



HAL
open science

Honi soit qui mal y pense : the countess of Salisbury and the "slipt garter"

Leo Carruthers

► **To cite this version:**

Leo Carruthers. Honi soit qui mal y pense : the countess of Salisbury and the "slipt garter". Colette Stévanovitch et René Tixier. Surface et profondeur. Mélanges offerts à Guy Bourquin à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire, 7, Association des médiévistes anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur, pp.221-234, 2003, GRENDEL, 2-901198-35-X. hal-04674732

HAL Id: hal-04674732

<https://hal.science/hal-04674732v1>

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Honi soit qui mal y pense:

The Countess of Salisbury and the “Slipt Garter”

In an oft-repeated but ill-documented tale about the founding of the Order of the Garter and its curious motto, it is said that King Edward III (1327-77) used the famous words to rebuke his courtiers when he gallantly retrieved a garter which the Countess of Salisbury had dropped during a ball. What lies beneath the surface of this story? Can there be any truth in the anecdote of the “slipt garter”? (The expression belongs to John Selden and was repeated by Elias Ashmole, the first Garter Herald of Arms to make a serious attempt to establish the history of the Order).¹ In the first place, when was the Order of the Garter founded? Who was the Countess of Salisbury at the time? And when is the ball supposed to have taken place, since a different lady might be meant if the incident happened a long time before the foundation of the chivalric order? Is the countess merely a cipher, reduced to a title, or does her personality have a bearing on the legend? Perhaps more importantly, what documentary evidence exists for the story, and where did it come from?

Unfortunately the Garter register, known as the Black Book, was not compiled until very much later, during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-47), with the result that much of the Order’s early history is obscure.² The chronicler and poet Froissart, writing in 1387-90, does mention a romantic liaison between Edward III and a certain “Comtesse de Sallebrin” (*sic*), but not the anecdote of the “slipt garter”. In fact the story about the Countess of Salisbury losing her garter is not recorded in England until about the same time as the Black Book was composed; it was collected by Polydore Vergil in 1513 but not published in

¹ John Selden (1584-1654), English jurist and legal historian whose manuscript collection was bequeathed to the Bodleian Library. He is quoted by Elias Ashmole in *The Institutions Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*, London, 1668-72; dedicated to King Charles II, this is the first book about the Order (the reference to the ‘slipt garter’ appears in ch. V, section I). Ashmole (1617-92) is also remembered as the founder of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

² For a survey of Garter theories, the latest authority is Hugh Collins, *The Order of the Garter, 1348-1461: Chivalry and Politics in Late Medieval England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (see esp. pp. 256-8); also W. G. Cooke and D’A. J. D. Boulton, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?*”, *Medium Ævum*, 68 (1999), 42-54.

print until 1534.³ He recounts how, according to “popular tradition” (*fama vulgus*), Edward III “picked up from the ground a garter from the stocking of his queen or mistress, which had become unloosed by some chance”.⁴ Aware of the courtiers' knowing looks as he was about to hand it to her, as if at an amorous action, the king is reported to have tied it instead around his own leg, addressing the court with the words which would later become the famous motto.⁵ This may have been inspired by a similar story in the Arthurian romance *Tirant lo Blanc*, composed in Catalan in the 1460s and printed late in the fifteenth century, with Castilian and Italian versions appearing in the sixteenth; but there, the lady is not identified.⁶ Polydore Vergil's good faith is not in doubt (he was a serious historian); but the question is, where did the tradition he heard come from? It is not recorded by any contemporary documents relating to the Order of the Garter, and has the appearance of a later invention whose intention is to explain and justify the motto's somewhat obscure words. Even if the anecdote itself should prove to be entirely apocryphal, it does involve real people; one would therefore like to be sure as to who the countess in the story was.

English antiquarians and historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were familiar with both Froissart's and Vergil's accounts. William Camden (1551-1623) mentions Vergil's version of the story, but goes a step further by saying that the lady who dropped her garter was the king's mistress, not the queen, even naming her as Joan, Countess of Salisbury.⁷ Elias Ashmole knew the story about the countess but takes pains to underline the fact that neither Froissart nor any other early historian provides the least evidence about the “slipt garter”; in fact he suspected it might well be a later invention by the French at the time of the renewal of the Hundred Years War under Henry V (1413-22), the hint of scandal being intended to discredit the honour of the Order of the Garter. Unlike both Froissart and Vergil, Ashmole also gives the countess a name, agreeing in this with Camden: Joan, popularly known as the Fair Maid of Kent and later Princess of Wales, though Ashmole questions whether Froissart could have meant the princess. Furthermore, he thought that Selden was confused about Joan's identity, since Selden referred to her as being

³ Polydore Vergil was an Italian ecclesiastic who had come to England on a mission in 1502 and stayed on for many years. A friend of Sir Thomas More and other English humanists, he held the post of Archdeacon of Wells (1508-54). His *Anglicae Historiae libri XXVI* was published in Basle in 1534-38.

⁴ Polydore Vergil, quoted by Richard Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine, A Biography of the Black Prince*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1978 (repr. 1996), p. 85.

⁵ Grace Holmes, *The Order of the Garter: Its Knights and Stall Plates 1348 to 1984*, Windsor: Oxley, 1984, pp. 4-5.

⁶ The Catalan authors were Joanot Martorell (d. 1468) and Martí Joan de Galba (d. 1490), *Tirant le Blanc*, ed. Martí de Riquer, Barcelona: Selecta, 1947. See also *Tirant lo Blanc*, trans. David H. Rosenthal, London: Macmillan, 1984. The anecdote appears in ch. lxxxv.

⁷ See Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*, p. 86.

Countess of both Kent and Salisbury, whereas she was actually, according to Ashmole, the wife of Sir Thomas Holland before she married the Black Prince. But both were right, as we shall see below, at least about the Fair Maid of Kent's titles. While the account by Ashmole makes it clear that the story was still current in the seventeenth century, the use of the lady's name shows that it had continued to circulate in an embroidered version independent of Vergil's *History*. The confusion may be cleared up by taking a closer look at the years during which Edward III was planning the Round Table and the Order of the Garter.

The exact date of foundation of the Order of the Garter was once doubtful (opinions ranged from 1344 to 1351), though there is now agreement among historians on the year 1348.⁸ The problem lay perhaps in a certain evolution in the king's intentions over a period of years, about which even Froissart, one of the earliest chroniclers to mention the Garter, was not entirely clear.⁹ This led to a similar hesitation on the part of Ashmole. As early as 1344 Edward III planned to organise a Round Table, which Froissart took to be the foundation date of the Order, though it was not until four years later that the original idea took concrete form as the Order of the Garter. What is clear is the literary influence of chivalric romance on England's first order of chivalry, as the king deliberately modelled his idea on the traditions of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. It is known that Edward III was attracted to romantic pageantry and glamour, whether from real-life sources or from literature. He and his companions were inspired by a wish to revive the traditions of the golden age of chivalry. In January 1344, at a feast in Windsor Castle, the king therefore announced his intention of re-founding the Round Table; the formal initiation was to take place the following Pentecost, after the pattern of Arthurian romance.¹⁰ He then planned a grand jousting tournament to take place at Windsor on St George's Day (23 April), setting up a table 200 feet long for the entertainment of the knights and their ladies.

The original, ambitious idea was to create a large chivalric fellowship of three hundred knights, and construction even began at Windsor on a building designed to house the Round Table. But this plan was modified during the next few years, to be replaced by the much smaller, more exclusive Order of the Garter. It was to be limited to twenty-six members: the sovereign, his eldest son and twenty-four companions, most of whom had accompanied Edward III on the Crécy campaign of 1346. A chivalric fellowship with an explicitly religious

⁸ See Collins, *The Order of the Garter, 1348-1461*.

⁹ Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Siméon Luce, Paris : Société de l'Histoire de France, 1869-72, iv. 203. See also *Froissart: Chronicles*, ed. & trans. Geoffrey Brereton, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1968.

¹⁰ Juliet Vale, "Arthur in English Society", in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999, 185-96: 192-3.

function, it was to have its own collegiate church and permanent home, St George's chapel in Windsor Castle. The completion in 1349 of the new chapel, where the coats of arms of Knights of the Garter were to remain on display, provided one more date which has sometimes been wrongly taken to mark the Order's beginning.¹¹ One way or the other, it is certain that the foundation of the Order of the Garter soon fired the imagination of English knights and European princes. It gave an impetus to chivalric values and was associated from the first with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, a tradition out of which it had in a certain sense grown, so that fantasy and reality fed each other. It is not therefore surprising to find the motto (or a version of it) appearing in literature, as it does at the end of one of the most famous English chivalric poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,¹² whose probable connection with the Order of the Garter has been examined elsewhere.¹³ That readers of such courtly literature in many countries would have seen a connection with the prestigious Order of the Garter is unsurprising, since the Order fascinated the courts of Europe and was emulated by them (see also the reference to *Tirant lo Blanc*, above).¹⁴

As for the adoption of the unusual Garter motto, which can literally be translated "Shamed be the one (or, Shame on him) who thinks ill of it", we may well wonder what the "it" (*y* in French) could refer to. The meaning is far from obvious and has been the object of much speculation. What would Edward III not wish anyone to disapprove of, especially the nobility and more particularly the founding companions of the Order? It seems probable that the king was thinking of his claim to the French throne, which dated from March 1337, and the war in France which he had been pursuing on and off ever since. This was indeed Ashmole's suggestion, which modern historians tend to confirm.¹⁵ The first military engagements had been launched in the summer of 1340, followed by a truce during which the English and French fought together in Prussia, supporting the Teutonic Knights against the Tartars. Edward renewed the war in France in 1342-43, followed by another truce of three years. In the interim came the Round Table plan, and the jousting at Windsor in April 1344. But playing at combat could hardly satisfy these hardy young knights, and the most serious

¹¹ For a full list of the founding companions and subsequent members in the fourteenth century, see *The Complete Peerage*, by G. E. C. [Cokayne], vol. II, rev. and ed. Vicary Gibbs, London: St Catherine Press, 1912, Appendix B (pp. 534 ff.); Holmes, *The Order of the Garter*, pp. 120 ff.; and Collins, *The Order of the Garter 1348-1461*, pp. 288-99.

¹² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, [1925] 2nd ed. revised by Norman Davis, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967.

¹³ See Leo Carruthers, "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Medium Ævum*, 70 (2001), 66-79.

¹⁴ For European interest in, and emulation of, the Garter see D'Arcy J. D. Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe, 1325-1520*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1986.

¹⁵ See Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*, p. 86.

military campaign in France took place in 1346; the king himself was still only 34, while his eldest son, the Prince of Wales, now fought his first battle at the age of 16. After a resounding English victory at Crécy in August 1346, the siege of Calais went on for nearly another year before it was brought to a successful conclusion. When the Order of the Garter was founded in 1348, Edward III clearly gave priority to those who had recently campaigned at his side in France; and for the remainder of his long reign (he lived until 1377) service in the French war continued to be seen as a prerequisite for Garter membership.¹⁶ It has also been pointed out that, far from being a lady's garment, the buckled Garter as depicted from the earliest years of the Order was part of a knight's accoutrement and may therefore be seen as a symbol of brotherhood, of unity and concord between the Order's members.¹⁷ It may even be that the Order itself created a fashion for wearing garters, rather than the other way round, since the word "garter" is extremely rare before the foundation of the Order.¹⁸

A closer look needs to be taken at Jean Froissart (c. 1337-c. 1410) because of the role played by his *Chroniques* in transmitting at least one part of the romantic legend, that of the amorous but chaste affair between Edward III and the lady referred to as the "Comtesse de Sallebrin". Froissart was a native of Valenciennes, in Hainault, the homeland of Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III.¹⁹ He came to England in 1361 to collect material for his future histories and was well received by the king and queen; he also visited Scotland at this time. He later served on a number of royal missions and was close to the affairs of court. In 1366, for example, he accompanied the Prince of Wales to Bordeaux; in 1368 he went to Milan with Lionel, Duke of Clarence. He was therefore personally acquainted with many members of the royal family, including the Princess of Wales; he was also friendly with a number of the founding companions of the Order of the Garter, such as Sir John Chandos (d. 1370), who gave him information about the French war and the chivalric values lying behind the foundation of the Order. After Queen Philippa's death in 1369 he returned to Valenciennes and completed the first version of Book I of the *Chroniques*, drawing freely on the work of Jean le Bel, though in later versions he often substituted his own account of events.²⁰ He received several ecclesiastical appointments and continued to travel in Flanders and France, publishing Book II

¹⁶ Collins, *The Order of the Garter, 1348-1461*, pp. 39-41, 280.

¹⁷ Holmes, *The Order of the Garter*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*, p. 87.

¹⁹ See Froissart's biography in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of French Literature*, ed. Joyce Reid, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 245-6. See also the briefer paragraph on Jean le Bel, p. 340.

²⁰ Jean le Bel (c. 1290-c. 1370) was a canon of Liège whose chronicle covered the period 1329-61. *Chronique de Jean le Bel*, ed. J. Viard and E. Déprez, Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, I, 1904 (p. 285 for the story about the Countess of Salisbury at Wark Castle).

in 1387 and Book III in 1390. He revisited England in 1394-95, meeting King Richard II, and wrote Book IV before the end of the century. The "Comtesse de Sallebrin" story appears in Book II, ch. 46 and Book III, ch. 51 and 55. Presuming that Froissart was actually given this account by one of his English contacts, who can the countess in question be?

According to Froissart, the affair took place quite early in Edward III's career, long before the foundation of the Order of the Garter: it was in 1334, during one of his campaigns in Scotland, in the long war which followed the death of the Scottish king, Robert Bruce. It is historically correct that Edward III intervened in Scottish affairs over a long period, hoping to unite the two kingdoms or at least to make the Scottish king his vassal. His younger sister, Joan, was married in 1328 to Bruce's son, the future David II (1329-71), who was only a boy of four at the time (Joan was seven); but Edward realised that the Scottish lords would never allow his child brother-in-law to pay homage to him as overlord. For this reason the English king supported the rival Edward Balliol, whom he helped to become titular King of Scots (1332-56), hoping to use him as a puppet. Balliol invaded Scotland in 1332, was crowned at Scone but was soon driven out again. Edward III personally fought the Scots in 1333, defeating them at Halidon Hill near Berwick and reimposing Balliol. The latter paid homage to the English king and ceded much of southern Scotland to him, with the result that the Border area was in a state of guerilla warfare for many years.²¹

Froissart's story of courtly love is set in this turbulent region in the year 1334. It seems to be an embroidered version of Jean le Bel's briefer and cruder account, possibly added to by Froissart's English informants, if not indeed enlarged upon by his own imagination.²² The "Comte de Sallebrin", a supporter of the English king, has been captured by the Scots, leaving his beautiful wife to defend their Northumberland home, the castle of Wark-on-Tweed, not far from Berwick and standing on the river which forms the border with Scotland. The king delivers the castle from a Scottish siege. The lady offers the king hospitality, wins a game of chess (and the king's love), accepts a ring from her royal opponent but manages to return it to him before he leaves the castle. Subsequently, to avoid embarrassing his hostess, the king does not return to the castle on his way back to England from the Scottish war. This courtly story has been seen as a parallel to, and indeed a partial inspiration of, the love-scenes

²¹ The succession question was not finally resolved until 1357, after Balliol's departure and David II's release by his English captors in exchange for a large ransom. Soon after David's return to Scotland his wife Joan (1321-62) left him and spent the rest of her life at the court of her brother, Edward III.

²² In fact Jean le Bel claims that Edward III raped the countess, but there is no evidence for this elsewhere, and Froissart refused to believe it. See Antonia Gransden, "The Alleged Rape by Edward III of the Countess of Salisbury", *English Historical Review*, 87 (1972), 333-44.

with the lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which it may well be.²³ It is perfectly possible that the anonymous English poet could have read Froissart's *Chroniques*, Book II of which, it will be recalled, appeared in 1387, and Book III in 1390 — thereby implying a late date of composition for the poem, fully in keeping with other arguments that have been put forward in support of this view.²⁴

As to the identity of the protagonists, the first problem that arises is the spelling of the name "Sallebrin", not known elsewhere, though arguably a form derived from the Latin *Salisburyensis*, "of Salisbury" (Sarum was the ecclesiastical usage). It has the air of a name imperfectly understood by a foreigner, even though the city and cathedral of Salisbury were famous, and the Salisbury title was equally so, at least in Froissart's time. But the second and more serious problem is that this title, though indeed held by a leading noble family, the Montagues, when Froissart was in England in the 1360s, was not in use in the year 1334, since the earldom of Salisbury was not granted to William, Lord Montague, until 1337. There had once been an earldom of the same name, going back to 1142, but this had fallen into abeyance in 1261.²⁵ Since Alice de Lacy, the only person who might have laid claim to the old Salisbury title but never did so, was still alive in 1337 and did not die until 1348, the king clearly took it for granted that the earldom of Salisbury had long been extinct, thus leaving him free to grant the title to William de Montague, one of his favourite knights. Now if the identification of "Sallebrin" with Salisbury be accepted, then Froissart cannot have meant a person who was known by this name in 1334 (since there was none), but only someone who later became Countess of Salisbury — in short, the wife of the 1st or 2nd earls of the Montague line. They are not difficult to identify.

William, Lord Montague (c. 1302-44), was a companion-in-arms of Edward III's who had been in command at the siege of Berwick, for which reason he was granted, in August 1333, Wark Castle, the site of Froissart's romantic story.²⁶ He was married in 1327 to Katherine, daughter of the 1st Lord Grandison; and as he was created Earl of Salisbury in 1337, his wife became the first Countess of Salisbury of the Montague line. Their son William, 2nd Earl of

²³ See the discussion by Emile Pons, éd. et trad., *Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert, poème anglais du XIV^e siècle*, Paris: Aubier, 1946, pp. 43-46.

²⁴ For the possibility of a late dating and a patron who was a pretender to the throne see Carruthers, "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March", pp. 70-79.

²⁵ Ela, Countess of Salisbury in her own right, died in 1261. According to *The Complete Peerage* the title should by law have gone to one of her great-granddaughters, Ela Longespee, wife of Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, but no claim was ever made in her name (she died in 1310); the latter's only daughter was Alice de Lacy, *suo jure* Countess of Lincoln, widow of Thomas, Earl of Lancaster (executed in 1322).

²⁶ G. A. Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 26.

Salisbury (1328-97), succeeded his father in 1344; he was married firstly (in 1341) to a member of the royal family, Lady Joan Plantagenet (1328-85), daughter of the Earl of Kent, of whom more below; and secondly, soon after the dissolution of this marriage in 1349, to Elizabeth (1343-1415), daughter of John, Lord Mohun.²⁷ It is clear from the dates that only Katherine de Grandison could be the lady involved in Froissart's story of 1334, if indeed she was in the north of England at the time; there is certainly no reason why Edward III could not have paid courtly homage to the faithful wife of a close friend, and continued to feel affection for her after her husband's death (she lived until 1349). Joan Plantagenet may be excluded as she was only six in 1334, while Elizabeth Mohun was not even born. On the other hand, the situation changes dramatically if we look at the years immediately leading up to the foundation of the Order of the Garter in 1348, when the identity of the Countess of Salisbury had in fact become a diplomatic problem involving the king and the pope. Indeed, at least one modern historian has attempted to dissociate the "Comtesse de Sallebrin" of 1334 from the "slipt garter" incident, moving the latter forward to August 1347, with Joan of Kent (now aged 19) as the mysterious lady, at a ball to celebrate the taking of Calais at the end of the long siege.²⁸

The lady at the centre of this controversy was Joan of Kent, a first cousin of Edward III's who had been practically adopted by Queen Philippa. Her father, Prince Edmund, 1st Earl of Kent, youngest son of King Edward I, had been executed for treason in 1330 (not by the young Edward III himself, but by his mother and Mortimer), but this was not held against the infant who was brought up at court.²⁹ Reputed to be a great beauty — hence her popular sobriquet as the Fair Maid of Kent — this lady was to find herself beset by thorny legal questions surrounding each of her three marriages, leading more than once to difficulties with her patrons, the king and queen. This began early in 1340 when, barely twelve years old but already nubile, she had married an obscure young man a few years older than herself, Thomas Holland (younger son of a Lancashire knight), in a private, informal ceremony. This took the form of an exchange of vows in the presence of witnesses, though without the blessing of a priest. To go through with such a lovematch in the days when the marriage of an

²⁷ For all information on the earldom of Salisbury and its holders see *The Complete Peerage*, vol. XI, rev. Geoffrey White, London: St Catherine Press, 1949, under Salisbury (pages 373-91 for the relevant period).

²⁸ Margaret Galway, "Joan of Kent and the Order of the Garter", *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 1 (1947-8), 13-50. This article makes two further suggestions that others have condemned as unfounded: that Edward III had a bastard son named William Montague by a sister of the 1st Earl of Salisbury, and that he compelled the acceptance of this son as 2nd Earl of Salisbury to the exclusion of the rightful heir (criticised by Holmes, *Estates of the Higher Nobility*, 28 n3, and Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*, 261 n3).

²⁹ Edward III had succeeded to the throne in 1327 at the age of 14, after the deposition of his father, Edward II (murdered soon afterwards), by Queen Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer.

heirss required a royal licence, and when the betrothal of a near relative of the royal family was an affair of state to be arranged by the king himself, was hazardous to say the least. Nevertheless, though irregular, the union was valid in canon law, as the later court case would prove. That it was not merely an engagement is proved by the fact that they took each other as man and wife *per verba de presenti*, i.e. using the present tense, not the future; and anyway the relationship, according to the later testimony of both partners, was consummated.³⁰

Some months after this clandestine marriage Thomas Holland left to fight in Prussia, and was absent for a year or more, from which he returned a knight. But very soon after his departure, during the winter of 1340-41, a new and more prestigious alliance was arranged by the Lady Joan's guardians, i.e. her mother, the dowager Countess of Kent, and her maternal uncle, Lord Wake; this was to a young man her own age, William de Montague, son of the 1st Earl of Salisbury. It is not clear if and when Joan told her mother about the private marriage; but she, perhaps genuinely believing the Holland contract to be illicit and invalid, must have persuaded her daughter (still, it must be recalled, hardly more than a child) to remain silent, and the public marriage with Montague was duly celebrated in January 1341.³¹ When Sir Thomas Holland returned at the end of 1341 or early in 1342, he found himself faced with a *fait accompli*. Whatever Joan herself may have said to him, the Montagues were unwilling to recognise the validity of the Holland marriage, and in this they had the support of the king and queen, who took a close interest in Joan. Not being at that time in a position to engage in a costly court case, Holland was obliged to wait until 1347 before attempting to recover his wife by legal means; and probably believing that he would not have a fair hearing in an English court, he eventually had recourse to the pope in Avignon. During the intervening years he had attracted the king's attention by his military valour, to such a remarkable extent that he was invited to become one of the first companions of the Garter when it was founded in 1348.

In the meantime, the 1st Earl of Salisbury died in January 1344 as a result of injuries sustained during the Round Table jousting at Windsor, to be succeeded by his son William. The young Joan of Kent was therefore Countess of Salisbury from early in 1344. Almost as close to the king as his father had been before him, the 2nd Earl of Salisbury became one of the founding companions of

³⁰ The best and most accurate account of Joan's unusual marital history, based on a close study of the contemporary papal registers, is by Karl P. Wentersdorf, "The Clandestine Marriages of the Fair Maid of Kent", *Journal of Medieval History*, 5.3 (1979), 203-31. He explains (p. 205) the legal implication of *per verba de presenti* — an interesting example of the power of grammar (here, the verb tense); it does not mean 'by the words of those present' as suggested by Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*, p. 172.

³¹ Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility*, 28 n3, provides legal evidence that the Montague marriage took place before 21 January 1341.

the Garter four years later. His mother, née Katherine de Grandison, dowager Countess of Salisbury, may well, as we have seen, be the lady referred to in the courtly story situated by Froissart in 1334 — where, let us recall, there is no mention of a “slipt garter”. Furthermore, as she is known to have taken a vow of chastity after her husband's death in 1344, this sister of Bishop Grandison of Exeter does not seem a likely candidate for a clandestine royal courtship between then and 1348. She did, nevertheless, remain in contact with the court during her chaste widowhood, for she was sent abroad on a royal mission in November 1347, possibly to Avignon, in which case it was probably in connection with her son's legal difficulties.³² If so, it proved to be of no avail, as Thomas Holland obtained satisfaction after a protracted lawsuit which ended in November 1349: the legality of his contract with the Fair Maid of Kent was upheld, which meant that her marriage to Salisbury had to be declared null and void. Joan thus became free, after nine years, to return to her first husband, which is apparently what she herself had wanted all along. While the court case was taking place she had been called upon, through the intermediary of a canon lawyer, to state whether Sir Thomas's claim that she had entered into marriage with him of her own free will, in the presence of witnesses, and that the union had been consummated, was true. This she had been able to confirm, though not without difficulty, as she was for a time sequestered by the Montague family in order to prevent a meeting with the lawyer who was to represent her in Avignon, and was only able to see him when the papal court had insisted on obtaining her testimony.

The transition to the Holland household seems to have been most happy, judging by the fact that the couple had six children, the first of whom was born in 1350. Joan, now Lady Holland, had not expected to inherit her father's title because she had a younger brother, John, 3rd Earl of Kent; but when the latter died in 1352, Joan became Countess of Kent in her own right. The earldom of Kent was treated as a peerage in tail general, i.e. descent was allowed, in the absence of a son, through the female line, a somewhat unusual practice though not quite as rare in the fourteenth century as it would later become.³³ It was also relatively common at the time for the husband in such a case, if not already holding a title, or if holding one of lower degree than his spouse, to apply for elevation to the peerage in right of his wife, something which, again, became increasingly rare in later generations. Accordingly Sir Thomas, who had been

³² See *The Complete Peerage*, vol. XI, 1949, pp. 387-8. Wentersdorf, p. 212, suggests that the dowager countess's trip abroad in November 1347 'at the king's command' may have been to Avignon to defend the legality of her son's marriage.

³³ The point at issue was whether a title had been granted, at the time of its creation, to the 'heirs of his body' of the original holder, or restricted to the 'heirs *male* of his body'. On Kent see *The Complete Peerage*, by G. E. C., vol. X, rev. and ed. H. A. Doubleday, Geoffrey White and Lord Howard de Walden, London, 1945, Appendix K, p. 126.

summoned to parliament in 1353 as Baron Holland, was in 1360 created 1st Earl of Kent of the Holland line. This he did not live long to enjoy, as he died soon afterwards, in December 1360.

Within a short time the Countess of Kent, now almost thirty-three years old, was again contemplating marriage. Her cousin Edward, Prince of Wales, was already known to be passionately in love with her. Edward was two years her junior and still unmarried, which was rather unusual for a prince of his age — though he had an illegitimate son, not at all unusual for a Plantagenet. He and Joan were secretly married in the spring of 1361, without even asking the king's permission. One might have hoped that Joan's first clandestine marriage would be a lesson; but perhaps it was, since she now knew that there was probably a way to force papal approval for a cousin union which could well be seen as a cause for excommunication, let alone of the king's displeasure. There was in fact a flurry of exchanges between English and papal canon lawyers leading to an official dissolution of the invalid union with Edward but granting the required dispensation for a legal marriage, which was publicly celebrated in October 1361.³⁴ Therefore the same lady who started out in life as a royal earl's daughter became in turn the secret wife of a commoner, then a countess by marriage, a bigamous wife obliged to separate from her second husband, then a knight's wife, a countess in her own right, and finally a princess by marriage. The complicated series of marriages and titles appears to have confused the antiquary Elias Ashmole, who, though clear in his mind that Joan the Fair Maid of Kent was firstly the wife of Sir Thomas Holland and later Princess of Wales, thought Selden wrong to suppose that she was also the Countess of Kent and Salisbury — which she indeed was, though not concomitantly. The great French scholar Emile Pons, who examined the question of the Garter motto and its possible connection with the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, was led by a similar confusion into the mistaken conclusion that since Joan was Lady Holland, she could not have been a countess, either of Kent or of Salisbury.³⁵ Whether she could have been Froissart's "Comtesse de Sallebrin" remained in doubt; Ashmole seemed to think not, as the dates did not square, while Pons is more hesitant, not perhaps having realised that Joan was only six in 1334.

The new Princess of Wales was successful in her role as presumed future queen. Much of her married life was spent in Bordeaux, capital of Aquitaine,

³⁴ *The Complete Peerage*, by G. E. C., vol. XI, pp. 389-90; Wentersdorf, "The Clandestine Marriages", pp. 217-9.

³⁵ Pons, *Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert*, pp. 41-46, 'L'aventure amoureuse de Gauvain et la fondation de la Jarretièrè'; see esp. 41 n1, a page-long note containing a highly condensed discussion of the 'slipt garter'.

where the Black Prince ruled in his father's name from 1363 onwards.³⁶ The marriage produced two sons, Edward (1365-70) and Richard, born at Bordeaux in 1367. Unfortunately the Prince of Wales, worn out by his labours in war, died in 1376, a year before the old king. The result was that Joan soon found herself the mother of a boy-king, Richard II (1377-99), but not queen herself. She never forgot her first husband or her Holland children, the latter being brought up at court with their younger half-brother Richard, now king, and through this connection the Holland family was destined, in the following generations, to make a number of other important royal marriages.³⁷ Joan lived until 1385, dying at the age of only fifty-seven, not particularly old in comparison with other great ladies or indeed some other kings' mothers.³⁸ It may seem surprising, given that she could have been interred beside the Prince of Wales in Canterbury Cathedral, that she gave instructions in her will of 1385 that she was to be buried beside her first husband, Sir Thomas Holland. It was, however, quite a common occurrence for women who had been married several times to choose burial other than with the last spouse, either with an earlier husband or even sometimes to return to their paternal family — perhaps thus making a final show of independence in a society that did not allow women very much leeway.³⁹

Clearly Joan of Kent, Princess of Wales, was a force to be reckoned with. It seems likely that this beautiful woman with whom men fell madly in love, whose disputed marital status more than once provoked a scandal, may have become a peg, one on which a later generation hung a tale invented to explain both the Garter and the motto. She may even have been the victim of an amalgam with her former mother-in-law, the 1st Countess of Salisbury, once rumoured to be the lover of Edward III — either the victim of a rapist, if any credence may be placed in Jean le Bel, or at least, in Froissart's edulcorated version, the king's "mistress" in the courtly sense. It is quite possible that the

³⁶ The prince's movements are traced in great detail by Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine*. However, the dates given for his wife's previous marriages (p. 172) are not as accurate as those provided by Wentersdorf, who took his information directly from the papal records.

³⁷ For a more detailed account of the later Plantagenets and some of their multiple marriage alliances, including the Hollands, see Leo Carruthers, "Chaucer's In-laws: Who Was Who in the Wars of the Roses", in *Mariages à la mode anglo-saxonne*, éd. Roger Lejosne & Dominique Sipièrre, Amiens: Université de Picardie (Coll. Sterne), 1995, pp. 40-50 with inset double-page family tree.

³⁸ Two examples from the next century of kings' mothers who were not queens are Edward IV's mother, Cecily Neville, Duchess of York, who lived to be eighty (1415-95), and Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, who lived to be 66 (1443-1509).

³⁹ See Joel T. Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth-Century England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, esp. ch. III, "Widows". Despite the title, there is much here about the fourteenth century too, and the discussion of wills and women's legal rights applies equally to both centuries.

king paid court, chaste or otherwise, *both* to Katherine de Grandison (in 1334) *and* to her beautiful daughter-in-law, his cousin Joan of Kent (in the 1340s). And that such things, whether true or not, were the subject of gossip: during the years that Joan was Countess of Salisbury she was suspected of adultery with Sir Thomas Holland — her true husband, but who believed that at the time? It may well be that she *was* behind the curious motto of the Garter; recent commentators do not exclude the possibility that the familiar legend had some foundation in fact.⁴⁰

Whether it did or not, it is easy to see how the whiff of scandal played into the hands of Henry IV (1399-1413) and his Lancastrian successors. The invention (or at least dissemination) of the “slipt garter” story may have been part of Henry IV’s slanderous campaign to discredit Richard II’s mother, presenting her in an unfavourable light as an unfaithful wife.⁴¹ Rumoured to be Edward III’s mistress who married instead his son and heir, with a flock of children from an earlier marriage (the Hollands), one can well imagine the insinuation: who knew if Richard II was legitimate or not? It should be noted that in the following century an analogous (and equally spurious) argument was used by Richard III when he usurped the throne in 1483, declaring his nephews to be illegitimate on the grounds that his brother, Edward IV (1461-83), had not been validly married to Elizabeth Woodville, Lady Grey — another widow with a large family who, in the view of her enemies, were “imposed” on the court by a besotted young king. It would likewise have remained in the interest of the Lancastrian kings (from 1399 to 1461), ever anxious about the legitimacy of their own claim to the throne, to slander Richard II’s mother. This may well explain why Polydore Vergil, more than a century after Richard II’s death, found the story about the Fair Maid of Kent still circulating at the court of the Tudor monarch, Henry VIII, whose father had been heir to the Lancastrians in 1485.

The Garter motto therefore, although mysterious, is not totally opaque, while lending itself to more than one interpretation. That it referred to the French war and Edward III’s claim to be King of France can hardly be in doubt. At the same time it may have been inspired by his taste for amorous, gallant or courtly affairs, which he did not trouble to deny — by gossip about the first Countess of Salisbury, and by the legendary beauty, not to say matrimonial unorthodoxy, of the second Countess, a cousin who became his daughter-in-law. Appearances, the words seem to mean, are not what we think: let us not jump to hasty conclusions, especially when that involves making negative judgements

⁴⁰ Cooke and Boulton, “A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?”, say that ‘there may nevertheless be some foundation to the familiar legend (first recorded in the late fifteenth century) that it alluded to a lady’s garter picked up by the founder’ (p. 48). The fifteenth-century reference is to *Tirant lo Blanc*.

⁴¹ Wentersdorf, “The Clandestine Marriages”, p. 204.

about the king's intentions or our neighbour's morality. One can see how this would apply to the story about the "slipt garter", as well as to Joan of Kent's good faith. The anecdote is colourful, romantic in every sense of the word, and very much in keeping with the Arthurian code of chivalry, which required a knight to respect and defend all ladies; it also fits in with the courtly love tradition. Perhaps the king *did* intend (among other things) to defend a lady's honour; and perhaps the motto's very ambiguity appealed to him, involving a play on words of the kind known to have been enjoyed by the literary (as well as knightly) Edward III, a lover of Arthurian romance. But others, whether harmless gossips or malicious rivals, were free — perhaps already in the lifetime of the protagonists and certainly in later generations — to make use of this ambiguity for political motives, in order to cast doubts upon the legitimacy of Richard II, who, like his great-grandfather Edward II (1307-27), was a king discredited, deposed and murdered. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*