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Queen Elizabeth to Lord Paget, 1561
Remarks from Early Modern Bibliophilia: A Celebration of the Chrzanowski Collection
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This document is, in effect, a party invitation. It was among the hottest tickets for male political elites in Tudor England. It invited Lord Paget to the noble Order of the Garter's 1561 celebration of the feast of St. George at Windsor Castle. In 1561, Paget was at the end of a long career in royal service. The Garter was the chivalric order founded in the 1340s by King Edward III. To be named a Knight of the Garter was the most exclusive, and highest, secular honor to which male elites could aspire. The Order was comprised of only twenty-four Knights and the monarch. The host(ess) of this party was Queen Elizabeth.

There were a few things that interested me about this document. First, the Order of the Garter had been founded, and had existed, as a male-dominated institution for centuries by the 1560s. It had been established by a king and all of the Knights were men. Women had participated in the Order's ceremonies sporadically during the Middle Ages. But they had never had a formal role in the Order and had never been made Knights. Whatever participation they had enjoyed was, apparently, over by the early-sixteenth century. But in 1561, a woman was head of the Order.

A second thing that drew me to this document was my long interest in ritual displays, their meanings, their social and political dynamics and how all of those changed over time. I have examined these questions in the provincial urban context and this document allowed me to make a first foray into goings on at Court. Finally, celebrations dedicated specifically to St. George have also interested me. He was the patron saint of England and had a widespread appeal, geographically and socially. He was popular everywhere and with pretty much everyone in sixteenth-century England.

Festivities dedicated to St. George were of long standing by the sixteenth century, yet they were not static and changed over time. One significant change struck me immediately upon reading this party invitation. The Queen invited Paget to celebrate the feast day on May 18. But the feast of St. George falls on April 23 on the liturgical calendar. The change in dates surely reflected the impact of the Reformation. Protestant reformers sharply attacked the veneration of saints. (I should add that there were also those who did not leave the Catholic Church who were also troubled by the practice.) In England, many saints' days had been abrogated from the liturgical calendar. But St. George remained popular, nevertheless. Celebrations dedicated to him were sometimes detached from his feast day, likely to downplay his link to traditional religion. I think that this is the case with the invitation to the Garter's 1561 celebration.

A second important change took place a few years after this invitation was proffered. In 1567, Elizabeth declared that Garter celebrations did not have to be held at Windsor, which had been their traditional home. After that time, they were apparently not held at Windsor again during the Queen's reign. Observances were held at Greenwich and Whitehall instead. In addition to moving the date and location of the celebrations, Elizabeth also abandoned and reworked a number of other customs that had customarily been associated with these observances. Some scholars have argued that with such innovations, the Queen was able to put her own stamp on a male-dominated institution.

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Returning to 1561 where we began, Lord Paget accepted the Queen's invitation and celebrated the feast of St. George at Windsor. As I noted earlier, Paget was at the end of his career at that time. Most historians remember him as a political survivor. He served in governments of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary, and finally that of Elizabeth. Clearly, he had considerable diplomatic skills in addition to his administrative ones. Paget had had his ups and downs during his long career. In fact, he had previously been degraded from Garter, and then restored. He had also been imprisoned in the Tower, but later released. Despite all of those upheavals, Paget died of natural causes in 1563. We might think of that as a mean feat for someone who was a long-standing royal servant in such disparate regimes. But I will close by quoting the late G.R. Elton, speaking about those who also (probably) died of natural causes. He said, "people did, [die] after all, even without assistance from the government."