Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight

AND THE ORDER OF THE GARTER

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Introduction: SGGK and the Edwardian Era

The aesthetic brilliance of the fourteenth-century English master-poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*) has perhaps been to blame for the ahistorical readings that have been its commonest fate: anatomizing and glossing its virtuoso narrative and finely filed moral drama has been a full-time task for most of its readers ever since. To relay the story to others is to sense from inside, so to speak, its impelling narrative, psychological, and ethical force, and most of all the delicacy of its final catastrophe, when so much turns out to have ridden on so little—and to sense this without being able to do even approximate justice to the poem’s verbal, descriptive, and stylistic genius. The story, in a word, has seemed enough, from the moment that the great-bodied knight of green, on his green horse, enters King Arthur’s hall at Camelot in its own full New Year’s Day swing, so stunning its revelers that, collectively, they are barely able to rouse themselves to vindicate the Round Table’s reputation. They do so in the figure of Gawain: it is he who takes up the Green Knight’s invitation to behead him on the condition that should the beheader fail, he must submit his own neck to the challenger’s ax a year later. When the Green Knight rides off, carrying his sardonic head in his hands, he leaves the court to hide in forced gaiety its sense that something transformative has happened. Quite what this something is, however, is on hold through the seasons of the ensuing year, Gawain’s wintry quest to find the agreed-on meeting place in wild parts, and a second psychological microdrama as he finds a host, the lord of the marvelously appearing castle of Hautdesert, who catches him up in aristocratic Christmas festivity for his last days. Here, the poet loses himself—it would appear—at once in the sensuous surfaces of aristocratic life and in the vanishing regress of a moral drama almost too fastidious to take hold of. We are Gawain’s voyeurs as he, knight of the perfections defined by the pentangle-sign on his shield and coat of arms, struggles at once to keep faith with his host, with whom he has agreed to exchange on each of three evenings each day’s acquisitions, and to withhold himself from his host’s wife, who
on each of these three days (while her husband hunts abroad) seeks to seduce him and whose kisses on each of these days Gawain dutifully renders in turn to his host (but not the girdle she presses on him on his final day as a charm that will protect him from death).

By the time Gawain has left the castle and held himself to his rendezvous at the Green Chapel on January 1, lost blood to the slight slice in his neck that the Green Knight delivers there, and had his nemesis unveil himself as none other than the man who had hosted him till that morning, it turns out that his decisive examination was not where he had been looking for it, in his sexual seduction, and that, unawares, he has lost what had mattered most to him: his image of himself. The Green Knight/Bertilak’s revelations at the Green Chapel puncture what is now seen to have been an illusionary moral self-sufficiency. For Bertilak to convict Gawain of having, against the terms of their game, withheld the girdle he had accepted from his host’s wife against his rendezvous with the Green Knight is enough to humble the knight of the pentangle into another condition of being. The discovery of this flaw, to be signaled and remembered in both the cut in the neck and the girdle, is an ontological shock: Gawain enters onto a penitential consciousness. Given Gawain’s exemplary status from the poem’s beginning, and since the Round Table agrees to wear the girdle too (though for a different reason), the Round Table—and in this chivalric model the aristocratic order as such—loses the moral completeness unto itself of its would-be self-concept.¹

Presented in these terms, the poem is a thrilling fiction, fully absorbing for its combination of plot and poetics (its distinctive qualities of style, form, reference, and meaning). Breaking its narrative, dramatic, and significative spell in order to historicize the poem, meanwhile, is not a matter simply of topicalizing the poem, as in the occasional readings that SGGK has received.² A deeper historicization is at work in recent readings that seek out material, political, cultural, and ideological correlates between the text and the moment or period of its making. Since I share the assumption of these readings that the time and place of literary texts constrain their substance and form, and that a historicist approach to them is therefore indispensable for an act of interpretation to take place, their approach is broadly mine; if my reading of SGGK differs from theirs for other than accidental reasons (the accident that would make the Order of the Garter rather than anything else the poem’s decisive historical referent), the difference proceeds from my own preoccupation less with the history of events or cultural phenomena than with the history of ideas. The syllogism underlying my version of the imperative to historicize,³ and so impelling my pursuit of the historicity of SGGK, runs roughly as follows: ideas have histories; these histories can be tracked because they are manifested in discourses, fields of language with discernible circumstances, lexicons, boundaries, and shelf lives caught in

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an endless mutual loop with the things (for my purposes, events or processes) to which they refer or from which they extrapolate (each causing changes in the other, each also with a certain autonomy of the other); and therefore the ideational character of a literary work can be returned to history through the anatomy of the discourses at work in it.

The primary immediate event at work in SGGK is available to the reader in what has to date seemed mostly a textual curiosity, the inscription that appears in enlarged script at the poem’s end in the poem’s single extant manuscript: HONY SOYT Q MAL PENC—with one difference, the official motto (honi soit qui y mal pense, or “shamed be he who thinks ill of it”) of the monarchical Order of the Garter founded by Edward III on St. George’s Day, April 23, 1349 (or possibly in 1348; see chap. 2). I will accept the invitation of that motto and pursue a reading of the poem as a reading of history whose point of departure is the founding of this order. The live relationship between event and discourse means that what matters most is not simply identifying the local event of the order’s foundation as the (or a) referent of the poem but pursuing the status of that order as the materialization of specific discourses and their ideas, and as in turn the active occasion of continuing adaptations in those discourses and ideas. This approach to the event as sign and cause of discourse is what really enables the link to be made between the poem and its historical moment. The Order of the Garter as an institutionalization of the heart of the royal court is, most explicitly in the order’s Arthurian associations (to be laid out in chap. 2), an event-effect of one discourse more than any other: that of insular historiography, by which I mean the totalizing historiography of the island of Britain from its beginnings, a historiography epitomized in the mid-fourteenth century by the French prose Brut and containing most pertinently the model of Arthur’s court. The order is only slightly less, however, the event-effect also of the discourse of Arthurian romance, once again through the order’s Arthurian associations. In turn, Sir Gawain as an Arthurian poem is an instance of the discourse-effect of the Garter-event.

Within historiographical discourse, two moments bear especially heavily on SGGK, much as they bear on the Order of the Garter. First, for all its appearance of beginning, middle, and end, the summary of SGGK above follows virtually all discussion of the poem in unframing it: the poem preludes its narrative of Gawain with an epitome of insular history foregrounding the founding of Britain in the arrival of Brutus on the island as a consequence of the fall of Troy and recurs to this foundation at its end. The opening recapitulation of places and names—from Troy/Aeneas to Romulus/Rome, Ticius/Tuscany, Langaberde/Lombardy, and Brutus/Britain—marks the presence of an idea that needs to be restored to the poem: namely, an idea of history as aristocratic genealogy and as the foundations of peoples and territories, an idea accessible in the insular historiography produced in England. This historiography is
overwhelmingly Galfridian, the achievement of the Anglo-Norman cleric Geoffrey of
Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae, which supplied almost two millennia of miss-
ing insular history from Brutus into the seventh century, a vacancy for which there
were no effective competitors till long after our period (see Ingledew, “Book of Troy”).

Historicizing the appearance of insular historiography in SGGK involves the reader in
asking what we know of the continuing construction of insular history in both event
and text at the time of the poem’s writing. The second primary discursive pressure on
the poem is locked into the Arthurian apex of insular history out of which the poem’s
adventure-narrative is made. This Arthurian apex complicates the task of excavating
the poem’s discourses in order to seek its referents because, of course, the Arthurian
idea became embodied in two intimately related but discrete discourses, those of his-
toriography proceeding once more from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum
Britanniae, almost a quarter of which was devoted to Arthur’s reign, and of romance
proceeding from Chrétien de Troyes and vastly elaborated in the Vulgate cycle. Into the
intertextual relationships between these historiographical and romance discourses in
England a sequence of actual reigns must be inserted for the opening of SGGK to be
appreciated: those of the three first Plantagenet Edwards, whose rule over the period of
a century (1272–1377) was fluctuatingly shaped by the Arthurian regnal and royal
precedent, and at the same time itself worked on that precedent, so much so that this
period of rule helped to constitute Arthurian discourse. (Briefly, the deeds of Edward I
and Edward III meant that the Arthurian history inevitably read—and was also con-
tinuingly composed, as in the stanzaic and alliterative Morte Arthures—differently.)

To historicize SGGK—to grasp hold of the historiographical and romance dis-
courses of Arthur at work in SGGK and to better understand these discourses’ inter-
action with the Edwardian reigns in general and with the Order of the Garter in
particular—I have had recourse to a concept of desire whose sources will be obvi-
ous to anyone familiar with Augustine’s City of God and On Christian Doctrine. Ex-
trapolating from Augustine’s theory of the motives for human action in history, I
understand desire as the motive force not only for the deeds that medieval histori-
ography and romance mediate and influence but also for the very production of
medieval romance and medieval historiography as the two prime medieval narrative
modes for rendering secular experience—that is, for suspending and elaborating
secular experience in the dimension of time. In this view, desire, to which the expe-
rience of time, along with the experience of space, is intrinsic as a measure of the gap
between the subject and what is desired, motivates both historical actions and their
narrative representations. Desire underlies the predication of both discourses
(crudely speaking, one as a discourse of what has happened, the other of what might)
on what humans want: on what is felt to be lacking in human existence, or, con-
versely, on what is felt to satisfy, from political and social dispensations to the
domestic state or sexual consummation or, in the almost universal case of the faith-ful in Western Christendom, the condition of salvation in the holy city, the Heavenly
Jerusalem.

This encompassing concept of desire in time is approximately captured for me in a phrase that Giuseppe Mazzotta elicits from the meanings of the passion of Aeneas and Dido to Virgil and Augustine, and from Dante's mediation of Virgilian and Augustinian eros in his own historical constructions in the Commedia: what Mazzotta calls "the erotics of history," by which he means love as "the generalized desire that shapes the world of history and is the root of history," especially in its form as amor sui, the love by which humans direct themselves toward the world and away from God (150), a love representatively at work in Dido and Aeneas. The eros of history (as I shall term it, to accentuate the suggestion that the erotic inheres in history) is a matter of the philosophy and theology of history in these three emblematic writers. As a concept pointing to the operation of eros even at the center of the making of history in its political and military aspects, and to the operation of history even in the privacy of the sexual relationship, the idea of the eros of history offers, to my way of thinking, the best prospect of solving the intimate relation between medieval romance (heavily eroticized) and medieval secular historiography (the writing of the making of history in which the operations of power, especially in the form of war and other violence, predominate), a relationship that has been abundantly noted but not, to my understanding, satisfactorily explained. The concept of the eros of history, with its grounding in desire, can do more than explain this relation, I believe, in that, as I hope will become apparent, it returns history not only to the discourse of medieval romance but ironically to the similarly deprecated discourse of insular historiography as well. To this last, perhaps most of all in its Arthurian node, a deficiency of history has for a very long time been imputed—as it has been imputed too to a discourse generically associated with Arthurian discourse, namely chivalric historiography, such as Jean Froissart's of the fourteenth-century aristocratic world.

Approaching SGGK through insular historiography and associated discourses such as those of chivalry, as well as through the discourses of Bible, liturgy, and penance that presume and construct counterhistories, and through the particular concept of the eros of history, then, enables us to connect the poem to its historical matrix. The foundation of the Order of the Garter as an event proves merely an economical point of entry to the real historicity of SGGK as a poem both constructing history and carrying ideas with their own history. To recover the history in SGGK in this sense is to intensify the poem's own ethical force: that is, the pressure with which it bears on the reader to reform his or her life. At stake is the chance to rethink the status of romance itself, away (relatively speaking) from fiction and toward history,
where history is as invested with desire as romance and is as much the ground of a poetics as fiction but where it is at the same time the surer medieval basis for ethical representation, analysis, and instruction. Historicizing SGGK thus means reinforcing the working in the poem at once of desire and of the ethical demand.

To connect SGGK significantly to the founding of the Order of the Garter by Edward III is to affirm a relationship others—mostly some time ago—have tried and failed to establish.9 No one, on the other hand, can have much difficulty finding reasons for the appearance of the Garter motto at the poem’s end, whether or not the same scribe that copied the poem wrote these words, as Malcolm Parkes believes to be the case.10 The poem recounts how the brotherhood of the Round Table comes to wear as a symbolic device an item of female clothing with erotic connotations (the girdle of Bertilak’s wife) distinguished by its color (green); five years after formally announcing that he would institute his own Round Table, Edward had founded a chivalric order inspired by Arthur’s whose device was an item of female clothing with erotic connotations (the garter) distinguished by its color (blue, as in the designation of the order provided by the contemporary specialist historian of chivalry Jean Froissart, “les chevaliers dou Bleu Gartier,” Luce 3:37).11

Further, the motto itself, whose referent—what it is that it is shameful to think ill of—has often been taken to be the order’s garter, applies aptly to the concluding moments of the poem’s drama, when Gawain and his companions express opposite attitudes to the girdle that Gawain has borne away from his rendezvous with the Green Knight and that they adopt as a device of the Round Table. The words of the motto suit both responses. Seeing his own “thinking ill” in the girdle he had weakly accepted and wrongly retained, Gawain feels “schame” (SGGK 2504): the motto fits him quite literally. His fellows, on the other hand, “[l]ȝen loude” (2514) at Gawain’s mortification and see in the girdle their company’s honor (2513–21); their laughter is shame’s antithesis and illustrates the normative response intended by the motto’s dare that its audience discover “mal” in its referent.12 Whether appended to what the poet wrote or the poet’s own words, the manuscript’s Garter motto points readily, then, to the dramatic denouement that carries the poem’s lesson and more specifically to an object, the knightly brotherhood’s girdle, that easily recalls the garter of Edward’s order. It is a suggestively tight economy that links motto and device in this way.

Two obstacles have particularly discouraged pursuit of a connection with much to recommend it. One is how little we know about the circumstances and motives behind the foundation of the order and particularly behind its motto and device. Most frustrating is the belatedness of the famous story first widely circulated by Polydore Vergil in the early sixteenth century that provides motive and cause for
order, motto, and device: Edward III picks up a garter that has fallen from his queen or a different beloved—amica—and, responding to the laughter of his great knights by telling them they will honor the item, proceeds to found the Order of the Garter.\textsuperscript{13}

The missing pieces in what we know of the order’s founding, meanwhile, have made it more difficult to provide a convincing dramatic reading of the poem connecting it to that foundation. Such readings as have been attempted having failed to convince, a second feature of current scholarship on the Gawain-poet has almost foreclosed further exploration of possible connections to the founding of the Garter. Unless the connection between poem and event is being made well after that event, to refer the poem to something that happened in 1349 is to put into question an assumption about the poem’s date of composition that has not only held for many decades now but been applied with much greater specificity recently.\textsuperscript{14}

The manuscript in which SGGK appears as one of four poems whose common authorship is rarely questioned (\textit{Pearl}, \textit{Cleanness}, and \textit{Patience} are the others), British Library Cotton Nero A.x, is late fourteenth century; the lack of dispositive evidence for dating the works significantly earlier than the manuscript has encouraged the attribution of the poems to the same period.\textsuperscript{15} In the context of a wider interest among literary medievalists in the intersections of English cultural and especially political history with the corpus of Middle English literary works from Langland and Chaucer on, a number of scholars have now pursued the Gawain-poet’s works not simply as datable to the later years of Richard II’s reign (1377–99) but as distinctly late-Ricardian in material reference, thematics, or style. The citations of possible ties between the works of the Gawain-poet and the Ricardian 1390s to match the operating assumption about the poem’s date have tended to reinforce the predisposition not to explore possible ties between SGGK and an Edwardian era much less familiar to many students of Middle English literature. Recent scholarship has helped to lever into place a Ricardian Gawain-poet on display in the authoritative \textit{Companion to the Gawain-Poet} edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson.

The most detailed documentation of what it is about Ricardian England that would help to illuminate or explain the works of the Gawain-poet is by Michael Bennett on the social provenance that texts of their qualities written in the northwest Midlands would seem to require, chiefly in his much-cited \textit{Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of SGGK}, and in articles since. This work has appeared on either side of the one substantial recent challenge to the general acceptance of a late-fourteenth-century date for SGGK, by W. G. Cooke in his 1989 article “\textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}: A Restored Dating.” Cooke found this acceptance, which replaced what had been uniformly earlier datings (1325, 1340, c. 1360, post-1373), to have evolved adventitiously and to be “remarkable given the lack of direct evidence” (34).\textsuperscript{16} Treating in turn the paleographical, philological, and literary evidence, and
especially the evidence related to each of the criteria that weighed most with Tolkien and Gordon in their edition of *SGGK* in 1925, namely costume, architecture, and armor, Cooke concludes that the poem is likeliest to have been written between 1330 and 1360. At a minimum, he demonstrates that the grounds that to Tolkien and Gordon suggested the late fourteenth century suggest just as well the midcentury.

Bennett has recently modified his first response to Cooke’s article—“in view of the whole tone of the work [i.e., *SGGK*], most scholars will doubtless continue to prefer a late fourteenth-century dating” (“Court of Richard II” 18n22)—to acknowledge that a midcentury date is “feasible . . . though perhaps only if the Gawain-poet moved in the most fashionable circles” (“Historical Background” 82). Bennett’s continued inclination nonetheless toward the Ricardian date, and one in the 1390s more specifically, derives from his demonstration in *Community, Class and Careerism* that the outstanding candidates as households in the service of which one might find such a sophisticated writer as the Gawain-poet, especially in a northwest Midlands wholly devoid of resident noble families (“Historical Background” 73–74), were the patronates of Chester and of Lancaster. In the last quarter of the century, these were demesnes respectively of Richard II, who developed especially strong ties to Cheshire, and Edward III’s son and Richard’s uncle John of Gaunt, the kingdom’s most powerful magnate in this period. Bennett, however, does not pursue the implications of the fact that the same regions of Chester and Lancaster had been from midcentury as strongly associated with two other great figures, also of the royal family and also vigorous recruiters for the kind of clerical service—namely, within or proximate to a chivalric milieu—that most scholars assume for the Gawain-poet: Edward’s eldest son, the Black Prince, Earl of Chester, and Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Edward’s cousin, his premier commander, and in his lifetime the realm’s preeminent noble. As is apparent even in Bennett’s account (see especially “Historical Background” 74–75), features of Richard’s reign that appear to support a Ricardian date for *SGGK* are also characteristic of Edward III’s reign.

Once the argument is shifted to comparing the claims on *SGGK* of equivalent temporal stretches, the earlier period possesses several advantages. Henry of Lancaster and the Black Prince, the latter first as Edward’s lieutenant in Aquitaine and then as prince of Aquitaine, spent a number of years in France, at the height of English warrior chivalry from 1339 to 1360; service of these magnates must have offered an even better basis than the Ricardian years for the kind of intimacy with aristocratic practice and the ethos of chivalry that the Gawain-poet displays. For topicality, the Wirral, the “wyldrenesse” north of Chester that Gawain travels through in his journey to find the Green Chapel, where “[w]onde . . . bot lyte / Þat auþer God ober gome wyth goud hert louied” (701–02), suits midcentury better than late. By 1376, when it was disafforested, this area had been largely tamed; ear-
lier, it was strongly associated with wildness and lawless behavior, and its development was retarded further by the devastation wrought by the Black Death (Bennett, “Historical Background” 73, 76); its reputation was corroborated by the visit of the Black Prince himself to Cheshire in 1353 in relation to a wave of resistance and criminal behavior in the Wirral and other forests (Booth 120–23). Certainly, the Cheshire that Richard gravitated toward in the 1390s is hardly the remote and threatening wilderness positioned symbolically against the civilized south of Camelot that SGGK presents; Richard goes to Chester precisely because he is unsafe in the southeast (Bennett, “Historical Background” 86, 87; see also Bowers 71–74), quite reversing the poem’s dramatic poles. Bennett is also on weak ground when he asserts that SGGK evokes Richard’s court more than it does Edward’s (“Historical Background” 85), as I hope to demonstrate unequivocally in chapter 2; similarly, Bennett’s Richard, if not incapable of energetic campaigning, falls a long way short of the conquering Arthur whose famous leadership of a preeminent military court is the explicit pretext for the Green Knight’s appearance (SGGK 258–64): nothing in the Green Knight’s words, on the other hand, would unduly have flattered Edward III, who was virtually rampant in relation to France, Scotland, and a series of continental principalities between 1339 and 1360 (see chap. 1 and, more intensively, my forthcoming book Romance as History: British Past and Edwardian Present in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight).

When, in The Politics of Pearl, which provides the most fully explored commitment to a Ricardian provenance for any of the poems of Cotton Nero A.x to date, John Bowers depends on and amplifies the connections Bennett makes between the poems and Richard’s reign, he likewise invokes correlations as well or better suited to Edward’s reign than to Richard’s. Here too, Richard’s quasi-imperial ambitions in the 1390s (Bowers 78), in their limitation to the British Isles—Richard’s policy of peace toward France (185–86) split his nobility and could not have been less Edwardian—and in the prospects of their realization, verge only superficially on Edward’s. The same principle that what holds for Richard holds for Edward applies to Bowers’s comments on the acceleration of courtly display and opulence under Richard (28–30).21 Even Bowers’s invocation of the labor statutes of the 1388 Cambridge parliament in relation to Pearl’s emphasis on the biblical parable of the laborer in the vineyard, with its thematicization of the matter of wages (41–49), can be paralleled or eclipsed as a historical correlate by the more fundamental innovations of the 1351 Statute of Laborers (Ingledew, “Jerusalem” 29–35).

Taking otherwise a heuristic approach to the relation between the text and its time leads Bowers to some interesting results but by no means to compelling ones.22 Bowers argues, for example, that Pearl reproduces a Ricardian “mystification of royal power” in its depiction of the heavenly court, echoing Richard’s distinctive drive in the 1390s to sacralize the image of kingship (108–12, 117–18, and passim; quotation

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from 30); for Bowers, the poet’s works are, indeed, politically aligned with Ricardian interests. This orientation helps to explain to him the poet’s anonymity and the manuscript’s singularity: the poet’s status as a Cheshire man when Cheshire was so strongly and pejoratively associated with Richard would have made his works controversial before Richard’s deposition or have cost them favor after it (40, 187–91). For me, on the other hand, the depth of the poet’s confrontation with royal power throughout his work is what explains the same phenomena: I think that the poet courted authorial suicide, and almost successfully—not through works whose allegiances to the royal court are, even in Bowers’s account, far from manifest, aggressive, or even unequivocal (21–22, 40) but through works radically at odds with that court. The “mystification” of the royal power that Bowers finds sympathetically rendered in the description of the Heavenly Jerusalem of Pearl I would attribute to that poem’s drive on the contrary to render divine power as of another order from that of earthly kings. The critique of kings and their courts throughout Cotton Nero A.x is consistent, moreover, with the poet’s attitude to (mostly royal) cities in each of his other poems (Babylon—not to mention Sodom and Gomorrah—in Cleanness, Nineveh in Patience; and even, though less aggressively, Camelot and, in the provocative opening lines, Troy and Rome in SGGK:23 there is no sign elsewhere of the impulse Bowers locates in Pearl’s Heavenly Jerusalem and its royal Lamb “to glorify the English capital” or to cultivate the mystique of Ricardian royal power (120).24 Altogether, I would argue, the poet’s cities and rulers approach more nearly the model of the incommensurable cities and rulers of the Augustinian earthly Babylon/Rome on the one hand and the Heavenly Jerusalem, City of God, and its king on the other.25

In my view, then, neither Bennett’s nor Bowers’s work, the most substantial of their kinds, comes close to settling the issue of date.26 The anthology in which Bennett’s summation of the evidence for a Ricardian Gawain-poet appears offers signs elsewhere of a willingness to consider earlier dates for the poet’s works. Writing on the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, Edwards assigns it flexibly to the second half of the fourteenth century; he notes meanwhile that it is “clearly separated by some interval from the original transcription of the poems it contains” (198–99, quotation from 198).27 Meanwhile, good evidence from other sources suits a midcentury date. In Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince (which Cooke does not mention in his article), Stella Newton observes that in his tight “cote” (SGGK 152) the Green Knight appears dressed in the fashion of the mid-1360s, when the chest area was padded in a manner that might account for the effect created by the Green Knight’s “brest . . . sturne” and “smale” stomach and waist (SGGK 143–44; Newton 64).28 There is no need, in fact, to posit padding rather than physique to explain the Green Knight’s strong chest; and the tightness that prompts Newton’s proffered date is actually, as she indi-
cates on numerous occasions (4, 9, 18, 29), a feature also of tunics dating back to the early 1340s. If indeed the Green Knight’s tunic is not padded at the chest, the smallness of his “wombe” and waist makes its likely date between 1340 and about 1350, at which point men began to wear the tunic padded at the belly (illustrated, Newton 30); otherwise, it dates best to between 1360, by which time padding at the belly ceased in favor of the chest padding, and 1370, when the close-fitting tunic was clearly going out of fashion (by 1380, it was a thing of the past; 64). More general features of fashion that distinguish Edward’s midcentury court and both Arthur’s and Bertilak’s courts in SGGK include a “new taste for embroidery” as part of “an immeasurable increase in decorated surfaces” (i.e., including heavy ornamental use of jewels on apparel, designs on shoes, etc.), “far larger quantities of far more expensive silks,” and a newly abundant use of ermine (34, 38).29

Another area of aristocratic practice that may bear on the poem’s date concerns Gawain’s horse Gringolet, “þat gret watz and huge” (2047). The high period of the destrier or magnus equus in England is the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries, and the shift away from it dates from the 1330s; by the time of Edward III’s campaign in France in 1359–60, “the quality of warhorses employed by the English aristocracy had quite perceptibly declined” (Ayton, Knights 25).30 The destrier nonetheless continued to figure in chivalric life (Ayton, Knights 32–39); it features largely in the Black Prince’s Register covering the years 1346–65 (Hyland, Horse 72–74).31 Ayton remarks on the animal’s continuing force as a symbol of the martial chivalric life in later literary works, such as the alliterative Morte Arthure, otherwise acutely attuned to contemporary life (Knights 27–30).32 Even if the literary destrier did outlive its historical counterpart, however, the poet’s famous particularity on the details of contemporary aristocratic life puts in doubt that, writing in the last quarter of the century, he has literary rather than actual models in mind and has placed Gawain on a horse made anachronistic by the dress and architecture around him. Paying tribute to the evidentiary value of this very particularity at the same time that he assumes a late date for the poem, Ayton cites the description of the rough terrain Gawain and Gringolet must negotiate (SGGK 2160–67) to support his view that, in conformity with the switch to smaller and less valuable horses in the second half of the century, Gawain’s horse is not the ill-suited destrier (Knights 22). But to infer this is to override not only the emphatic earlier phrase “gret . . . and huge,” which surely doubly translates magnus equus, but the similar description of the Green Knight’s horse, which had had to ride through similar country, as “þat and þikke” (SGGK 175; see also 176, 187).33 It is clear meanwhile that Gringolet is a covered horse (597–604, especially 601–02), a fashion alive in the image of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell in the Luttrell Psalter of c. 1340–45 (Coss 41),34 whose passing the contemporary chronicler and one-time campaigner in Edward III’s army Jean le Bel was lamenting in the 1350s,
along with a general decline in the display of the armed knight of whom SGGK’s
Gawain is himself such a notable example (CJB 1:126–27). The economical conclusion
is to suppose that the Gawain-poet was describing in Gringolet the destrier in
which the Black Prince, for example, retained a pronounced interest into the 1360s
and that the later the poem was written after this date, the more outdated Gringolet
would be.

In stylistic study of the poet’s work, meanwhile, Susanna Fein has opted for
1375–85 as “the ripest moment” (393) for the development of the Pearl’s stanza form.
Her analysis quite clearly opens the door to earlier datings, however, since she sees
in the poem a strong relationship to “the octet/quatrain poetry of northern biblical
narratives” that dates from the early fourteenth century (391–93, quotation from
392). O. S. Pickering provides evidence of stylistic precedents for the poet’s practices
in the poet’s home region of Cheshire considerably earlier than hitherto suspected,
notably late-thirteenth-century experimentation in the vernacular with complex al-
literative stanza forms and “preoccupation with verbal patterning and ornament”
(157). On the other hand, Breeze’s suggestive hypothesis on lexical grounds that the
poet resided for a period in southwest France extends to the date: it appears that he
was there, Breeze says, in the last quarter of the century “rather than the third”
(“Gawain-Poet” 267); the first proposition, however, appears much better indicated
than the second by the evidence he adduces.35 Also on the dating implications of
the poet’s other works, my own reading of Cleanness (“Liturgy,” esp. 273–74) explains
why I believe this poem to address the Avignon papacy and to predate the papacy’s
return to Rome in 1378, and why I emphatically do not take the poem to be cruder,
and so presumptively earlier, than SGGK.

Reading SGGK as an Edwardian poem, therefore, need not be a defensive opera-
tion. The leading historian of the founding of the Order of the Garter, D’Arcy J. D.
Boulton, has now joined Cooke to refine the latter’s view that the poem was written
between 1330 and 1360, in an argument that the poem was composed between 1353
and 1361. By basing their argument on circumstantial evidence related to Henry of
Lancaster, who was himself a founder-knight of the Order of the Garter, they have
identified the same figure, the same years, and the same associational field linking
poem and event that my own research, from entirely different points of departure,
has suggested to me; I shall indeed be arguing that Lancaster’s 1354 work the Livre de
seynz medicines consolidates in a variety of ways his eligibility as a historical ana-
logue, if not referent, of Gawain. Lancaster remains, nonetheless, a relatively minor
element in my arguments for both redating and reinterpreting SGGK; my interest in
the article by Cooke and Boulton lies here simply in its reaffirmation of Cooke’s pre-
vious argument for a notably earlier date for SGGK. As now refined and supple-
mented, Cooke’s arguments continue to issue a challenge that deserves address.
Meanwhile, the salutary impetus to historicize SGGK attempted by Ricardian readings remains to be realized.

If the available evidence leaves us, in principle, at least as free to ascribe SGGK to Edward III's reign as to Richard II's, the poem's Ricardian-oriented reader will need to be familiar with certain characteristic features of the earlier reign. Some of these characteristics pertain to an Edwardian period in its larger sense, running from Edward I's accession in 1272, through the vicissitudes of Edward II's reign from 1307 to 1327, and deep into Edward III's long rule (1327–77). To consider how SGGK might appear distinctively Edwardian in this sense, the reader cannot do better than to attend to the pervasiveness, purposiveness, and aggression of the political ideology and ethical culture of martial chivalry in this period. To begin with, the reigns of the three Edwards can be plotted as an era of vastly accelerated war making. Henry III's reign (1216–72) had seen a long retraction in the political-military efficacy of a royal house constitutively multiterritorial from the occasion of the Norman Conquest; in the late thirteenth century, Henry's son Edward I (already "dominus" of Ireland and Duke of Aquitaine) launched a long era of renascent Plantagenet ambition and achievement through a process of insular conquest that brought for the first time complete dominion over Wales (the victories of 1282–83 and the 1284 Statute of Wales) and came at moments within a step of incorporating Scotland into a unitary insular kingdom (the Scottish succession crisis of 1290–92, over which Edward I established control, and the wars that followed into the early fourteenth century). Meanwhile, Edward I intensified his dominion over Ireland and went to war with Philip IV of France over Aquitaine (1294–98). After the military failures of Edward II's reign with regard to Ireland and especially Scotland, Edward III resumed and escalated even his grandfather's ambitions and activities and, by combining extraordinary victories over the Scottish and French in the 1330s, 1340s, and 1350s with marriage alliances and diplomatic successes, came close on several occasions to achieving an ascendancy still more remarkable than that he actually achieved: the treaty of Brétigny in 1360 left him short of the throne of France, to which he had laid claim in 1337, but he was still the incarnation in Europe of the multiterritorial ruler and of a royal style of martial chivalry.

To carry this constant motivational force, war had to be in the name of something significant—an idea: in this case, the idea of territorial expansion and dominion on both island and Continent according to long-established Norman, Anglo-Norman, Angevin, and Plantagenet conceptions of kingship, ideas that achieved saliencies and issued in practices beyond anything that had obtained since the twelfth century. Redoubling this motivation was the ideology that defined the goals and conduct proper to both king and aristocrat: here, war took its place within
a caste ethos into which even territorial or quasi-national boundaries dissolved. As expounded in several definitive medieval treatises on chivalry and as practiced or violated on the fighting fields throughout later medieval Europe, this ethos (which was by definition also a stylistics) pertained to aristocrats as members of their social estate even more fundamentally than as members of their principalities or proctional political communities. Martial chivalry as an ethos and style embedded both in particular political ideas centered on concepts of lordship at the apex of which was the king and in ideas of conduct predicated of the estate that upheld the transnational social order as such arrived at an apotheosis in England over the period from 1272 to 1360, defining in Edward III’s reign the maximal values of the English monarchy and aristocracy at its most self-conscious and self-promoting.37

The force of Edward III’s reputation is hard to exaggerate: we shall see that he achieved for some well-qualified observers what can soberly be described as a quasi-allegorical status, being constructed by the principal contemporary recorder of the transnational chivalric history of northwestern Europe—the Liégeois Jean le Bel and the Hainault Jean Froissart, most notably—as more or less the instance of an abstract idea, the idea of chivalry, or even better of royal chivalry; at a more abstract level still, he becomes an allegorical figure of a certain, quintessentially aristocratic-monarchical idea of history, which is to say, of the temporal order sub specie aeternitatis. This perceptual construction of Edward provides a necessary context for comprehending his plans to found an explicitly Arthurian Round Table and his actual foundation of the Order of the Garter over the course of his most extraordinary decade, the 1340s. The Garter is instituted as Edward approaches the summit of his achievements, when he holds sway as sovereign of Europe’s most formidable and celebrated court. He has just been sought (in early 1348) as their imperial candidate by several German electors, who regard him as the “meliorem principem sub Christianismo,” but he has turned down their offer in order to concentrate on his claim to France (see Offler, “England and Germany” 627–31; quotation from knighston 2:56, who thinks that it was actual election that Edward turned down; similarly, le Baker 97); over the following decade or so, he will verge on realizing that claim. Even had he not projected a Round Table or founded the Order of the Garter, the overriding European status of Edward and his court into the early 1360s offers a straightforward invitation to connect to him any midcentury poem anatomizing a king and court whose military reputation is attested in such terms as the Green Knight’s in SGGK: “. . . be los of be, lede [Arthur], is lyft vp so hyȝe / And by burȝ and by burnes best ar holden, / Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde, / Be wyȝtest and be worȝpest of be worldes kynde” (258–61), terms he shortly repeats when he asks, “What, is þis Arþures hous . . . / Pat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony? / Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes . . . ?” (309–12).38
Edward’s Round Table/Garter project carries three further inflections that recommend its connection to *SGGK*. The king’s achievement in the project is doubly remarkable in the light of his father’s last decade through 1327, when the court, already militarily overmatched by the Scottish, fell into complete disarray: Edward II becoming estranged from his queen and son, let alone most of his court, and prolonged faction producing a string of political executions all the way through regicide in Edward’s eventual murder. This supplied the context in which Edward launched at his earliest opportunity on his chivalric career, embarking at the age of fourteen on his first campaign, against the invading Scots, some months after his coronation. Putting aside its martial and stylistic assertions in themselves, that is, the Garter expressed a distinctive achievement by Edward III, both the reconstruction of a court over the 1330s and—after a tense period in 1340–41—the consolidation of it into a unified body with a unitary purpose, to execute his military and political goals. Even Edward I never constructed an aristocratic solidarity in a manner remotely equivalent to Edward III’s. The period of solidarity in the court passed in Edward III’s own later years; Richard’s era will see degeneration into faction, civil dissension, deposition, and regicide—an arresting reprise of Edward II’s reign in these respects. In the long duration of English royal history in the Middle Ages, that is to say, Edward III’s mid-fourteenth-century court stands out uniquely for its combination of organized depth and unity. Second, Edward’s court was distinctively a young one: institutionalized effectively in 1337, when he created six new earldoms for men of his own generation and England’s first duchy, it was still very much in its early vigor when in 1344—still only thirty-one years old—Edward first made public his Round Table project. Finally, Edward’s court was definitively festive: his reign saw not only a revival but a sustained high pitch of tournaments, feasts, and Christmas celebrations that made of the Garter only the most formal and ambitious manifestation of a principle of Edwardian rule. Altogether, Edward’s court is either the only or, by a long margin, the best claimant to be a literal referent for the conquering, harmonious, festive court “in her first age” (54) that opens *SGGK*.

On the general level, of course, simple coincidence goes some way to explaining these connections between a contemporary court and the poem. Whatever the reality may be, it is the business of royal courts to project their own reputations, coherence, and vigor, Richard’s no less than Edward’s; and most Arthurian romance plots reduce to challenges to the status of a preeminent Round Table. So far, the Ricardian court might as easily have occasioned a literary rebuke in Arthurian guise as the Edwardian, for all that the parallel between Richard’s court and the poem’s would be less literal. But Edward’s explicit self-representation in 1344 as an Arthur with his own Round Table presses the poem’s reader harder. Though the project did not materialize as planned, its eventual issue, the Order of the Garter, was the era’s
most condensed material and corporate expression of martial chivalry as political ideology and as ethical exigency, Edward III’s most economically self-definitive political act, the best symbol and instrument of an aristocracy united in its expansionist martial commitments and its ethical style. Not only did this order evolve out of the original plan for a Round Table, but, as we shall see, Edward’s contemporaries made as close to no distinction between the two projects as it is possible to conceive. A poem of the second half of the fourteenth century that etiologizes a “girdle” brotherhood formed among Round Table knights is asking for its potential Edwardian topicality to be explored even before the eye of the reader of Cotton Nero A.x falls on the Garter motto at that poem’s end.

If this review of characterizing features of the rule of Edward III and their anticipation in the rule of Edward I offers manifest potential referents for SGGK, another feature points to a less obvious potential convergence between the poem and its historical environment. This convergence has to do with what the Round Table/Garter projects themselves point to, the historiographical discourse, a discourse with its own history, that is their premise and setting. The standard references to the Arthurianism of both Edward I and Edward III have given both kings short shrift by taking it to be epiphenomenal. When these kings invoke Arthur, they invoke not merely a name (even if an iconic one), still less a romance name, but a discourse: that of history, with its appropriation and constitution of events. Both kings inhabited the historiographical culture of the English royal line. This was built most effectively, of course, on post-Conquest insular historiography (as defined above), which both assumed and asserted the ambition of dominion over the entire island of Britain, as well as of Ireland, and multiterritorial rule on the Continent, as the currently dormant or unrealized paradigm for the rule of the kings of England. The definitive statement of this model of insular kingship was Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae. Geoffrey’s work had cast the remote past in the image of present Anglo-Norman ambition: according to this historiography, which preempted competing constructions well beyond the fourteenth century, Arthur had realized in his court not only material, cultural, and ethical primacy but, politically, what the Norman and Anglo-Norman kings periodically conceived and what the two Edwards reconceived: complete insular dominion (Edward I), and a multiterritorial continental imperium (Edward III).

By tapping into the discursive field to which Arthur belonged (the overwhelming bulk of the explicit royal exploitation in the English Middle Ages of Arthur as a figure of history comes from these two reigns), both kings, therefore, acted symptomatically. In this context in which Arthur was not simply a name, Edward I’s reign, which saw at once the conquest of Wales and near-conquest of Scotland (as it seemed at points) and a series of revealing deployments of the Arthurian history, also saw a
discursive development of the first importance: the launching of the French prose Brut. This work built on the foundation provided in the Historia regum Britanniae by carrying Geoffrey’s history from its beginnings in Troy and Brutus continuously through to the present time under its present king (initially through the end of Henry III’s reign and then, by way of continuations, through Edward I’s reign, Edward II’s, and the first years of Edward III’s). The prose Brut in this way carried out a portentous sleight of hand: it continued Geoffrey’s history of the kings of Britain (as in his title) by way of what was thenceforth really a history of the kings of England and so pretended, in both senses, that the history of the kings of England was the same as the history of the island: in this sense, it initiated a newly appropriative discourse in post-Conquest English historiography. It performed this function, meanwhile, in the aristocratic vernacular instead of Geoffrey’s Latin. Most simply, the Brut put the island for its English aristocrats under a name that was a metonym for the Troy from which, through his great-grandfather Aeneas, Brut (Brutus), the founder of Britain, had derived. The Galfridian-based account of the history of Britain/England that was funneled into a resistless array of insular and universal histories written in England, and ubiquitously distributed in all historiographical registers, with their implicit ideological tendencies (monastic, clerical, and lay; Latin, French, English), at no point ceases to feature the rule of Arthur as the summit of insular achievement. The titling and production of the French prose Brut confirm what was already the case in Geoffrey’s Historia regum Britanniae: this Arthur is properly Arthur only inside the context of insular (as against English) historiography from Brutus, and, behind Brutus, from Troy.

The articulation between the French prose Brut, as a discursive leap bridging the insular British past with the English present in a vernacular idiom, and SGGK is provided by the poem’s first two stanzas and echoed in its final lines (SGGK 2522–28). In the stanzas’ epitome of British history from Troy to Brutus to Arthur, SGGK depends on the Galfridian history that is continuous with present English history; the poet makes his debt explicit at the poem’s end, where we learn that we owe Gawain’s story to the “Brutus bokez” (2523). The stanzas that open SGGK are therefore the appearance more effectively of a discourse than of a topos. This appearance suits the character of the long Edwardian period from Edward I as a time that saw the genesis, acceleration, and establishment of the French Brut historiography. The opening stanzas write the poem’s Round Table Arthur into the Arthurian insular historiography rather than into the French romance Arthurian tradition: in doing so, they cast insular history in an evaluatively mixed light that catches at once the Galfridian/Brut plot of alternating times of peace and civil war and the Edwardian era itself, which from Edward I through Edward II to Edward III witnessed “werre and wrake and wonder,” and alternated “blysse and blunder” as “Bolde bredden
ñerinne, baret ðat lofden, / In mony turned tyme tene ðat wro3ten” (16–22). Indeed, the unexpectedly deprecatory turn not only on British history but on the imperial order of history emanating from Troy (the references to Aeneas’s “tricherie” and Rome’s “bobbaunce,” SGGK 4, 9) prepares, I believe, for a narrative reconstruction of the Order of the Garter that is just as unillusioned.

The embedding of the poem in historiographical discourse extends to the apparently “romance” narrative plot that follows in Gawain’s story, through that explicit reference to the “Brutus bokez” in which the story of the Round Table and the girdle can (we are told) be found. Insofar as to do so challenges distinctions clearly operating at the time, it is a bold move to assign not the opening and closing historical epites only but the romance adventure they enclose to the prose Brut. In the Historia regum Britanniae, in which most of the knights Chrétien was to assign to the Round Table are not to be found, Gawain has a leading role, notably in the would-be imperial campaign against the Roman procurator Lucius that Arthur aborts when he learns of Mordred’s treachery; so too he figures in this campaign in the Brut (1:89; see also 1:77), according to which he is buried in Scotland. Gawain therefore lies firmly in the insular-imperial historiographical matrix. Thanks to its opening and to its deployment of a strongly historiographical (as well as romance-typical) main character, then, a narrative is potential in SGGK that links the evolution of a brotherhood of a girdle, presented as a modification to the Round Table, to the sweep of insular historiography from Troy: and so runs parallel to a readily available narrative of Edward III through 1350 as a king whose self-concept, measured by the Round Table project and the actual Order of the Garter, was indebted to the always reappearing thread of imperial ambition in the historiographical record since Brutus.

In short, when Edward III founded the Order of the Garter that emerged from the Round Table project in an era of his own expansionist insular and continental wars, the figure of Arthur, transcendentally historical (to put it paradoxically—and in just this way also a romance figure), lay behind him: and, more pervasively, so did the discourse, or discourses, of Arthur. In the achievements that the Garter summarized, Edward III built on what his grandfather had started; in the Historia regum Britanniae and the prose Brut, not to mention the Galfridian history distributed in an array of other historiographical works, both kings had a representational, legitimating, and motivational scripture for their ambitions, that is to say an imperial myth to rank alongside Virgil’s myth for Rome, operating sometimes quite literally, at other times more subliminally (and, one might say, finally realized at a level equivalent to the realization of the Roman myth, namely in Britain’s Victorian empire). If to cite Arthur was to invoke a scripture emanating from Troy, Edward’s Round Table project and Order of the Garter stood for an idea of history. When in 1344 Edward calls up Arthur’s name and the label “Round Table,” he calls up a name and a label that conflate historicity with allegory in the man-
ner he and his court are on the way to doing for contemporaries (as we shall see in chap. 1): the allegory of a certain command of space and time that is political and martial chivalry, the historicity of a command of space and time that is realizable in the world of events because it has been realized before.

The notion that SGGK comments on the Garter is made only more attractive by the poem’s investment in a historical Troy and a historical Arthur and by its own allegorical thematization of Arthur’s court (that court *is* chivalry, as Edward’s is), so that it readily reads the Edwardian idea of history (even if it was written in Richard’s reign). Arthur’s historicity, his name’s function as the sign of achieved desire, largely (through violence) political but also erotic, does not preclude the function of his “romance” name, however, the name not only of the world of Chrétien and the Vulgate cycle but also of Arthur’s (Edward’s) never-achieved political ambitions in Geoffrey of Monmouth. When these fail, in Arthur’s largest, Roman, campaign, at the moment he learns that Mordred has seized his throne and lives with his wife (*HKB* 257–58), his name is at once that of a massive achievement and of a political and sexual dispensation frustrated. In turn, the struggle between Edward’s achievements as a maker of history and his drive for a multiterritorial empire is enacted as a conflict between sexual and political appetites in a cluster of important texts in the 1340s. Just as nothing would have offered a more apposite avenue to the representation and realization of the Edwardian martial chivalric reign than the Arthurian sign system in the country where Arthur was a figure of both history and romance, no vehicle is better suited to the examination of the Edwardian era than an Arthurian poem of the Round Table centered on a narrative of a sexual trial framed by the imperialized insular historiography.

Given the poem’s suitedness to the Edwardian era, the Edwardian midcentury offers a ready explanation for the poem’s thematic motive in puncturing an excessive chivalry. Gawain’s confrontation with his limitations at Hautdesert challenges the Arthurian-Edwardian norm: it recalls the Arthurian-Edwardian knight to the ethical framework of Christian history within which he inclines to forget his indelible inscription. This is the lesson I derive from the etiology of Gawain’s failure in accepting the girdle from his host’s wife as a charm against death: the fear that motivates him is the fruit of the original sin that brought death into the world (as orthodox religious teaching had it). The fear of death is also, as the Green Knight explicitly says, the love of life (“ȝe lufed your lyf,” he observes to Gawain, 2368), and so is firmly rooted in the psychology of desire. This etiology explains Gawain’s and the poem’s turn to liturgical and penitential topoi and vocabulary—that is, to remedies for sin and misdirected desire—to gloss what he learns from his rendezvous with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. The motive to assay the soul through the unarmed body is at work also, however, in Gawain’s primary manifest test, his subjection to the
three-day attempt at seduction by his host’s wife at Hautdesert, which, at the same
time as it removes the armor that enables the achievements and reputation of the
Round Table, approaches his body in its erotic susceptibility. At this point, we come
full circle in our survey of why it might be that the Garter motto appears at the end
of the poem.

The potential, for a reading of SGGK, of the erotic plot in Polydore Vergil’s
account of the Garter’s foundation has surely been underexploited. The plot shape
of Vergil’s story we can trace with probability back to London in the 1430s: back, we
might infer from our source, to Henry VI himself (see chap. 2). And in fact, all we
have to do is posit any story that would take up the garter as a female, sexually
suggestive, device to explain the order’s motto not only in itself but in its appear-
ance at the end of SGGK’s narrative. From that narrative, a knight emerges with an
isomorphic device, the girdle, that is a sign both of chastity and of the knight’s self-
compromise in response to a woman’s blandishments and that eroticizes an adap-
tation of the knightly brotherhood of the Round Table. If we posit no more than
this—that the Order of the Garter’s device points to a morally ambiguous erotic
motivation or occasion for the order’s foundation—SGGK offers itself as a commen-
tary on that foundation. If the poet’s point is that there was no basis for scandal in
the institution of the order, Gawain’s story illustrates how a knight may carry an
eroticized emblem from a sexual test with his chastity not only intact but made
exemplary; if his view is that there was such a basis, Gawain emerges as a counter-
model, someone whose chastity in procuring an eroticized emblem rebukes a king
whose own association with such an emblem points to sexual impropriety.

Up to this point, I have relied on the vocabulary of hypothesis to suggest
what recommends the Edwardian midcentury for close application to SGGK. The bal-
ance of this book will attempt to make the positive case for an intimate relationship
between SGGK and the Edwardian project. In chapter 1, I will examine Edward III’s
martial and sexual profile in the 1340s and provide the grounds for calculating what the
Order of the Garter stood for as the materialization of what Edward III represented and
as a potential point of departure for poetic commentary. Two contemporary texts of
immense importance in the specific historiography and the cultural symbolics of later
medieval chivalry and of Edward III, and especially for the history of how Edward was
perceived, provide strong correlates to SGGK as a poem figuring a king and a court, and
examining, including eroticly, a chivalric ideal embedded in the insular history: the
chronicle of Jean le Bel through 1361 and its rewriting and expansion by Jean Froiss-
sart in following decades. Both are writers personally familiar with the English court
who began their historiography in the 1350s, and both take as the linchpin of their
chronicles the figure of Edward III; the representation of Edward by both extends to charged treatments of Edward’s foundation of the Order of the Garter.

The account the two historians provide of Edward’s military activities through the 1340s is especially fruitful for measuring what the foundation of the order, as an event at once symbolic and functional, must have meant in its historical context and within its own aristocratic domain of signification. These texts provide an ideal test for the hypothesis that insular and continental war, as annexed to the ethos of martial chivalry, provided the hard currency of Edwardian symbolic capital; that Edward was the personal embodiment of this capital; and that the Round Table/Garter was his chief initiative in its institutionalization. In all these respects, le Bel and Froissart provide the discursive equivalent in relation to Edward that Geoffrey of Monmouth provided to Arthur (and in Arthur, William the Conqueror and his Anglo-Norman successors): they are specialists in the tradition of insular historiography that that fellow-cleric launched. If it does no more, juxtaposing these historiographical works with *SGGK* reveals clearly that in its chastisement of the best representative of Arthur’s court, the “romance” work cannot help reflecting on the historiographical paradigms of fourteenth-century chivalry.

But both works lean in *SGGK*’s direction in more provocative ways. It is le Bel who first appears deliberately to associate Edward’s foundation of a new order of knights, a new Round Table or an order modeled on the Round Table, with sexual scandal. Froissart responds to the challenge by disavowing le Bel’s stunning and formidably presented account of Edward’s pursuit of the Countess of Salisbury until he rapes her and by actively disassociating the entire question of Edward’s sexual conduct from the order he now names (as le Bel did not) the Order of the Blue Garter. Le Bel and Froissart thus sketch the parameters of the aristocratic attempt to grasp and master history, in which sexual questions repeatedly appear in the train of questions of conquest and empire. In support of the view that the entanglement of the Plantagenet imperializing drive with sexual conduct is the message of the Order of the Garter, chapter 2 provides the reasons for concluding (against the current standard view of the order) that the device of the garter is female, eroticized, and morally ambiguous and that the Garter motto bespeaks this moral ambiguity. Separately from le Bel’s and Froissart’s suggestive treatments, several texts that have been either scant or overlooked for what they indicate about Edward’s sexual conduct from the 1340s through the 1360s—that is, some time before the king’s well-known liaison with Alice Perrers from the later 1360s on—indicate strongly that the Round Table was projected and the Garter founded in the midst of a period of pronounced sexual controversy surrounding Edward, most of it intertwined with either his imperializing martial exploits or the culture of festivity that he promulgated in relation to those exploits. The textual
evidence of sexual controversy narrows to a synaptic distance the gap between the
device and motto of the Garter and sexual indiscretion or scandal; it also draws
toward each other SGGK’s erotic plot and its opening imperial theme on the one
hand and the occasion of the Garter foundation on the other.

The concept of the eros of history helps to explain this convergence of political
and sexual libidos in order and poem; specifically, the combination in SGGK of the
themes of national foundation and imperial drive in the first two stanzas with the
chastity test Gawain undergoes, the confluence of historiography and romance in
Edward’s Arthurianism and in the poem’s objects of attention, and the dual function
of the Garter in politico-military and sexual cultural orders. Foregrounded as it is in
SGGK, the plot of the erotic trial of one of the great knights in the island’s martial
history would indeed be a gloss on the question of history even without the links
that connect this plot to the deeds of Edward III. As it stands, both the Order of
the Garter and SGGK feature as exhibits in an old problematic in the philosophy
and/or theology of history that is not merely Virgilian, Augustinian, and Dantine,
but Galfridian.

In chapter 3, my purpose is to explain the drama of SGGK as a response to the
foundation of the Order of the Garter, namely as a critique of that order precisely for
its encapsulation of the martial and sexual Edwardian chivalric ethos, but more
finally as a critique of the historiography and romance that underwrite it. Once we
enter medieval historiography in particular, we encounter an array of discourses
competing for the same space and time: notably, several aristocratic and ecclesiasti-
cal discourses of history. The competing constructions of history are at work in
influential manuals of chivalry that specify from perspectives at different points
along the continuum between religious and secular the proper aristocratic custody
of secular history (and this custody, of course, has implications for the construction
at the same time of romance as a preferred aristocratic discourse): in these manuals,
sexual issues surface in company with martial as dimensions of aristocratic conduct
on which the social order depends. In orthodox texts (notably the anonymous
Ordene de chevalerie and Ramon Lull’s treatise the Llibre de l’orde de cavalleria),
knightly “cleanness” or sexual ascesis features largely as a necessary condition of the
proper social order; on the other hand, the French knight Geoffroi de Charny’s Livre
de chevalerie, written in the thick of the mid-fourteenth-century wars with England in
which he was a leading participant, combines a lexicon of cleanness with a reli-
giously heterodox attitude to sexual behavior, within an alternative chivalric con-
struction of the royal-aristocratic political and social order. Unusually for a romance
of its type, SGGK predicates the “clannes” of Gawain (653); even if the poem were not
written in midcentury, this ascription by a poet who wrote an entire (and over-
whelmingly and purposefully historiographical) work on the subject of cleanness

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would entail the poem’s entry into a construction of history that reflects on the Edwardian construction.

These chivalric manuals are therefore necessary texts to juxtapose with a poem examining the ideals of knighthood, and making cleanness the issue at stake in both its overt drama (the seduction narrative) and its covert drama (the girdle or “fear of death” narrative, with its themes of the fallen flesh and the acts of “fylþe,” such as the girdle’s acceptance by Gawain, to which it gives rise, SGGK 2436). The relation of religious discourse to chivalric regarding the order of history that underlies constructions of the noble estate is handily illustrated by a figure we have already noticed, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, the first courtier after the Black Prince to be made a knight of the Garter, hero of the wars with France, and an obvious candidate as the living incarnation of the poem’s hero: not only the figure proposed by Cooke and Boulton as a likely patron for the Gawain-poet, but the author, in his Livre de seyntz medicines, of a work repenting the author’s chivalric priorities written five years after the founding of the Garter, at very much the same time as I propose for SGGK’s writing as a poem with a similar thrust. The standard chivalric manuals, combined with Henry’s work and with liturgical and penitential discourse threaded through SGGK, illuminate the allegory of discourses that provides the most fundamental of the poem’s plots. What is at stake is the order of history, or more exactly that order’s construction in competing historiographies. This discursive allegory, in institutional terms roughly pitting ecclesiastical against aristocratic fields of meaning, is the plot and problematic of SGGK as a poem whose point of departure is the Order of the Garter.

In its allegory of discourses, common to which discourses (biblical, liturgical, penitential, romance) is the discourse of historiography, SGGK only conforms to a fundamental plot-line of the poet’s corpus. Bible, liturgy, penance—and romance’s permeation of and by each through the poet’s exploitation of the metaphors of courtesy: these define the poet’s prime and fundamentally historicizing discursive commitments in Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience. Their heavily historiographical matrix extends from Pearl’s eschatology in its vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, taken so largely from the Book of Revelation, through Cleanness’s transhistorical sweep through the Old Testament (and allegorically through the eight ages of Christian salvation history; see Ingledew, “Liturgy” 264–65), to Patience’s pursuit, in the story of Jonah, of a figural intersection between salvation history and the history of the worldly city of which Nineveh was a progenitor (for Froissart, no less than chivalry’s point of origin; see chap. 1). SGGK witnesses to the drama of discourses as the cultures of the church and of the court, for all that they overlap, compete for the institutional space from which history is given its content and its interpretation. Understanding the poem in this way also has the advantage of enabling us to
believe that the poet of *SGGK*, a work so often in discussion split from its companion poems in its single manuscript, really is the same one who wrote *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*.

It remains to say a concluding word about the relation between this book and its forthcoming companion, *Romance as History*. If, roughly speaking (once again), the writing of history describes the field of what has happened and romance describes the field of what can be imagined to have happened, in *SGGK* this complementarity takes the form of the relation between the poem’s first two, history-writing stanzas and the consequent romance narrative of Gawain’s adventure. The separation made by this book and its companion writes large this bifurcation in *SGGK*. The present book proceeds from the romance narrative as a rewriting of the foundation of the Order of the Garter; the other grows out of the recapitulative sketch in the first stanzas of Britain’s Trojan genealogy through King Arthur, to approach *SGGK* as an avenue into and a commentary on the entire domain of the writing of Galfridian insular history. The latter project allows me to extrapolate from the work done in this one with the aim of rehabilitating medieval romance as a discourse of history, meaning a discourse that constructs history and (most germane to my motive) participates in the ethical urgency of history that is regularly denied romance. In *Romance as History*, I explore further what lies at the root of both medieval romance and medieval historiography, namely, desire: most consequentially, the desire for that sense of place and relationship economically expressed in the idea of home—an empty vessel of an idea, to be filled by constructions of space and time that range from the eschatological or ecclesiastical, through such terrestrial formations as the imperial or national or such other community-based formations as the city-state or city, or a plenitude of constructions of the local, all the way to the constitution of the family, the couple, or, finally, the self. *Romance as History*, therefore, follows through on ideas opened up in this book; the reader will appreciate that in the last resort the distinction between the two books is as much a matter of convenience as that which conventionally, in a manner alien to medieval readers and writers, separates the two parts of *SGGK* and the two discourses they primarily instantiate.