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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the ballad of King Arthur in the Langham *Letter*?

In much of the Langham *Letter*, the author digresses from his avowed purpose of describing the entertainment given by the Earl of Leicester for Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle in 1575. Included among these digressions is a five-page account of:

a ridiculous devise of an auncient minstrell, and hiz song [which was] prepared to have been profferd, if meet time and place had been ffound for it (Kuin 59).

The author deftly introduces the "ridiculous devise" into his description of the Kenilworth entertainment by claiming that he saw it performed at some other time and place:

Ons in a worshopfull company, wehar full appointed, he recoounted his matter in sort az it shoould have been uttred, I chaused too be: what I noted, heer thus I tell yoo (Kuin 59).

The author of the Langham *Letter* then gives a detailed description of the minstrel's attire, relates the minstrel's ludicrous exposition of the "coat of arms" of Islington, and ends with his performance of a ballad of King Arthur. The matter is handled throughout with tongue in cheek, as the description of the minstrel's preparations for his song indicates:

Appeerz then a fresh, in hiz ful formalitee with a loovely look, after three loly cooursiez, cleerd hiz vois with a hem and a reach, and spat oout withall, wyped hiz lips with the hollo of hiz hand, for fyling hiz napkin, temperd a string or too with hiz wreast: and after a littl warbling on hiz harpe for a prelude, cam fourth

with a sollem song, warraunted for story oout of king Arthurz acts, the first book and 26 Chapter, whereof I gat a copy, and that iz thiz (Kuin 62-3).

The author thus warrants that the story on which the ballad is based is bona fide (it is in fact drawn from Chapter 26 of Book I of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*) (Cowen 57-8), and he assures Humfrey Martin that the ballad is "sollem". The truth of the latter statement can best be judged from the ballad itself:

So it befell upon a Penticost day,
When king Arthur at Camelot kept Coourt riall,
With hiz cumly Queen dame Gaynoour the gay,
And many bolld Barons sittying in hall,
Ladyes apparaild in purpl and pall,
When herauds in hukes herryed full by
Largess Largess chevaliers treshardy.

A douty dwarf too the uppermost deas
Right peartly gan prik and kneeling on knee,
With steeven full stoout amids all the preas,
Sayd hail syr king, God thee save and see:
King Ryens of Northgalez greeteth well thee,
And bids that thy beard anon thoou him send,
Or els from thy jawez he wyll it of rend.

For hiz robe of state, a rich skarlet mantell,
With a leaven kings beards bordred about,
He hath made late, and yet in a cantell
Iz left a place the twelfth to make oout:
Whear thin must stand, be thoou never so stoout.
This must be doon I tell the no fabl,
Mawgre the pour of all thy round tabl.

When this mortall [message] from hiz moouth waz past
Great waz the brute in hall and in boour:
The king fumed, the queen shrieked, ladiz wear agast,
Princes puft, Barns blusterd, Lords began too loour,
Knights stampd, Squiers startld az steeds in a stoour,
Yeemen and Pagez yeald oout in the hall,
Thearwith cam in syr Kay the Seneshall.

Sylens my suffrainz quod the curtize Knight,

And in that stound the chearme becam still,
The dwarfs dynner full deerly waz dight,
For wyne and wastl he had hiz wyll,
And when he had eaten and fed hiz fyll,
One hunderd peeces of coyned gold,
Wear given the dwarf for hiz message bolld.

Say too syr Ryens thoou dwarf quod the king,
That for hiz prouod message I him defy,
And shortly with basinz and panz will him ring
Oout of Northgalez whear az he and I
With swears and no rayzerz shall utterly try
Which of us both iz the better barber:
And thearwith he shook hiz sword Excalaber (Kuin 63-4).

At this point, the author breaks off the tale abruptly:

At this, the minstrell made a pauz and a curtezy, for
Primus passus. More of the song iz thear, but I gat it
not. Az for the matter had it cum to the sheaw, I think
the fello woold have handled it well inoough (Kuin
64).

Furnivall notes that this ballad of King Arthur was printed in 1656 in *Musarum deliciae* over the initials "J.A." (74). However, the attribution of authorship to "J.A." is surely wrong. In the first place, it was not made until almost one hundred years after the publication of the ballad in the *Langham Letter*. Secondly, the note quoted in Furnivall indicates that the ballad as given in the *Musarum deliciae* is "identical" to that given in the *Langham Letter*. However, the author of the *Langham Letter* indicates clearly that he has not transcribed the entire ballad; he says that the minstrel paused for "*Primus passus*," and that the ballad has additional verses ("More of the song iz thear, but I gat it not."). If the source of the verses in the *Musarum deliciae* were independent of the *Langham Letter*, the missing verses would be there. Since they are not, we may reasonably conclude that the version in the *Musarum deliciae* is ultimately derived from the *Langham Letter*.

In addition, the comic touches which enliven the ballad are very much in keeping with the humorous vein of other parts of the *Langham Letter*, indicating that all were written by the same author. In fact, the entire burlesque account of the "mock minstrel" (Furnivall's term) leaves the reader with the distinct impression that the author is sharing an "inside" joke with Humfrey Martin, the point of which is that the

author of the *Langham Letter* is recalling for Humfrey Martin's benefit a festive occasion of some years earlier. On that occasion, Humfrey Martin and other members of a "woorshipfull company" were, seemingly, entertained by the author of the *Langham Letter* in the guise of a mock minstrel. The liveliness and give and take of the performance (in which the minstrel clearly "played the fool") is indicated by the author's recollection of the minstrel's irritation when his exposition of the "arms" of Islington was contradicted by a member of the "woorshipfull company":

Heerat every man laught a good, save the minstrell:
that though the fool wear made privy, all waz but for
sport, yet too see him self thus crost with a contrary
ku that he lookt not for, woold straight have geen over
all, waxt very wayward, eager and soour: hoow be it
at last by sum entreaty and many fayr woords, with
sak and suger, we sweetned him again, and after becam
az mery az a py (Kuin 62).

That the minstrel was quite a young man at the time of this performance is indicated by the description of his "napkin":

Oout of hiz boozom drawn foorth a lappet of his nap-
kin, edged with a blu lace, and marked with a truloove,
a hart and a D. for Damian: for he waz but a bachelor
yet (Kuin 60).

Was the minstrel really present at Kenilworth in 1575? The author of the *Langham Letter* claims the minstrel was there. At the same time, he makes it clear that the minstrel did not perform for anyone - - much less the Queen -- at Kenilworth. He also makes it clear that the performance he describes occurred at some time in the past:

Once in a woorshipfull company, whear full appointed,
he reccounted his matter in sort az it shoould have
been uttred, I chaunsed too be: what I noted, heer
thus I tell yoo (Kuin 59).

That being the case, his recollection of the performance is remarkable indeed. He has noted each detail of the minstrel's dress, all the particulars of his exposition of the arms of Islington, and six verses of the minstrel's ballad of King Arthur.

Who was this "mock minstrel"? The only reason-

able way to account for the feat of memory just described is to conclude that the mock minstrel was the author of the Langham *Letter* himself. He could so readily recall all the details of the minstrel's dress and performance because he himself was the performer.

If Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the author of the Langham *Letter* -- as has been suggested in previous editions of the *Edward de Vere Newsletter* -- then the mock minstrel was the Earl of Oxford.

This hypothesis gains considerable support from the fact that a manuscript copy of the ballad of King Arthur is known to have existed in the library of Thomas, Lord Windsor, grandson of Edward de Vere's half-sister, Katherine (see Appendix A). The fact that a manuscript copy of the ballad was in the possession of one of the de Vere descendants is a further link in the chain of evidence suggesting that the author of the Langham *Letter* was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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Appendix A:

The ballad of King Arthur as given in *Cambria Triumphans*.

In his *Cambria triumphans* of 1661, Percy Enderbie reproduces a version of the King Arthur ballad, prefacing it with the following remarks:

At a solemnity held by this renowned King [Arthur] upon the feast of Pentecost, which was the usual day for the Knights of the Roundtable to convene, a challenge was brought to *King Arthur* from a king of *Northwales*, the Copy whereof was given me by the right honorable *Richard Lord Herbert of Cherbury* and

Castle Island, unto whom it was presented by Dr. *Johnson* a grave and learned Physitian in Worcester, who had it from a Manuscript in the Library of the right honorable *Thomas Lord Windsore*, which here I will insert for my Readers recreation.

As it fell out upon a Pentecost day,
King *Arthur* at Camelot kept his Court Royal
With his fair Queen *Gwinever* the gay,
And many princes sitting in hall,
Bold Barons, Knights and Squires that day,
Ladies attired in purple and pall,
With Herehaughts in hewkes howling full high,
Cried Larges Larges, Chevaliers treshardie.
A doughty Dwarf to the uppermost Desk,
Boldly gan prick kneeling on knee,
Said, King *Arthur*, God thee save; and see,
Sr. *Reimes* of *North Gales* greeteth well thee,
And bids thee anon thy Beard thou him send,
Else from thy jawes he will it off rend.
For his robe of state is a rich scarlet mantle,
With eleven Knights beards bordred about:
And there is room left yet in a Kantle
For thine to stand, to make the twelfth out;
This must be done, be thou never so stout.
This must be done, I tell thee no fable,
Maugre the teeth of all the round table.
When this mortal message from his mouth past,
The Kings fum'd, the Queens scrich't, Ladies were agast,
Princes pufft, Barons blusterd, Lords began to lower,
Knights storm'd, Squires startl'd, like steeds in a Stower,
Pages and Yeomen yeld out in the hall,
With that came in Sr. *Kay* the Seneschal.
Silence my Sovereign, quoth the courteous Knight,
And therewith all the stur began to still,
The Dwarfs dinner full deerly was dight
Of Wine, and wisely he had his fill,
A hundred peices of fine coyned Gold
Were given the Dwarf for his message bold.
But say to Sr. *Rayns* thou Dwarf quoth the King,
That for his bold message I him defie;
For shortly I mean with Basons him to ring
Out of *North Gales* where he and I
With swords and not rasors will quickly try
Whether he or K. *Arthur* will prove the best Barbor;
And therewith he struck his good sword *Esculabor* (197).

It will be noted that the version of the ballad found in the Langham *Letter* is written in the style of Anglo-Saxon poetry: the two halves of each four-stress line are interrupted by a caesura, and bound by alliteration. In the version given in *Cambria triumphans*, however, alterations have been made which distort the meter of the original, as well as the vigour of its language.

The provenance of this inferior version of the ballad is, however, of considerable significance, since

it links the Langham *Letter* with Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

As Enderbie says, his immediate source of the ballad was Richard, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d.1655), who, according to Lee (307), was the son of Edward Herbert (d.1648), and a nephew of the poet, George Herbert (1593-1633).

In his autobiography, Edward Herbert (d.1648) informs the reader that his brother, George Herbert the poet (1593-1633), was at one time chaplain to his "kinsman", Philip, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery (d.1650) (Lee 22). In 1605, Philip Herbert (d.1650) married Edward de Vere's youngest daughter, Susan de Vere (Ogburn 784). From the fact of George Herbert's chaplaincy to Philip, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, it can be inferred that the relationship between these two branches of the Herbert family was a close one. The existence of a copy of the ballad of King Arthur in the possession of a member of the Herbert family thus affords further evidence that Edward de Vere was the author of the Langham *Letter* and of the ballad of King Arthur. It is also not without interest that one of the persons mentioned in the most complimentary terms in the Langham *Letter* is Lady Mary Sidney (Kuin 78), grandmother of Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery (d.1650).

Further evidence of Oxford's authorship of the ballad is provided through its connection with Thomas, Lord Windsor. According to Enderbie, the ballad came to Richard Herbert through a Dr. Johnson of Worcester, who obtained it from a manuscript in the library of Thomas, Lord Windsor.

Thomas, Lord Windsor (1591-1641) was the grandson of Edward de Vere's half-sister, Katherine de Vere (only child of the marriage of John, 16th Earl of Oxford, and Dorothy Neville, daughter of Ralph Neville, 4th Earl of Westmoreland), and Edward Windsor (1532?-1575), nephew of George Windsor and Ursula de Vere (youngest sister and co-heir of John de Vere, 14th Earl of Oxford) (*Complete peerage*, 794, 800).

The provenance of the Enderbie version of the ballad of King Arthur thus links it with two separate family connections of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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THE HERBERT FAMILY

