between old and new and actively shaping our views of the past – something especially noticeable in Victoria, where the Gentleman Usher knocked on the door not with his fragile plaster-tipped rod, but with his shoe. The third concept, that of mythic capital, is illustrated by the Garter itself, particularly its 'unrecoverable origins'. These have the effect of 'enhancing both its mystique and its historical distance' (p. 36), none more so than the dispute over the chivalric story that at a ball in Calais a lady's garter had fallen off, and that to save her face, King Edward III picked it up, attached it to his own leg, and claimed that soon everyone would be proud to wear garters. Whether such frivolity was really the genesis of the Order is moot; the fact that people know about the story and consider it (or spoof it, as in Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 And All That*), only adds to the Garter's prestige.

The second chapter focuses on what we do know about the Order's foundation, which is not much. Wardrobe accounts mention 'blue garters' sewn on banners from as early as 1345, pointing to the order's connection to the Crécy campaign. Literature provides no precise details, although such works as the chronicle of Jean le Bel, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or *Tirant Lo Blanc* seemingly justify the dropped garter story, or at least point to an atmosphere of sexual scandal at Edward's court. Similarly, the Order's motto, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' ('shame be to him who thinks ill of it'), while offering a 'reassuring core of textual authority' ... 'positively celebrates its own ambivalence' (p. 71), and as such points to an atmosphere of play at court, a world of disguises and contrived enigma. But it also points to the power of the king, who gets to inflict the shame and decide what the 'y' refers to; similarly, the great gap between the alleged dropped-garter incident and the subsequent glory and honour of the Order of the Garter illustrates the king's power to bridge it.

The third chapter details some of the critical and historical discourse of the Order from the 16th century. Various accounts of the dropped-garter story remained popular, in part thanks to Polydore Vergil's retelling of it in his *Anglica Historica*, although he claimed 'fama vulgi' as a source. The story then would have had the same appeal that gossip about royals does today: *they* may be wealthy and famous, but *we* are able to say things that they cannot acknowledge themselves. Writers such as George Peele, André Favyn, and Richard Johnson all relayed versions of it. Other writers, like John Ferne, William Fennor, and John Selden, quickly passed over the origin story in order to praise the great brotherhood of arms that Edward had founded. But serious antiquarians like Peter Heylyn, Elias Ashmole, or John Anstis began to actively denigrate the dropped-garter story starting in the 17th century as being beneath the dignity of the Order and the product of a foreigner (Polydore Vergil), a critique that continues to this day.

The fourth chapter focuses on the inverse of honour, shame. In order for the Garter to be honourable, it needed to threaten and occasionally punish members with degradation if they took up arms against a fellow knight, or if they were found to be heretical, traitorous, or cowardly in battle. In being degraded, a Garter knight's crest would be cast down from its place in St George's chapel, and his stall plate broken, in addition to the usual humiliating rituals of having his spurs cut off or sword broken over his head. This produced a problem for the Garter: its honour had to be policed, but the *damnatio memoriae* of a degraded member was an affront to its archival integrity. More recently, shame has attended the Order when individual knights try to out-display it (by bringing 200 men to an installation, for example), when the surviving family does not return a member's Garter regalia but sells it, or even when common people jeer its elaborate robes or crash its banquet. And in the 19th century the *Honi Soit* motto made several appearances in sexual jokes, testifying to the 'failure of the Order's official historians to control its mythical associations with women and sex' (p. 164).

The fifth chapter discusses how the Garter deals with change. The Order makes continuous appeal to its longevity and to the continuity of its ideals, but in reality has made frequent changes to them. In particular, the current Garter ritual is a product of the same forces that David Cannadine outlined in 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: *the British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition" c. 1820–1977*'.⁽³⁾ Trigg writes against 'proud' histories of the Garter to produce 'a history of the neglect and dishonor into which it has fallen at various stages'. For instance, in the reign of Richard II, the Order's poor knights and canons were negligent in their duties, and the chapel was overrun with weeds. The Reformation and Commonwealth saw regalia destroyed or sold off for personal gain. And Edward VII's revival of royal ceremonial was impeded by the refusal to retire of Sir Albert Woods, Garter King of Arms (d. 1904), even though he had long ceased effectively exercising his office. Attempts at reform were particularly urgent during the religious upheavals in the 16th and 17th centuries, when monarchs could not bring themselves to do away with the Garter, but wanted to cleanse it of popery and superstition, even going so far as to suggest that its lost original statutes were 'pure' and that corruption had subsequently crept in. The role of women in the Order can also be read as 'a series of interruptions and moments of resistance'. Women were appointed as Ladies of the Garter in the 14th and 15th centuries, but this medieval courtly tradition did not extend beyond the reign of Henry VII. Edward VII appointed his queen Alexandra as a Lady of the Order (an action resisted by Woods), but it was not until 1987 that women, as 'Lady Companions', were entitled to become Garter members on the same terms as men. 'Continuity', in this case, is problematic.

Chapter six deals with the garter itself, and the Order's robes, as articles of clothing. The Order has steadily moved away from having the sovereign tie an actual garter on the leg of a newly installed knight; the intimacy of this act is potentially embarrassing, and sartorial fashion does not necessarily accommodate it. This situation is especially true with the sovereign is a woman (Queens Anne, Victoria and Elizabeth II themselves wore the garter on their left arms), and the Order has substituted the collar, star, and lesser George as alternate signifiers of membership. The elaborate garter robes, for their part, can offer opportunities for 'historicism, fantasy, imagination and parody' (p. 245), as seen in Max Beerbohm's novella *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), which has the Duke of Dorset dress up in them before flinging himself to a watery death on account of his unrequited love for the title character.

The final chapter revisits the theme of medievalism, and some of the more recent events in the life of the royal family. The marriage of Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles in St George's chapel in 2005 helped to legitimize it, while the encounter between the American photographer Annie Leibovitz and the Queen in 2007 over the Queen's 'dressy' tiara and Garter robes illustrated both royal impatience with ornate ceremonial and refusal to set it aside. The Garter and related phenomena continue to appear in various places today, for example the image of St George that is affixed to the front of the Queen's Rolls Royce in place of the usual figure of the Spirit of Ecstasy; a box of chocolate with a cartoon scene of the Garter procession on it that Trigg recently purchased in London; Rex Whistler's painting *Allegory: HRH the Prince Regent awakening the Spirit of Brighton* (1944), which features the Prince naked except for a garter, sash and star, leaning over a recumbent nude; or a chain of English-style pubs in France named The Frog and bearing the motto 'Honi Soit qui peu y Boit'. These all things point, in their way, to the Garter's troubled relationship to

its medieval past, and its divided and uneven history.

Despite the many interesting nuggets of Garter (and Garter reception) history to be discovered in *Shame and Honor*, this historian confesses that he finds much to dislike about it. As is apparent by now, much of what Trigg discusses is only tangentially or arbitrarily related to the Order of the Garter. The Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod belongs more properly to a history of Parliament, and even the Garter King of Arms is more important to a history of heraldry than to a history of the Order as such. St George's, Windsor, is a royal free chapel and not everything that takes place there is or ought to be associated with the Garter – such as Prince Edward's marriage there in 1999 (seven years before he himself was made a Garter knight), which cannot really be seen as an attempt at 'smoothing over and forcefully displacing' embarrassment. That other groups choose to adopt the Garter motto for their own purposes cannot possibly reflect on the Order itself (and it is hardly that scandalous, given that in English heraldic practice mottos are not normally granted, and groups are free to adopt whatever mottos they want – 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' is used by several military regiments, to everyone's satisfaction). If an author chooses to signify a character as aristocratic by associating him with the Garter, it merely raises the question, is this not simply arbitrary? Could he not just as well have chosen a peer's coronet or ermine robes? (He might have been better off to do so, given that members of the Garter are mere knights, who take precedence *below* the eldest sons of barons – the characters in Arthur Sullivan's *The Zoo* are technically wrong to exclaim that someone secretly wearing the garter is 'a peer in disguise'.) A lot of the material in *Shame and Honor*, particularly in chapter six, is a critique of the British monarchy and British 'heritage culture'. This is fine, but a book parallel to Tom Nairn's *The Enchanted Glass* (4) would have been a better venue for it. Trigg acknowledges that 'there is a kind of myopia that a project like this can induce, whereby everything becomes an allusion to its subject matter, and where the subject matter is called to account for every phenomenon' (p. 252). But just because she is willing to acknowledge the problem does not mean that it goes away.

Indeed, much of what Trigg does claim about the Garter can also be applied to any long-lasting organization. The Roman Catholic Church, an Oxbridge college, or the monarchy itself all adapt themselves to their current times, while trying to be true to what they see as their core ideals. Sometimes this process runs smoothly, sometimes it does not, but it does not necessarily mean that an organization is 'deeply riven by its own history'. To see changes in the Garter as the result of 'entropic decay and dilution' is a choice, like seeing the glass as half-empty. That 16th-century monarchs took such pains to revise the Order's statutes according to their respective religious beliefs points first and foremost to the Garter's great prestige: Edward VI could simply have abolished the society, as his regime did with most other confraternities, but he wanted to keep it going and enjoy its cachet. And of course the Order will focus more attention on honour than on shame. To have to degrade a member is indeed shameful to the Order as well as to the individual member, it is therefore perfectly understandable for the Order to pass over such incidents with as little comment as possible. A university might expel a student for cheating, but the fact that a cheater had been a student in the first place does not make the university look good. That the incident will not receive front-page treatment in the alumni magazine should surprise no one.

Trigg is probably right to claim that the Order's foundation story accrues 'mythic capital' to it. One thinks of similar mythical stories like Newton and the apple or Washington and the cherry tree. But just as it is possible to write a history of Newton or Washington without ever mentioning these things, so also it is possible to write a history of the Garter without having to mention, and then dismiss, the myth. Trigg takes some pains to position herself against 'official' histories of the Garter. But what if those histories are right? What if the Garter really was an article of *male* attire, and Edward's choice to use it as the emblem of his society was parallel to his cousin Alfonso's Order of the Band – and the dropped-garter story was propaganda originating at the French court, as Jonathan Boulton suggests (and as Antonia Gransden showed was true about Edward's alleged rape of the Countess of Salisbury)? Much of what Trigg writes would then become moot. Edward III was exceptionally image-conscious, and sometimes the simplest explanation is the best one: the garter was the emblem of the Crécy campaign, the motto refers to his claim to the crown of France, and the Order of the Garter a means of rewarding the important participants of the campaign and (hopefully) of perpetuating its success. Just as he substituted the Order of the Garter for his planned Order of

the Round Table (1344), illustrating that he had little time for Arthurianism when he had important business to attend to, so also is the dropped-garter story unlikely to have happened, or to have met with Edward's approval. Medieval people had access to common sense, and their literature was often the equivalent of our action movies or romantic comedies – fun, but no blueprint for real life.

This leads to another concern of *Shame and Honor*, that of medievalism. The Garter is indeed 'medieval' in that it was founded in 1348. But the intense desire to define the medieval as against the modern seems misplaced (most recent example: Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*). History is one thing after another, and the fact that the Garter was founded in 1348 as a result of the Hundred Years' War is in some ways arbitrary: if the Garter had not existed, one could see an order founded by Elizabeth I to celebrate the defeat of the Spanish Armada, or Charles II to celebrate the Restoration, accruing just as much prestige over the course of its existence. There is a pleasure in dressing up – but that pleasure is presumably enjoyed by members of the Order of the Thistle (1687), the Order of the Bath (1725), or the Order of St Michael and St George (1818), which have similar costumes but apparently do not have a 'troubled relation to a medieval past' or an 'inability to acknowledge the medievalism of the medieval thing at its heart' (p. 275). Perhaps a better approach to periodization is simply by century, which would designate the Garter as having 'fourteenth-century' origins, giving it one hundred years' more accumulated tradition than if it had been founded in 1448, and 100 years less than if it had been founded in 1248. Whether this is 'medieval' would then become secondary.

But, as mentioned, these are the observations of an historian. Literary criticism and cultural studies have different concerns, different methodologies, and a different argot. It might be best, however, if studies such as this avoid the word 'history' in their titles.

Notes

1. Peter Begent and Hubert Chesshyre, *The Most Noble Order of the Garter: 650 Years* (London, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hugh Collins, *The Order of the Garter 1348–1461: Chivalry and Politics in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2000); Antti Matikkala, *The Orders of Knighthood and the Formation of the British Honours System, 1660–1760* (Woodbridge, 2008). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: *the British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition" c. 1820–1977*', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (Santa Fe, NM, 1988). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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