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The Crown and the Garter: the Shared Motto of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Edward III’s Order of the Garter

David Urbach

“The king is home at Camelot / Among his many lords, all splendid men— / All the trusted brothers of the Round Table” (ln. 37-9). So it is that we are introduced to the court of King Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, perhaps the most famous of the Middle English verse romances. It is also one of the most perplexing for scholars. At the poem’s end a new order of knighthood is formed, and the motto proclaimed is quite unusual: “Shamed be he who thinks evil,” or in the original Old French, “Honi soit qui mal pense.”¹ Notably, this motto is paralleled by that of the Order of the Garter, a chivalric society of knights founded by Edward III of England in 1348, just a few decades before *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written. Edward’s motto differed only slightly: “Shamed be he who thinks evil of it.”² In representing England’s most chivalric nobles, why did Edward phrase his motto so defensively? What did the king not want to be thought ill of? The standard answer

has been that he was defending his claim to the crown of France, for which he had started what would become the Hundred Years’ War. But at this time there were also certain accusations that he had violently raped a countess early in his reign. Though ultimately unfounded, these rumors still threatened his reputation as the model of contemporary royal chivalry. I will argue that the connections between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK* from here on) and Edward’s Order of the Garter will show that the king’s motto, and thus the foundation of the Order itself, was intended to silence these rumors and reinforce Edward III’s chivalric reputation.

One reason medieval historians often overlook *SGGK*’s ability to comment on Edward’s motto is that the most accepted period for the poem’s writing has been between the king’s death in 1377 and the year 1400. Some say that the other poems in *SGGK*’s manuscript, the British Library Cotton Nero A.x., when taken together, fit this time span, Richard II’s reign, better than a mid-century dating.3 All were composed in the area of Chester and Lancashire, which many scholars have noted suggests a connection with the conspicuous presence of prominent Cheshiremen at Richard’s court.4 Examinations of the poet’s descriptions of clothing and architecture may also support this, although a date as early as 1350 would still be possible if the poet were fashionably up-to-

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3 Ibid., 9.
date.\textsuperscript{5} And if SGGK was truly written after Edward III’s death, then it would seem unlikely for the poet or his patron to be defending his chivalric reputation. So the later dating tends to accompany the assumption that the Order of the Garter’s motto must refer to Edward’s claim to the crown of France.\textsuperscript{6} The Order’s practical functions in the French war have been seen as an adequate, if not entirely satisfactory, explanation for its motto.\textsuperscript{7} SGGK’s own French connections have led some of its scholars to agree with the French throne theory, but the poem’s natural complexity does not let itself be pinned down so easily.\textsuperscript{8}

The alternate interpretation of the Order’s motto, in which it is a defense of Edward’s reputation against rape accusations, is always in conjunction with a study of SGGK. These scholars also tend to put the poem’s composition within ten or twenty years of the Order’s foundation in 1348.\textsuperscript{9} Many specific features of


\textsuperscript{6} John Harvey. \textit{The Black Prince and his age.} (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), 88. The earliest scholar of the Order, Elias Ashmole, in his 1672 book \textit{The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter}, presented some of the core arguments for this theory that are still accepted by many today, including the Garter King of Arms for most of the 1970s, Sir Anthony Wagner.


\textsuperscript{9} W. G. Cooke and D’Arcy J. D. Boulton. “\textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}: A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?” \textit{Medium Aevum} 68, no.1 (1999), 45. Cooke and Boulton argue that no later than
the poem call to mind Edward’s reign more than Richard’s. Descriptions of the nature of the landscape that Gawain travels through, certain names among the Round Table knights, and the general portrayal of Arthur’s court as young, strong, and ambitious all suggest the middle of Edward’s reign, when he was at the height of his popularity. Contemporary Arthurian comparisons would not likely have been made with Richard II’s relatively unimpressive court, whereas they were a central feature of his grandfather’s reign.  

When Edward created the Order of the Garter on St. George’s Day, 1348, he was consciously trying to revive a perceived set of older martial chivalric values against perceptions that such chivalry was already in decline. Chroniclers of many countries were complaining of “decadence” and “softness” among knights due to aristocratic pretences and luxurious living. Honoré Bouvet, in his circa 1385 treatise *L’Arbre des Batailles*, claimed that the knights of old were hardier men than his contemporaries, not afraid to farm their land and work as well as fight. Religiously-minded writers tended to advocate crusades as remedies, making Christian knighthood a kind of monkhood with its own special holiness apart

1360 is likely, but some critics have ascribed this to their central (and to my mind not entirely convincing) thesis that the poem’s patron is Henry of Grosmont, first Duke of Lancaster. For a critical view, see Carruthers, 73.  

from the Church. Edward used that and more by invoking King Arthur’s Round Table brotherhood, which included the legend’s entire web of historic associations revered in England and abroad. With his new nobility built on proven merit and military service, he used the Order of the Garter to build a reputation of paramount chivalry of arms and moral uprightness. A statement of triumph, it reminded his subjects and his rivals that in the space of eighteen years he had overcome the social, political, and military disorder that his father, and his father’s usurpers, had left him.

The Order met annually in the specially-constructed St. George’s Chapel at Windsor, an impressive building that hosted mandatory Mass services for the members, but Edward wanted a reputation not just for formal piety, but also for real-world virtue. John Gower, in his *Mirour de l’Omm*, attacked the knights of his time for rampant promiscuity and lawlessness, and this kind of poor repute may have been what the king sought to avoid when, on the Crécy campaign in 1346, he (unsuccessfully) forbade his men from wanton ravaging, the destruction of holy places, and the

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11Clein, 30-5. Richard Kaeuper also makes this connection in *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.
12 Ingledew, 16-7.
13 Ibid., 15.
harming of women and children. He wanted a higher standard for his legacy, and likely for the reality of his court as well.

Military orders had been used by monarchs before for the dual purposes of focusing religious devotion and the prowess of knights for national reasons, most notably in Spain with the Orders of Calatrava, Santiago, and the Band. Ramon Llull’s treatise on chivalry extolled “moral excellence [as] the characteristic which distinguishes knights from men of inferior social status,” but the Orders were explicitly military. Henry of Grosmont, earl of Lancaster, campaigned in Spain for awhile under Alfonso XI, and certainly had interactions with the Order of the Band; in fact, he may have been inducted as a member. Cooke and Boulton suggest that this may have inspired Edward to model his order after it, perhaps even modifying its banda symbol into his garter. But undoubtedly the most explicit inspiration for the Order of the Garter comes from the legends of King Arthur.

Edward actively promoted himself as a new Arthur, as a bold king in the best chivalric tradition, a victor on the battlefield, the monarch of a united England with imperial aspirations. His grandfather, Edward I, had done this as well, even so far as carrying

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17 Ibid., 88-9. Only the Order of the Band was founded by a monarch, but the Orders of Santiago and Calatrava loyally and effectively served the kings of Spain in the Reconquest.

18 Clein, 35.

19 Cooke and Boulton, 50.
Arthurian romances with him while on Crusade. His son Edward, later the Black Prince, was raised on the literature of the Arthurian Cycle. It would be a fantastic legacy if the king could appear to actually revive one of the most glorious elements of England’s mythic history. So, at a great feast in 1343, Edward III announced his plan to build a great Round Table that could seat a full three hundred knights, as in the romances, with a corresponding building and chapel. He was not the first English monarch to try something like this. Edward I had also held a grand tournament called a Round Table to celebrate his conquest of Wales, and another at Falkirk celebrating peace with Scotland. But these and others subsequent had been isolated tournaments; Edward III’s plan involved a consistent series of tournaments to be held that would mold a lasting disposition for chivalric and martial excellence in the best knights of his realm. Construction on the central circular building was apparently begun on a lavish scale, but for reasons unknown was never completed. It was to be quite large, possibly large enough to accommodate an indoor jousting list, but recent excavation around Windsor and comparison with the circular Castell Bellver in Majorca (which Edward was likely familiar with, and which bears striking resemblance to his plans and the excavated foundation-work) suggests it may have only been intended for “play-acting” by knights, where they could recreate their chivalric deeds in a feast setting in

20 Harvey, 148, 118.
21 Ibid., 72-4. He cites the Temple of the Holy Grail in the romance Younger Titurel as a possible influence.
front of an admiring crowd. There is also evidence of Edward having a deep affinity for the character of Lionel, a cousin of Lancelot and knight of the Round Table, to the extent that at the tournament of Dunstable in 1334 he jousted anonymously under Lionel's arms. He even went so far as to name one of his sons Lionel. Such chivalric imagination could hardly fail to have been inspired by romance literature, and known occurrences of such games at feasts often reflected Arthurian and romantic themes.

The founding of the Order of the Garter in 1348 functioned as the completion of the failed Round Table project. Membership this time was limited to the king, his son Edward, the Black Prince, and twenty-four hand-picked knights from among his new men and most loyal, prominent captains. Their annual feasts on the day of St. George were much like the one described at the beginning of *SGGK*, with the jousting and dancing, the "company so proven" (In. 58) of young energetic knights who have already made names for themselves. The Order's statutes, as given to us perhaps unreliably by the seventeenth century historian Ashmole, mention only religious duties for its members, but by practical association it had a

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military element due to all its members being active warriors and commanders.²⁶ By associating himself with such a strong central authority as Arthur, Edward sidestepped the contemporary question of whether a military order was more loyal to its head or its king by making himself both, as well as being its most visible and paradigmatic member.²⁷

It certainly worked. The widely-read French chronicler Jean le Bel, and after him Jean Froissart, lionized Edward's achievements and drew explicit Arthurian parallels.²⁸ The Garter knights were all active captains in the war against France, and in peacetime participated in many jousts and tournaments.²⁹ The lavishment of many of these events acted as proof to the king's subjects that England and its aristocracy were still strong and flourishing, despite worrisome war costs and severe economic hits from the Black Plague.³⁰ Certainly by the end of Edward's reign, the Order was considered the supreme embodiment of chivalry in Europe, and the emblem of the garter was widely known. English poets rhapsodized about its virtue and greatness.³¹

²⁶ Barber, Edward, Prince of Wales, 91.
²⁸ Ingledew, 14.
²⁹ Barber, Edward, Prince of Wales, 93. At the tournament at Eltham in 1348, the founding year, twelve blue garters were made for the knights with the motto emblazoned. Also see Maurice Keen. Chivalry. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 181 and Vale. Edward III, 82.
³⁰ Allmand, 185.
Laurence Minot was especially prolific in the years from 1332 to 1352, celebrating the common interests and successes of the Crown and the people in popular nationalist verse. Those who remembered the tumultuous years of Edward II and the rule of Isabella and Mortimer rejoiced in England's now envious position on the world stage.

Such was the climate in which SGGK was written. The Gawain-poet was almost certainly commissioned by a magnate of some means and importance. This is suggested by the poem's size, its complexity, which required time to write, and the presence of illustrations in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. There was precedent for this: Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Essex and Hereford (1336-61), commissioned an alliterative chivalric romance, and other knights, including Henry of Grosmont, were themselves authors on chivalric topics. The exploits of Garter knights would be high in the minds of fourteenth-century writers, and Edward's reputation provokes us to read connections between him and any mid- or late-century poem that concerns itself with an illustrious, energetic English court, as SGGK does. In all, the Order played a crucial part in preserving chivalric ideals in spite of the turbulent and disillusioning events in the fourteenth century, the devastation of both war and plague.

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32 Harvey, 41.
33 Cooke and Boulton, 45.
34 Ingledew, 14. Ingledew argues that even if the poem were written under Richard II, it would still refer to Edward III.
In light of such a reputation, the traditional interpretation of the Order’s motto has been that it refers to Edward’s claim to the throne of France, and that it was chosen as part of Edward’s larger efforts to garner support for the French war over a prolonged period of time. This does make considerable sense. The king publicly announced his determination to challenge Philip VI in October of 1337, adding as he did the French fleurs-de-lis to his shield arms. The colors of the fleurs-de-lis, blue and gold, are also the colors he later chose for the Order of the Garter. While the statutes of the Order, likely written after his death, do not include “King of France” among his titles, it is known that Edward did use that title at the time of the Order’s founding. That Edward considered his claim worthy to defend with bold, dramatic gestures is clear. His propaganda efforts included having clerics and bishops throughout the kingdom urge his subjects to pray for his success in France. He spent lavishly on building projects and new religious houses, and even instructed Archbishop Stratford in 1346 to read to the congregation of St. Paul’s Church alleged French plans to invade England. And again, we have the Order’s motto itself, which is in Old French: honi soit qui mal
At a time when English vernacular and nationalism were ever more common, the use of French for the motto stands out, especially since all of the other mottos Edward adopted at various times were indeed in English. In this way it comes across as a statement of jurisdiction, and the meaning of the words, “shamed be he who thinks evil of it,” declare implicitly and defiantly that moral right shall be asserted by military force. This attitude is supported by the manner in which Edward’s army did invade France, luxuriously bedecked in the finest materials in a conspicuous show of pageantry. Also, of the men he knighted before the first field battle, many were later inducted into the Order. In fact, the composition of the earliest Garter knights show a marked preference to those who had served in the French theater, passing over those captains who had only campaigned with Edward in Scotland and Ireland. Because of these reasons, primarily, most historians since Ashmole have taken the motto of the Order of the Garter to essentially be a dare meant to intimidate anyone tempted to oppose the war with King Philip VI of France.

There is no doubt the war was prominent in the minds of everyone involved in 1348, and the link with

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41 Vale, Edward III, 76.
42 Clein, 129.
43 Vale, Edward III, 81.
44 Barber, Edward, Prince of Wales, 49. Among the knighted were William of Montagu, earl of Salisbury (aged 18), and Roger Mortimer, grandson to the infamous usurper. Both were important Garter knights, and it is Salisbury’s wife who was alleged to have been raped by Edward.
45 Carruthers, 69.
the Order's practical function seems inescapable. And although few historians until recently seem to have considered SGGK in their analyses of the Garter's, the poem does contain its own connections with France. These connections, however, have nothing to do with war, but with chivalric reputation, a fact which many scholars of medieval literature have noted, but seemingly most historians have overlooked.

Middle English romances always preferred Sir Gawain, a very English knight and King Arthur's own nephew, to the French Sir Lancelot;\(^{46}\) as such, it is not surprising that SGGK mentions Lancelot only in passing, despite his immense popularity in France. This must have been a deliberate choice by an author almost certainly familiar with French courtly literature, which had become more available in England due to the long years of war in the mid-century.\(^{47}\) Gawain himself was also popular in France, so much, in fact, that his character developed a separate reputation in French romances. In both he is a master of courtly language, eloquent and charming and all around well-liked. But his morality shifts; in French romantic literature Gawain is a shameless and effective womanizer, while in English romances he is chaste and modest, an earnest model of right behavior and good manners.\(^{48}\) In SGGK, the English Gawain finds himself unexpectedly pitted against his own French reputation.

\(^{46}\) Cooper. Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, xvi.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., xii.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., xix.
Midway through the poem Gawain arrives at the Castle Hautdesert, deep in “curious regions” (In. 713) situated “in the midst of [a] wood” (In. 764); that is, far from the civilized English court of Camelot. Since the name Hautdesert has roots in Old French, perhaps we should not be surprised that the nobles gathered at the castle for Christmas are familiar with Gawain’s womanizing French reputation rather than his English one of “all virtue, / excellence, strength, and good breeding” (In. 911-2). They whisper with eagerness that now the famous Gawain will be able to teach them “the subtle speech of love” (In. 927). Yet Gawain seems oblivious to the rumors and does not act according to them. He certainly notices the beauty of his host’s wife when she appears radiantly clothed at dinner, but although they share sparkling conversation, “no innuendo darken[s] their delicate speech” (In. 1013). Later, during each of the three mornings that the lord of the castle is out hunting, the Lady of Hautdesert tries unsuccessfully to seduce the young knight. When her advances are gracefully parried by him, she remarks with a sly look in her eye that “it’s hard to be sure [he’s] really Sir Gawain” (In. 1293). She explains each time that the reputation she was familiar with had led her to believe that he would eagerly give in to sexual temptation and “make [his] claim quickly when the lady is willing” (In. 1490), but instead she “never hear[s] the smallest word from [him] about love-lore” (In. 1523-4). Put off his guard by her

49 Ibid. Endnotes to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 100, n34. Cooper remarks that here Gawain’s French reputation begins to more aggressively intrude upon the story and complicate things for him.
boldness, Gawain professes to be “unaware” (ln. 1487) of this idea about him, but his attraction to the lady (under the excuse of chivalric courtesy) leads him to grant her request for a kiss. He is, essentially, being tempted to fulfill his own “textually constructed’ reputation.”50

These themes are seen also in a scandalous story that spread through northern Europe in the 1350s and ‘60s. Jean le Bel repeats in his Chronique a story of an alleged rape by Edward III. Supposedly the young king falls madly in love with the beautiful Countess of Salisbury in 1342. While the earl of Salisbury is away from home, Edward goes to the castle at Salisbury and rapes the Countess. The earl dramatically confronts the king, renounces every gift the king has given him before, and leaves England forever to fight and die in Spain. Jean Froissart, who wrote after le Bel and based his own Chronicles on the latter’s work, doubted the tale’s veracity, and for good reason: le Bel gets many big details wrong, and such a lurid event, if true, would likely have been repeated in other sources that could be cross-referenced.51 The story is apocryphal by all accounts, but for someone as concerned with chivalric reputation as Edward III, even rumors could not be tolerated. It seems that this story was well-known before le Bel published it fifteen years after the

fact, and that European courts were nearly obsessed with it. As long as people even entertained the idea, it would stain Edward’s legacy and make a mockery of his planned Round Table.

Certain parallels between the two stories suggest themselves. As the French literary reputation precedes Gawain, so did the French chronicle surround Edward with a reputation for lust. As Gawain is actually not a womanizer, but rather a knight very concerned with living up to the ideals of his uncle King Arthur, so is the story of rape likely false and Edward concerned with living up to and reviving Arthurian chivalry. So, if we proceed to the end of SGGK, where Arthur and his knights form a new order around Gawain “to keep him company” (ln. 2517) after his moral test, and taking as their symbol the girdle, and proclaiming as their motto “honi soit qui mal pense” – “shamed be the one who thinks evil” – it is not hard to think of the Order of the Garter being founded as a way for Edward to shield himself from moral attacks by gathering the best knights of England around him, and defiantly displaying both a symbol of his alleged, but false, infraction, the garter, and his chivalric prowess.

54 Cooper, endnotes to Sir Gawain, 109.
One of the foremost advocates of the Order’s motto referring to the French throne claim, Juliet Vale, has admitted that she has no explanation for why the Order would possibly choose a garter as the motto’s “vehicle.”55 The only other apocryphal story is always rejected; it says that the Countess of Salisbury, at a tournament, was embarrassed when her garter fell from her leg into public view, and as onlookers laughed at her, King Edward knelt to pick it up, returned it with a bow, and declared the Order’s motto as a defense of her honor.56 While flattering to the king, it nevertheless has the ring of contemporary legend and would not in any case provide a satisfactory explanation for the Order’s origin. Working purely from historical records and the French chronicles, historians cannot explain the garter, with its notably erotic connotations and absolute lack of connection to the war in France.57 But scholars who consider SGGK realize that it helps us find a convincing context for the relevance of one apocryphal story over the other.

It should be noted just what Gawain’s sin is. Near the end of a probably deadly quest to prove his worthiness as a Round Table knight – as Edward’s reputation at the time of his alleged rape was still fresh and untested by time – Gawain enjoys the hospitality of the lord of Castle Hautdesert, whose name is later revealed to be Bertilak. The two make a pact that whatever each of them wins during the day they will exchange that evening. The first two days Gawain only

55 Vale, Edward III, 82.
56 Keen, 194.
57 Ingledew, 6.
receives one kiss from the lady of the castle, and each kiss he dutifully returns to Bertilak without telling him from where they come. The third morning, the lady is more forthright and seductive than ever, and manages to make Gawain keep her girdle as a gift; she claims it is a love-gift, but he only consents to take it when she reveals that it has a magic that will not let him "be cut down by any man nor slain" (In. 1853). For the first time he reveals a fear of death, accepting the girdle and keeping his promise to hide it from Bertilak. Dishonesty and the breach of hospitality towards his host-lord are his sins.

When it is revealed that the Green Knight is Bertilak, and that the seductions were an elaborately-constructed test of Gawain's worthiness, Gawain is "so shaken with guilt, so grief-struck that he quake[s] within" (In. 2370). He curses "cowardice" and "covetousness," vices that caused him "to give in to [his] greed and go against [him]self / And the noble and generous code of knightly men" (In. 2380-1). Bertilak disagrees, praising Gawain for never fully giving into sexual temptation. Even Gawain's confession, he says, clears him of guilt (In. 2390). This attitude is shared by King Arthur and the other knights when Gawain returns to Camelot. But the young knight is unsatisfied. He desires perfection. Throughout the poem, he prays desperately that he not miss Mass, and frequently invokes the Virgin Mary. As Mary represents sexual purity, so does St. John, on whose day the deal with Bertilak is made. Gawain's shame reveals the depth of his desire to truly

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58 Cooper, endnotes to Sir Gawain, 99, n28b.
59 Ibid., 105, n64.
be holy. These are values Edward himself sought to promote, as evidenced in his own deep concern for the importance of masses in the atonement of sin. Additionally, the king showed special devotion to the Virgin Mary above all others, often swearing by her, as does Gawain in the poem. 60

Interpreting the motto of the Order of the Garter to refer to Edward III’s aggressive claim to the French throne cannot explain the garter itself as a symbol. By the time the Order was founded in 1348, the member knights had already proved their worth in the French war. 61 Edward would not need the chivalric society to defend a war that was so far successful and popular. Rather, the themes of overcoming sexual temptation and a brotherhood’s support of one of its own against accusations of unchivalrous behavior present in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight lead me to believe that the primary function of the Order and the meaning of its motto was to defend Edward’s reputation against the false allegations of rape and preserve his legacy as Europe’s most illustrious royal knight. To his credit, and despite whatever actual faults, Edward III probably came closer than any other English monarch

60 W. M. Ormrod. “The Personal Religion of Edward III.” Speculum 64, no. 4 (1989), 855-8. The statutes of the Order of the Garter allow for an unusually high number of masses to be said for dead members, with all member knights required to contribute money towards them.

to actually reviving the legacy of King Arthur's Round Table in medieval England.

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