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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write *Sir John Oldcastle* in an attempt to save his cousin Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, from the headsman's axe? [Part 3 of 4]

The latest date by which *Sir John Oldcastle* could have been written is October 16th, 1599, when the following entry appears in Henslowe's *Diary*:

> this 16th of october 99
> Receved by me Thomas downton of Phillipp Henchlow
> to pay m^{r} monday m^{r} drayton & m^{r} wilsson & haythway
> for the first pte of the lyfe of S^{r} Jhon Ouldcasstell & in
> earnest of the Second pte for the use of the companyny
> ten pownd I say receved. . . (Rittenhouse 43).

What this entry indicates is that the Earl of Oxford's secretary, Anthony Munday, and three others were to receive payment for the transfer of some sort of interest in *Sir John Oldcastle*. The exact nature of the interest being transferred is, however, not entirely clear.

A further entry, written sometime between November 1st and November 8th, 1599, alludes to the date of the first performance of *Oldcastle* by Henslowe's company:

> as A gefte
> Receved of M^{r} hincheloe for M^{r} Mundaye & the Reste
> of the poets at the playnge of S^{r} John oldcastell the
> ferste tyme . . . (Rittenhouse 43)

These two entries in Henslowe's *Diary* have been construed as evidence that the play was written by Munday et al in 1599. However, nothing is said in either entry as to authorship or the date of the play's composition. In fact, internal evidence in *Oldcastle* clearly points to a far earlier date of composition than 1599.

One of the strongest arguments *against* 1599 as the date of composition is the brewer Murley's statement in Scene v, ll. 61-2 of *Oldcastle* that "Childermas day this year was Friday" (Rittenhouse 150). Since nothing in the plot requires Murley to mention Childermas day, the fact that he does so suggests that Childermas day, i.e., December 28th (Cheney 46) has some significance. This inference is supported by the fact that the whole of the dialogue between Acton and Murley in this part of the scene leads up irresistably to Murley's comment about Childermas day:

> Acton.
> Forty odd thousand into Ficket Field,
> Where we appoint our special rendezvous.
> Murley.
> Phew, paltry paltry, in and out, to and fro, Lord have
> mercy upon us, what a world is this! Where's that
> Ficket Field, Sir Roger?
> Acton.
> Behind Saint Giles in the Field near Holborn.
> Murley.
> Newgate, up Holborn, Saint Giles in the Field, and to
> Tyburn—an old saw. For the day, for the day?
> Acton.
> On Friday next, the fourteenth day of January.
> Murley.
> Tilly, vally, trust me never if I have any liking of that
> day! Phew, paltry paltry, "Friday," quotha, dismal
> day. Childermas day this year was Friday
> (Rittenhouse 149-50).

Two possibilities as to the significance of the mention of Childermas day present themselves. The first

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of these is that the reference is historical. However, this is clearly not the case: Childermas day did not fall on a Friday in December of 1413, the historical time period in which Murley's reference is set (Cheney 149). The only other possibility is that Childermas day was a Friday in the year of the play's composition. This effectively rules out 1599. Childermas day did fall on a Friday in 1599 (Cheney 118), but December 28th was still two and a half months in the *future* at the time of Henslowe's entry of October 16th, and Murley's words are unequivocally in the *past* tense: "Childermas day this year was Friday." Thus, Murley cannot be referring to either Childermas day, 1413 or Childermas day, 1599.

In the last three decades of the 16th century, Childermas day fell on a Friday in four other years: 1571, 1576, 1582 and 1593 (Cheney 132, 147). The internal evidence in *Oldcastle* points to December 28, 1571, and it is on this year that the balance of this article will focus.

One of the most telling pieces of evidence for 1571 as the year of *Oldcastle's* composition is the fact that Childermas day is the feast of the Holy Innocents (Rittenhouse 150), and in 1571 this feast of the "innocents" fell on Friday, December 28th, 1571, just two weeks prior to Norfolk's trial for treason.

Moreover, *Oldcastle* seems to emphasize the date of Norfolk's treason trial, which took place on January 16th (*Marvellous chance,* 209), in yet another way. The playwright has moved the date of the Ficket Field rebellion to January 14th, (see Acton's speech quoted earlier) two days before Norfolk's treason trial, even though, according to Rittenhouse:

> The chronicles mention January (except Hall who says December) but never as late as the fourteenth (150).

Since the chroniclers differ as to the exact date of the Ficket Field rebellion, and since nothing in the plot requires the pin-pointing of an exact date, the fact that January 14th is specifically mentioned in the play must, like the reference to Childermas day, have some special significance. Clearly, the two references pointedly bracket a time period of a little over two weeks, running from December 28th, 1413 to January 14th, 1414. However, the only inference that can safely be drawn at this point is that the comparable two-week period in 1571/2 was a time of great danger for Norfolk, falling as it did on the eve of his state trial for treason, and that it would have been an eminently suitable time for a last-ditch attempt to influence Queen Elizabeth and her most powerful courtiers in his favour.

A second group of references indicating a composition date of 1571 is the Irish references in the play, all of which point toward the early part of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

The first of these Irish references is the name of the character MacShane. As Rittenhouse points out, MacShane in *Oldcastle*:

> could bring to mind the Irish rebel Shane O'Neill, who fought Elizabeth's deputies in the early part of her reign (244).

and whose progeny were known as the MacShanes. Shane O'Neill had visited London in 1562, where he apparently created a lasting impression at court by making "a cringing and equivocal submission to the Queen in person, howling and lamenting in the Gaelic manner". Later, O'Neill again turned rebel, and was defeated by a force under Sir Henry Sydney at Farsetmore in May of 1567. He was killed shortly thereafter, and his head sent to Dublin Castle staked on a pole (Morton 27, 32-3, 79). Two years later, O'Neill was formally attainted by the Irish Parliament of 1569 (*Ireland in the age of the Tudors,* 120-1). The use of the name MacShane in *Oldcastle* thus serves to underscore the difference between a rebel like the treacherous Shane O'Neill, and a loyal subject like Oldcastle/Norfolk.

The memory of Shane O'Neill would have impressed itself on the minds of Queen Elizabeth and her courtiers in yet another way. In the summer of 1566, O'Neill was the subject of a confrontation between two of the most powerful peers in the realm, the Earls of Leicester and Sussex:

> At a Council meeting Leicester accused Sussex of re-

> sponsibility for Shane O'Neill's rebellion in Ireland, and when Sussex retorted that it was his acuser who had himself fermented rebellion by his letters to O'Neill, the two nearly came to blows (Williams 99).

MacShane's Gaelic line in the play ("Ahone, ahone, ahone, a cree") is also apposite in connection with Norfolk. According to Rittenhouse, the line means "Alas for the prince, or chief" (231). MacShane's words have no relevance to the scene in *Oldcastle* in which they are found, nor could they have any reference to Sir John Oldcastle, who was certainly not a prince. Norfolk, however, a cousin of the Queen's (Peck 297), was styled a prince: his stall in the Chapel at Windsor was:

> decorated with his own arms beneath a ducal crown. Instead of crest or supporters there was his style written out in full: 'Treshault puissant et tresnoble prynce Thomas duke de Norfolk, Comte Mareshall d'Angleterre, Seigneur de Mowbray, Segrave et de Brus, Chivalier du tresnoble Ordre de la Jarretiere et aussi du tresnoble de Seint Michell' (Williams 96).

Norfolk was also referred to by others as a prince, including Camden:

> Incredible it is how dearly the people loved him; which he had purchased through his bounty and singular courtesy, not unbeseeming so great a Prince (Williams 257).

Thus, MacShane's Gaelic words "Alas for the prince" appear to be a reference to Norfolk.

MacShane's request to "let me be hanged in a with after my cuntry, the Irish, fashion" also points to an early date for the composition of *Oldcastle*. Sir Francis Bacon, in his essay "Of Custom and Education", writes that, in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign:

> an *Irish Rebell* Condemned, put up a petition to the Deputie, that he might be hanged in a With, and not in a Halter, because it had been so used, with former rebels (Rittenhouse 251).

Since this event, judging from Bacon's comment, was unique, and took place in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, it seems reasonable to posit that the reference to it in the play is topical, pointing to a date of composition near the time of the event itself.

Another contemporary mention of the Irish situation is found in Scene xxv where Sir Richard Lee, finding the murdered body of his son, says:

> Alack, it is my son; my son and heir
> Whom two years since I sent to Ireland
> To practise there the disciplines of war
> (Rittenhouse 240).

Although the Irish rebels were somewhat less restive than usual in the years 1569-72, English forces were still being sent over to Ireland during that period (Morton 49).

Thus, the combined effect of the Irish references in the play indicates an early date of composition for *Oldcastle*.

Another set of references pointing to 1572 as the date of composition is the references connecting the play to William Brooke, Lord Cobham.

The full title of the play is, of course, *The true and honourable history of the life of Sir John Oldcastle, the good Lord Cobham*. The play is thus about one of William Brooke's predecessors in the title, although not one who was a Cobham by blood. Sir John Oldcastle was:

> a knight from Herefordshire [who] advanced through soldiering for the Lancastrians to friendship with the youthful Harry of Monmouth [and] marriage with the last Lord Cobham's heiress (McKeen 21).

Oldcastle was thus known as Lord Cobham only by reason of his having become the fourth husband of the heiress, Lady Cobham. After Oldcastle's death, the title passed, not to Oldcastle's own heirs, but to Sir Thomas Brooke, Lady Cobham's son-in-law, who had married the daughter of Lady Cobham by her second husband, Sir Reginald Braybrooke (McKeen 21).

In 1571/2, the current Lord Cobham, William Brooke, was in serious trouble. The reason for William Brooke's difficulties in 1571/2 was his involvement in the repercussions of the Ridolfi plot. *Oldcastle*, a play which portrays a former Lord Cobham as innocent of allegations of treason, could have done William Brooke, the current Lord Cobham, nothing but good in 1571.

As Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports in Kent, Cobham had been responsible for the capture of Charles Baillie, the courier who brought certain of Ridolfi's letters into England (McKeen 247). Cobham suppressed the confiscated letters by delivering the originals to the Bishop of Ross and sending a substitute packet to the Privy Council. When this was discovered, Lord Cobham was put under house arrest at Cecil House, the London residence of Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Burghley, where he remained for at least seven and a half months:

> On 24 May 1572, more than seven and a half months after he was taken into custody, Cobham was said by de Spes' successor in London to be still "under guard at Burleigh House" (McKeen 295).

When Cobham was released (probably shortly after Norfolk's execution at the beginning of June, 1572), he not only regained his freedom, but was also allowed to retain the Lord Wardenship (McKeen 295). Cobham's narrow escape from a fate similar to Norfolk's obviously owed a great deal to the protection of his close friend, Lord Burghley (McKeen 300), as well as to the fact that his wife was one of Queen Elizabeth's personal favourites. It may also have owed something to the timely appearance of the play *Sir John Oldcastle*.

A contemporary reference in the play to matters connected with William Brooke, Lord Cobham, can perhaps be detected in the playwright's handling of the character "Cromer the shrieve", who is transformed from the historical 15th century William Cromer, Mayor of London in Oldcastle's time (Rittenhouse 103), into a sheriff of Kent. The playwright seems to have placed Cromer in Kent to draw attention to William Brooke, the current Lord Cobham. The reference to William Cromer would have been topical in 1571 when Lord Cobham, as Rittenhouse points out, caused a certain amount of controversy in Kent by securing a William Cromer's election to Parliament:

> in the election of 1571 in Hythe (one of the Cinque Ports) Lord Cobham (the 10th) got one of his nominees elected, a William Cromer of Kent (204).

Since any part which the historical William Cromer of the early 1400's played in the life of Sir John Oldcastle was peripheral at best, the fact that the author of *Oldcastle* bothered to include his name, while changing the facts about him found in the chronicles, seems clearly to link the play with the events of 1571/2.

"Cromer the shrieve" is brought into the play in only a single scene, in which he arrests Lord Cobham. At the same time, he unhistorically puts in a kind word for Lady Cobham, urging the Bishop not to arrest her:

> But by your leave, this warrant doth not stretch
> To imprison her (Rittenhouse 209).

Since the Lady Cobham who was the wife of Sir John Oldcastle is barely mentioned in the chronicles, the prominent part given to her in the play as a loyal wife appears to draw attention to the current Lady Cobham, William Brooke's wife, friend of the Duke of Norfolk (Rittenhouse 183), and one of Queen Elizabeth's closest friends and favourites (Rittenhouse 144). While Lord Cobham was under house arrest at Lord Burghley's, Lady Cobham seems to have been absent from court for a time, although she was soon reinstated in favour and remained one of Queen Elizabeth's confidantes until her death in 1592.

Thus, a number of references in *Oldcastle* clearly seem designed to draw the audience's attention to the current Lord Cobham, Warden of the Cinque Ports in Kent, and to historical events of 1571/2.

One final reference in *Oldcastle* which points to events connected with the Duke of Norfolk is the name of the character Harpool. Although he is given such a prominent part that he at times almost takes over the play, Oldcastle's feisty servant Harpool is completely unhistorical. Harpool's name can, however, be connected to the Northern Rebellion of late 1569, in which the rebels captured Hartlepool, as "a suitable port for [the Duke of Alva] to disembark troops". Alva's aid failed to materialize in 1569

(Williams 173), as, of course, it failed to materialize in the Ridolfi plot because Alva thought Ridolfi and his entire scheme ridiculous. After an interview with Ridolfi in September, 1571, Alva wrote to his master, King Philip of Spain:

> I have been finding out more about him, and the persons with whom he conducted this business . . . [Norfolk] was not in a position to treat with him . . . Rather, he [i.e. Ridolfi] told me it was the ambassador [i.e., the Bishop of Ross] who carried on the affair. . . I conclude he [Ridolfi] is . . . of small wisdom, and that the affair has nothing like the foundation I had imagined . . . I hold it for certain that [Norfolk] never discussed the matter with his other friends who this man says would adhere to him . . . Ridolphi spoke like a man who had learned his lesson parrot-fashion, and when I ask him further questions he is left speechless (*Marvellous chance*, 87-8).

In summary, then, a significant number of topical references in *Oldcastle* point to 1571/72 as the date of the play's composition.

The fourth and final part of this four-part article will discuss the way in which the historical facts of Oldcastle's life and times have been altered in the play to create closer parallels with the circumstances surrounding Norfolk's downfall.

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