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Was the author of the Langham *Letter* a scholar?

The internal evidence demonstrating the scholarship of the author of the Langham *Letter* is so pervasive that it is strange to find that it has hitherto been largely overlooked. Much of this evidence is found in the glosses in the margins of the *Letter*, with the remainder incorporated within the text itself.

In the first place, it is clear from the marginal glosses that the *Letter's* author has a scholar's knowledge of history. In one of the glosses, for example, he refers his readers to a commentary on Tacitus' *Germania*, published in 1529 by Andreas Althamer (c1490-c1564). Moreover, the reference in the gloss to a folio sheet ("Upon Tacit. fol. 142") suggests that the author of the *Letter* was working from a manuscript, rather than a printed copy, of Althamer's commentary on Tacitus.

The same marginal gloss also illustrates both the author's scholarly interest in linguistics, and his knowledge of German. In the text of the *Letter*, he indicates his interest in linguistics in his discussion of the derivation of the suffix "worth" in "Kenilworth", in which he concludes that the English "worth" is related to the German "werd". In the marginal gloss, he shows his knowledge of German by referring the reader to several additional examples of similarities between English and German words and phrases:

The Germans cal *werck* that we cal *woork*; *welt*, *woorld*; *wermut*, *woormwood*; *So viel wert*, *So much worth* (Kuin 39).

The author's historical scholarship is also illustrated in the marginal glosses in which he cites the English historian William of Malmesbury (c1090-1143), and the anonymous *Florilegus*, as authorities for his discussion of the ancient Saxon kingdom of Mercia. These marginal glosses ("Florileg. fol. 221 & 225; Guil. Malmesb. li. I") refer, *inter alia*, to the following passage in the text of the *Letter*:

This Marchlond that Storyerz call *Mercia*, iz numbred in their books, the fourth of the seven Kyngdoms that the Saxons had whilom heer divided among them in the Ream. Began in *Ann. Domi.* 616: 139 year after *Horsus* and *Engist*, continued in the race of a 17 kings, a .259. yeer togyther: and ended in *Ann.* 875. Reized from the rest (sayz the book) at fyrst by *Pendaz* presumption: overthrowen at last by *Buthreds* Hascardy, and so fell too the kyngdome of the West Saxons (Kuin 38).

In this passage, the author displays his broad knowledge of this period in English history by making his own choice of facts where the historical accounts in question disagree with respect to the beginning of the Mercian kingdom. William of Malmesbury begins his account of the kingdom of Mercia with Penda's assumption of kingship in 626 A.D.:

In the year of our Lord's incarnation 626, and the hundred and thirty-ninth after the death of Hengist, Penda the son of Pybba, tenth in descent of Woden, of noble lineage, expert in war, but at the same time an irreligious heathen, at the age of fifty assumed the title of king of the Mercians, after he had already fostered his presumption by frequent incursions on his neighbours (Giles 70).

The author of the *Letter*, however, includes a parenthetical comment in the text ("sayz the book") which

signals his tactful disagreement with William of Malmsbury's position that Penda was Mercia's first king. The *Letter* dates the beginning of the kingdom ten years earlier, in 616 A.D. In a footnote to this passage in his edition of William of Malmsbury, J.A. Giles draws attention to Henry of Huntingdon's chronicle, a source which indicates that the author of the *Letter* is correct in his assumption that the Mercian kingdom did not, in fact, begin with Penda:

It would appear that Penda was not the first king, but the first of any note. Hen. Huntingdon assigns the origin of the kingdom to about the year 584 under Crida, who was succeeded, in the year 600, by Pybba; Ceorl came to the throne in 610, and Penda in 626. See H. Hunt. f.181, 184 (Giles 70).

From this reference to the chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon, it would appear that the author of the *Letter* should have dated the inception of the Mercian kingdom at 584 A.D. However, Kuin, in his edition of the Langham *Letter*, provides a plausible rationale for the *Letter's* choice of 616 A.D.:

It is probable that in naming 616 A.D., Langham is referring to the Battle of the Idle, which defeated Aethelfrith, destroyed Northumbria, and established Edwin as lord of all territories south of the Humber (82).

The author's meticulous concern for historical accuracy is also evidenced by a substantive correction made to this passage in the third edition of the *Letter*. In the second edition, the length of the period of time during which Mercia continued as an independent kingdom is given as "a .249. year". In the third edition, this error is corrected, and the figure for the combined reigns of the Mercian kings is given as "a .259. year" (Kuin 19).

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the author of the *Letter* was a historian of no mean ability, sufficiently familiar with a wide range of historical materials, both in manuscript and printed form, to be able to make informed independent judgements about a period in English history 900 years prior to his own time, using 400-year old source materials.

The author is equally scrupulous in his use of the *Florilegus*, another of the *Letter's* historical sources. The manuscript referred to in the marginal glosses as "Florileg." is an anonymous 13th century chronicle

formerly attributed to one "Matthew of Westminster". The author of the *Letter* appears to have taken the word "Florileg." from its title (Archbishop Parker's 1570 edition of the chronicle bears the following title: *Matthaeus Westmonasteriensis, Florilegus dictus, praecipue derebus Britannicis ab exordio mundi usque ad Annum Domini 1307*). However, the author of the *Letter* does not appear to have worked from Archbishop Parker's edition, but rather from a manuscript copy, since the marginal glosses refer to folio sheets. In addition to the marginal gloss referred to earlier ("Florileg. fol.221 & 225"), there is another important reference to the *Florilegus* in the *Letter*. This marginal gloss ("Florileg li. I fo. 300") refers to the *Letter's* description of a play traditionally performed by the men of Coventry. The *Letter* has this to say about the play's historical theme:

And heerto folloed az good a sport (me thought) prented in an historicaall ku, by certeyn good harted men of Coventree . . . Of argument how the Danez whylom heer in a trooubloous seazon wear for quietnes born withall and suffeard in peas, that anon by outrage and importabl insolency, abuzing both *Ethelred* the king then and all estatez every whear bysyde: at the grevoous complaint and counsell of Huna the kings cheeftain in warz, on Saint Bricez night, *Ann. Dom.* 1012 (Az the book sayz) that falleth yeerly on the thyrteenth of November wear all dispatcht and the ream rid. And for bicauz the matter mencioneth how valiantly oor english weemen for loove of theyr cuntree behaved theselvez: expressed in actionz and rymeZ after their maner, they thought it moought moove sum myrth too her Majesty the rather (Kuin 52).

Once again the author's parenthetical comment ("Az the book sayz") signals his disagreement with information given in his historical source, in this case the date 1012, which is the date given in the *Florilegus* for the massacre of the Danes on St. Brice's night (Luard 534). As Kuin points out in his edition of the *Letter*, the correct date for the massacre is 1002 A.D. However, since the author is relying chiefly on the *Florilegus* for additional details, such as the involvement of Huna, he cites the date found in that source. At the same time, he makes use of a parenthetical comment to indicate his reservations about the reliability of the date given in the *Florilegus*.

Another later period of English history with which the author of the *Letter* evidences familiarity is the troubled reign of Henry III (1216-1272). His knowledge of the events of Henry's reign is indicated by his mention of the Edict of Pacification, or Dictum de Kenelworth:

A singular Patron of humanitee may he [i.e., Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester] be well untoo us tooward all degreerz: of honor, toward hy Estates: and chiefly, whearby we may learn in what dignitee, woorschip and reverens her highnes iz to be esteemed, honored, and recyved. That waz never indeed more condignly doon then heer: so az neither by the bylderz at fyrst, nor by the Edict of pacification after, waz ever Kenelwoorth more nobled then by thiz, hiz lordships receiving her highnes heer noow (Kuin 77).

The author of the *Letter* makes an interesting historical judgment here: Leicester's reception of the Queen at Kenilworth in 1575 has "nobled" Kenilworth to a degree approximated on only two occasions in the past. According to the author, Kenilworth was first nobled by its "bylderz" (Cenwulf, King of Mercia, and his son Kenelm), and, later, by the Edict of Pacification, which resulted from the civil war which broke out between Henry III and his barons in 1264. In that year, the barons, led by the king's brother-in-law, Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, captured Henry at Lewes, and de Montfort took over the reins of government. In the following year, however, he was killed at the Battle of Evesham, and the civil war ended (Cannon 189; Cokayne 545-7). Shortly after the victory at Evesham, Henry issued an ordinance at Winchester under which the lands and tenements of every accomplice of Simon de Montfort were taken into the king's hands (Powicke 204). The Edict of Pacification, or Dictum de Kenelworth, of October, 1266 A.D., reversed the effect of this ordinance, and "defined the way in which persons, high and low, disinherited under the terms of the ordinance of Winchester as accomplices of Earl Simon, could be restored to their place in society and recover their lands" (Powicke 210).

It is, of course, possible that the significance of the Edict of Pacification was widely known to the Elizabethans. It seems more likely, however, that this 300-year old agreement was only of interest to indi-

viduals with a specialized knowledge of that period of English history. The *Letter's* mention of this obscure Edict would therefore seem to place its author among the members of that small, but select, group.

The author of the Langham *Letter* is also familiar with ancient history, as evidenced by a marginal gloss which directs the reader to the work of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus ("Diodor. Sicul. De anti. Egyptiorum gestia. li. 3"). The author has just described the remarkable gymnastic feats of an Italian tumbler, and has jestingly concluded that the man's feats were such that he began to doubt whether the Italian was "a man or a spirite". This chain of thought leads him further afield, into the realm of the spectacular sights described by Diodorus Siculus:

I bleast me by my fayth to behold him, and began to dout whither a waz a man or a spirite: and I ween had doouted me till this day: had it not been that anon I bethought me of men that can reazon and talk with too toongs, and with too parsons at onez, sing lyke burds, curteiz of behavioour, of body strong and in joynts so nymbly withall, that their bonez seem az lythy and plyaunt az syneuz. They dwell in a happy Iland (az the book termz it) foor moonths sayling Southward beyond Ethiop.

Nay Master Martin I tell you no jest: for both *Diodorus Siculus* an auncient Greek historiographer in his third booke of the old Egipcians: and also from him, *Conrad Gesnerus* a great learned man, and a very diligent writer in all good arguments of oour tyme (but deceased) in the fyrst Chapter of hiz *Mithridates* reporteth the same. Az for this fello I cannot tell what too make of him, save that I may gess hiz bak be metalld lyke a lamprey that haz no bone but a lyne lyke a lute string (Kuin 48).

This reference raises the question of whether the author of the *Letter* knew Greek, since Diodorus Siculus wrote in that language. As Kuin points out, John Skelton's English translation of Diodorus Siculus was available (93); however, the marginal gloss in the *Letter* refers the reader to Diodorus, not to Skelton's translation. Moreover, the *Letter* says that "from him", i.e., from Diodorus Siculus, the Swiss physician and naturalist Conrad Gesner derived a comparable passage in the first chapter of his *Mithridates*. This wording, together with the marginal gloss ("Mithrid. Gesneri"), suggests very strongly that the author of the *Letter* had compared

the wording in the two passages, the Greek of Diodorus with the Latin of Conrad Gesner. And, as Kuin points out, Gesner's Latin "closely follows Diodorus in this passage" in the *Mithridates* (Kuin 93). There is also additional evidence in the *Letter* to support the inference that its author was familiar with Greek. In describing the Earl of Leicester's magnificent garden at Kenilworth, the author says that it is, "for Etymon of the woord woorthy to be called Paradis", and points out in a marginal gloss the Greek etymology ("Paradisus. Graec.") (Kuin 72, 109).

In considering the scholarship of the *Letter's* author, it is also worth taking notice of his knowledge of other works of Conrad Gesner (1516-1565), whom he refers to as "a very diligent writer in all good arguments of oour tyme", as well as of the fact that the author is sufficiently interested in the learned Gesner to mention, for the reader's benefit, that Gesner is "now deceased".

In the realm of ancient history, the author of the *Letter* also demonstrates familiarity with the life of Alexander the Great. He is aware that Alexander was born in Emathia (Plutarch's life of Alexander makes no specific mention of Emathia), and that the Greek city states were under the rule of Macedonia during Alexander's lifetime. He also has knowledge of the life of Charlemagne; he is aware that Charlemagne conquered Italy and Germany, and that, as a conqueror, his achievements were such as to merit his being mentioned in the same breath as Alexander (Kuin 76).

The literary scholarship of the *Letter's* author is evidenced by his familiarity with works in both classical and medieval Latin. One of the works to which he refers in a marginal gloss is the metrical treatise on health entitled *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum*, written in Latin by Arnoldus de Villa Nova circa 1100 A.D. (Kuin 104). The author of the *Letter* mentions this work somewhat cavalierly as "*Salerns* chapter", and takes from it a hemistich, or half-line, which serves as a motto for his jesting description of the arms of Islington. The marginal gloss cites the source: "Salern. ca. 9".

In the course of the *Letter*, the author makes use of quotations from Ovid, Terence, Martial, and Virgil. These quotations serve to illustrate his comprehensive knowledge of the works of these authors. The quotation from Martial's epigram 42, for example, is by no means a common one, nor is the quotation from Ovid's *Tristia*. In one case, the author of the *Letter* takes the liberty of paraphrasing Terence to suit his own purposes (Kuin 110). Another quotation, from the *Septem Sapientum Sententiae* (Butrica), attributed in the marginal gloss to "Bias", was obscure enough to resist identification by Kuin (110).

In his reading of the classics, the author of the *Letter* has acquired an easy familiarity with the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheons. In one lengthy passage in the *Letter*, he catalogues the gifts which twenty-six gods and goddesses have provided for the Kenilworth entertainment, each gift an apposite one in terms of the attributes of the deity in question.

There is also evidence in the *Letter* of the author's knowledge of modern languages. In describing how he sings and performs on musical instruments at the request of the ladies at court, he speaks playfully of his "spanish sospires", "french heighes", "Italian dulcets" and "dutch hovez". Throughout the *Letter*, he uses a French, Italian or Spanish word or phrase, as occasion requires.

In addition, the *Letter* displays evidence of the author's knowledge of Hebrew. In discussing the derivation of the Queen's name, Elizabeth, he refers, with certain reservations, to a theory that the name means "Seaventh of my God":

Whearof part iz: fyrst hoow according to her highnes name ELIZABETH, which I heer say oout of the Hebru signifieth (amoong oother) the *Seaventh of my God*: diverz things heer, did soo justly in number square with the same. Az fyrst, her highnes hither cumming in this seaventh moonth: then, prezented with the seaven prezents of the seaven Gods: and after, with the melody of the seaven sorted Muzik in the dollphin, the Lakeladyez gyft (Kuin 64).

As Kuin points out, however:

This interpretation, a favourite of William Patten's, is wrong; the name derives from Hebr. *Elisheba*, 'My god is [my] satisfaction' (Kuin 105).

The author of the *Letter* is aware that this particular interpretation is of questionable authority, and diplomatically signals this fact by his parenthetical comments ("I heer say", and "amoong other"). Although it is possible that the *Letter's* author could have known of another Hebrew meaning of the name Elizabeth without being conversant with Hebrew, his meticulousness with respect to the Hebrew for "Elizabeth", when coupled with his reference to the derivation of the word garden/paradise from the Hebrew "pardes" (marginal gloss: "Aut Hebrae. Pardes id est.") (Kuin 73, 109), seems to betray a knowledge of the language.

Although the inference can be only a tentative one, it would also seem that the author of the *Letter* has some knowledge of Old English. When discussing the derivation of "Kenilworth", he mentions the fact that the English word "Woorth, with the rest of oour ancient langage, waz leaft us from the Germayns" (Kuin 39), i.e., the Saxons, who came to Britain from Germany. This interest in the origins of the "ancient" English language, would seem to suggest some knowledge of Anglo-Saxon English. In addition, the polished King Arthur poem in the *Letter*, which is surely of the author's own composition, is written in Anglo-Saxon metre in a four-beat line with a caesura in the middle, the two halves of the line being linked by alliteration. The use of this early English metre would seem to indicate some familiarity with Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The author's comprehensive interest in languages and linguistics is further confirmed by the unusual orthography of the *Letter*. Only someone with a scholarly interest in the English language would attempt to write a literary composition of the length of the Langham *Letter* using an experimental spelling system.

There are doubtless further examples of the author's historical, linguistic, and literary scholarship to be found in the *Letter*; however, the foregoing examples provide ample illustration of the remarkable

scholarly bent of the individual who shrouds himself behind the pseudonym "Robert Langham". These examples strongly suggest that the true author of the *Letter* was the brilliantly educated Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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