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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the Elizabethan history play, *Sir John Oldcastle*?

In subsequent issues of the *Edward de Vere Newsletter*, the question of Oxford's authorship of this play, and the related question of the play's historical significance, will be explored in some detail. For the purposes of the present article, however, the hypothesis of Oxford's authorship of *Sir John Oldcastle* will be considered solely from the point of view of similarities between *Oldcastle* and two other works of the Elizabethan period, the *Langham Letter* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*.

1. Captain Cox's library in the *Langham Letter* as evidence that a single author wrote the *Langham Letter*, *Sir John Oldcastle*, and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*.

In the June-August 1989 issues of the *Edward de Vere Newsletter*, a case was made for Oxford's authorship of the *Langham Letter* of 1575.

One of the most engaging features of the *Letter* is its description of the lively Captain Cox. Among other things, Captain Cox is a bibliophile. A comprehensive description of his library is given in the *Letter*:

For az for king Arthurz book, Huon of Burdeaus, The four suns of Aymon, Beavys of hampton, The squyre of lo degree, The knight of curteyzy, and the Lady Faguell, Frederik of Gene, Syr Eglamour, Syr Tryamour, Syr Lamwell, Syr Isenbras, Syr Gawyn, Olyver of the Castl, Luces and Eurialus, Virgyls lyfe, The castl of Ladyez, The wydo Edith, The king and the tanner, Fryar Rous, Howleglas, Gargantua, Robin

hood, Adambell Clym of the clough and Wylliam a cloodsley, The churl and the Burd, The seaven wyse Masters, The wyfe lapt in a morrels skyn, The sak full of nuez, The sargeaunt that becam a Fryar, Skogan, Collyn cloout, The Fryar and the boy, Elynor Rummig, and the Nutbrooun mayd, with many mo then I rehearz heer: I beleeve he have them all at hiz fingars ends.

Then in Philosophy both morall and naturall, I think he be az naturally overseen: beside poetry and Astronomy, and oother hid sciencez, az I may gess by the omberty of hiz books: whearof part az I remember, The shepards Calender, The ship of foolz, Daniels Dreamz, The book of Fortune, *Stans puer ad mensam*, The hy wey too the Spittel hoous, Julian of Brainsfords testament, The Castell of Looove, The booget of demaunds, The hundred mery talez, The book of Riddels, The seaven sororz of wemen, The proud wives pater noster, The chapman of a peniwoorth of Wit: Bisids hiz auncient playz, Yooth and charitee, Hikskorner, Nugize, Impacient pooverty, and heerwith doctor Boords breviary of health, What shoold I rehers heer, what a bunch of ballets and songs all ancient: Az Broom broom on hill, So wo iz me begon, trolly lo, Over a whinny Meg, Hey ding a ding, Bony lass upon a green, My bony on gave me a bek, By a bank az I lay: and a hundred more, he hath fayr wrapt up in Parchment and boound with a whipcord.

And az for Allmanaks of antiquitee, (a point for Ephemerides) I ween he can sheaw from Jasper Laet of Antwarp, untoo Nostradam of Frauns, and thens untoo our John Securis of Salsbury.

To stay ye no longer heerin I dare say he hath az fayr a library for theez Sciencez, and az many goodly Monumens both in proze and poetry, and at afternoonz can talk az mooch without book, az ony Inholder betwixt Brainford and Bagshot, what degree so ever he be (Kuin 53-4).

As Nichols has justly remarked:

... with respect to [Captain Cox's] Library, every bib-

liographer from Bodley and Selden down to those of the present times, has been as anxious to possess it as Sir Launcelot du Lake was to win the holy vessel (449).

Captain Cox's library is the library of a wealthy and cultured individual with a marked interest in native English literature, drama, and song, and we will not be too far wide of the mark if we conclude that Captain Cox is a self-caricature by Oxford, and that the library Captain Cox is said to possess is actually Oxford's own.

It is thus interesting to find in *Sir John Oldcastle* a character who is also inordinately fond of books and who possesses five titles identical to titles found in Captain Cox's library. In Scene xiii of *Oldcastle*, the Bishop of Rochester and his Summoner confiscate and are about to burn Oldcastle's religious books. Oldcastle's feisty servant Harpool spiritedly intervenes:

Bish. What bring'st thou there? What, books of heresy?

Sum. Yea, my lord, here's not a Latin book; no, not so much as our Lady's Psalter. Here's the Bible, the Testament, the Psalms in metre, *The Sickman's Salve*, *The Treasure of Gladness* and all in English, not so much but the almanac's English.

Bish. Away with them! To th'fire with them, Clun! Now, fie upon these upstart heretics! All English! Burn them, burn them quickly, Clun!

Harp. But do not, Sumner, as you'll answer it. For I have there English books, my lord, that I'll not part with for your bishopric: *Bevis of Hampton*, *Owlglass*, *The Friar and the Boy*, *Eleanor Rumping*, *Robin Hood*, and other such godly stories, which if ye burn, by this flesh I'll make ye drink their ashes in Saint Marg'et's ale (Rittenhouse 212).

The five books which Harpool so vigorously defends in *Oldcastle* are all to be found among the thirty-three titles in the first paragraph describing Captain Cox's library in the *Langham Letter*.

Captain Cox's library also forms a link between the *Langham Letter* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. Act IV Scene ii of *The Merry Devil* is a dramatization of the eighteenth tale in *The Hundred Merry Tales*, a title found in Captain Cox's library.

Although these facts by no means constitute proof that the *Langham Letter*, *Sir John Oldcastle* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* were all written by the same person, they are certainly suggestive of that possibility.

2. Similarities among characters in *Oldcastle* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*.

In the March 1989 issue of the *Edward de Vere Newsletter*, evidence was put forward suggesting that Oxford was the author of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. In that play, Oxford created a very distinctive character -- the jovial and loquacious Sir John, the Vicar of Waltham. Sir John first appears at the beginning of Act II at the house of Banks, the Miller of Waltham:

Banks. Take me with you, good Sir John! A plague on thee, Smug, and thou touchest liquor, thou art foundered straight. What, are your braines alwayes water-milles? must they ever runne round?

Smug. Banks, your ale is a Philistine fox; z'hart, theres fire i'th taile on't; you are a rogue to charge us with Mugs i'th rereward. A plague of this winde; O, it tickles our Catastrophe.

Sir John. Neighbour Banks of Waltham, and Goodman Smug, the honest Smith of Edmonton, as I dwell betwixt you both at Enfield, I know the taste of both your ale houses, they are good both, smart both. Hem, Grasse and Hay! we are all mortall; let's live till we die, and be merry; and there's an end.

Banks. Well said, sir John, you are of the same humour still; and doth the water runne the same way still, boy?

Smug. Vulcan was a rogue to him; Sir John, locke, lock, lock fast, sir John; so, sir John. Ile one of these yeares, when it shall please the Goddesses and the destinies, be drunke in your company; thats all now, and God send us health; shall I swear I love you?

Sir John. No oathes, no oaths, good neighbour Smug! Weel wet our lips together and huggle: Carrouse in private, and elevate the hart, and the liver and the lights, - and the lights, mark you me, within us; for hem, grasse and hay! we are all mortall, lets live till we die, and be merry, and thers an end.

Banks. But to our former motion about stealing some venison; whither goe we?

Sir John. Into the forrest, neighbour Banks, into brians
walke, the madde keeper (Abrams 126-7).

The lively Sir John, Vicar of Waltham, in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* much resembles in certain particulars two of the characters in *Sir John Oldcastle* - the brewer William Murley, and Sir John, the Parson of Wrotham. It is impossible to escape the suspicion that these three characters in two different plays were created by the same hand.

The chief similarity between Sir John, the Vicar of Waltham, in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* and the brewer William Murley in *Sir John Oldcastle* lies in a striking peculiarity of speech. Both the vicar and the brewer habitually repeat distinctive litanies of catch phrases. With Sir John, it is "Grasse and hay! We are all mortal; let's live till we die, and be merry; and there's an end!" The brewer Murley's favourite line is his "Phew, paltry, paltry, in and out, to and fro, be it more or less, upon occasion, Lord have mercy upon us, what a world is this!", as in the following speech from *Oldcastle*:

Mur. Phew, paltry paltry, in and out, to and fro, be it more or less, upon occasion, Lord have mercy upon us, what a world is this! Sir Roger Acton, I am but a Dunstable man, a plain brewer, ye know! Will lusty, cavaliering captains, gentlemen, come at my calling, go at my bidding? Dainty my dear, they'll do a dog of wax, a horse of cheese, a prick and a pudding. No, no, ye must appoint some lord or knight at least to that place (Rittenhouse 148).

Sir John, the Vicar of Waltham, in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* also bears a strong resemblance to *Oldcastle's* Sir John, the Parson of Wrotham. Both clerics have roguish personalities and an unwillingness to let conscience trouble them about matters such as thieving, drinking and wenching, as the following speeches from *Oldcastle* demonstrate:

Harp. Thou art the madd'st priest that ever I met with.

Sir John. Give me thy hand. Thou art as good a fellow. I am a singer, a drinker, a bencher, a wench; I can say a mass, and kiss a lass! Faith, I have a parsonage, and because I would not be at too much charges, this wench serves me for a sexton.

Harp. Well said, mad Priest. We'll in and be friends (Rittenhouse 146).

A few isolated quotations cannot hope to illustrate the many points of likeness among these three characters from two different plays. However, these points of comparison can and do suggest that the hypothesis of Oxford's authorship of both *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* and *Sir John Oldcastle* merits further investigation.

The possibility that Oxford wrote such diverse works as the *Langham Letter*, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, and *Sir John Oldcastle* leads to an even more comprehensive and interesting proposition. This is the hypothesis that virtually all the so-called "apocryphal plays" are by a single author, and that that author is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

Nor, on reflection, would this be surprising. It would be far more surprising if the total literary output of someone known in his own day as one of "the best for comedy" had disappeared without a trace. There are many points of connection in the apocryphal plays with Oxford's life experiences and known interests. It is thus quite likely that these plays represent much of the lost achievement with which he should be credited.

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