



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 15

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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 2 of 4]**

It has been said that the historical details in *Sir John Oldcastle* are primarily derived from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. This cannot be so if *Oldcastle* was written in 1571/2 just prior to Norfolk's execution, since the first edition of Holinshed was not published until 1577.

However, versions of the Oldcastle story were available in a variety of chronicles which predated 1571. Holinshed's account, for example, is itself for the most part taken word for word from the earlier chronicle of Edward Hall (see Appendix A). Fiehler lists the many other sources which were available at the time: *The St. Alban's Chronicle* of Thomas of Walsingham, *Otterbourne's Chronicle*, the *Chaplain's Account*, the *Liber Metricus*, the *Liber de Illustribus Henricis*, Capgrave's *Chronicle of England*, John Hardyng's *English Chronicle*, Adam of Usk's *Chronicle*, the *Vita Henrici Quinti* of Titus Livius, the anonymous *Northern Chronicle*, the *Pseudo-Elmham* chronicle, Polydore Vergil's *Historia Anglica*, *Gregory's Chronicle*, *Fabyan's Chronicle*, and *Stow's Chronicles*. These chronicle accounts differ from each other in certain details, but all the historical material in *Oldcastle* is found in one or the other of them (Fiehler 79-107).

The older chroniclers, writing prior to Henry VIII's break with Rome, portrayed Oldcastle as a heretic; from 1530 on, however, a series of polemical writ-

ers transformed Oldcastle into a Protestant martyr. *The Book of Thorpe, or of John Oldcastle* (probably written by the reformer William Tyndale), was published in 1530 (Fiehler 148-9). In 1544, the Protestant reformer John Bale (1495-1563) used Tyndale as the source of his *Brefe Chronycle Concernynge the Examynacyon and Death of Syr Johan Oldecastell* (Fiehler 156), and in 1563 John Foxe incorporated a "lightly-edited version" of Bale into his *Acts and Monuments* (Rittenhouse 23). Bale also influenced Hall's account of Oldcastle (see Appendix B) and thus, indirectly, Holinshed's.

The fact that both Bale and Foxe wrote about Oldcastle is of signal importance to the present inquiry because of the ties between Foxe and Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, and John Bale and the Earls of Oxford. These connections make it clear that the idea of dramatizing the Oldcastle story would have suggested itself much more readily to Edward de Vere than to any other Elizabethan playwright.

John Foxe's relationship with Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, spanned the latter's lifetime. Foxe was Norfolk's childhood tutor, instilling in his pupil the firm Protestantism that was a hallmark of Norfolk's religious beliefs to the end (Williams 25, 238), despite attempts to portray him as a supporter of the Papist cause. Foxe dedicated to Norfolk the first part of his *Church History*, published in Basel in September, 1559. Norfolk not only wrote Foxe a warm letter in response, but also, on Foxe's return to England in 1559 from exile on the continent:

found [room] for Foxe and his family in Christ Church,

Aldgate [where], once he was settled, the scholar began to collect material for his martyrology. Deprivation and exile had seriously affected his health and in the following spring Norfolk invited him to stay in the country and later found a niche for him in Norwich (Williams 47-8).

When he heard rumours that Norfolk had left the court under a cloud in September of 1569, Foxe wrote a letter warning him against false friends:

There is no greater cunning in these days than to know whom a man may trust; examples you have enough within the compass of your own days, whereby you may know what noblemen have been cast away by them whom they seemed most to trust. Remember, I pray you, the example of Mephibosheth, whereof I told you being young . . . (Williams 164-5).

After his conviction for treason, Norfolk requested permission to have Foxe and the Dean of St. Paul's, Alexander Nowell, visit him to give him spiritual comfort. As his gaoler, Sir Henry Skipwith, wrote to Lord Burghley:

[Norfolk] longeth much for Mr. Foxe, his old schoolmaster, to whom he most desires to perform that faith which he first grounded him in; and sure I find him little altered, but liveth now in such order as he before did, determined and very well settled towards God as ever I saw any (Williams 238).

Dean Nowell and Foxe visited Norfolk on January 19, 1572, and were at his side on the scaffold on Tower Hill when he was beheaded on June 2, 1572 (Williams 239, 253).

Foxe was a friend of John Bale (Harris 37, 119), and although there is no evidence of any close relationship between Norfolk and Bale, the two men must have been acquainted through Norfolk's aunt. From 1548-1553, Norfolk's aunt, Mary Fitzroy, Duchess of Richmond, was his guardian (Williams 24, 29), and in 1548, Bale was living at the Duchess's house in Knight Rider Street (Harris 37).

Because of his interest in drama, Bale was also known to John de Vere, 15th Earl of Oxford, as well as to his son John, the 16th Earl. In 1536, Bale listed the titles and first lines of fourteen plays which he had written for John de Vere, 15th Earl of Oxford (Harris 75, 133-4). One of these plays, *King John*,

was perhaps performed at the coronation of Edward VI (Harris 58, 103), and again in August, 1561, during Queen Elizabeth's visit to Ipswich (Harris 104). In the same month, August, 1561, when Edward de Vere was eleven years old, the Queen was also entertained at Castle Hedingham by John, 16th Earl of Oxford, who kept a troop of players (Ward 12, 264).

Bale's *King John* is vital to the question of the authorship of *Sir John Oldcastle* because, in *King John*, for the first time in English drama, Bale:

introduced historical subject matter and historical personages into the morality framework. . . . depicting the fate of King John, whose struggle with the pope was analogous to that of Henry the Eighth, as an object lesson to the people of what might happen again should the will of the pope prevail (Harris 130).

Thus, the play:

give[s] a Protestant interpretation of a historical incident, in which the subject is treated in much the same way as [Bale] treated it in his account of Sir John Oldcastle (Harris 93).

Creeth also notes Bale's innovative approach in interpreting contemporary events through reference to history:

by making drama out of the reigns of Henry II and [King] John, he invented the English chronicle play, and . . . made it from the start a mirror of Tudor policy (xxiv).

The *Dictionary of National Biography* makes the same point, saying that Bale's *King John* is:

a singular mixture of history and allegory, the events of the reign of John being transferred to the struggle between protestantism and popery in the writer's own day (962).

This is precisely the method used in the play, *Sir John Oldcastle*. The author uses events in the reign of Henry V to illuminate contemporary events in the England of 1571/2. Charges of Norfolk's complicity in the Northern Rebellion and the Ridolfi plot are put into perspective through the clarification of Oldcastle's role in the Ficket Field rebellion and the Cambridge conspiracy. In the play, Oldcastle is completely cleared of any personal involvement in, or

responsibility for, these events. As the Judge remarks as early as Scene i: "Sir John Oldcastle/Innocent of it, only his name was used" (Rittenhouse 114). The author of the play thus raises a reasonable doubt on Norfolk's behalf: like Oldcastle, Norfolk, too, may be innocent.

The author uses the historical analogy to support Norfolk's innocence on another level as well. Judged against the standards of the Catholicism of his day, Oldcastle was a heretic; in the England of 1571/2, however, he was recognized as an early Protestant martyr. Thus, Oldcastle's accusers in 1413 had been mistaken about him, and the author of the play thereby raises the possibility that Norfolk's accusers might be mistaken as well.

In summary, there is no Elizabethan playwright more likely to have dramatized the story of Sir John Oldcastle than Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. John Bale, whom Oxford as a boy probably knew personally, had written plays for Oxford's grandfather, and it is only reasonable to suppose that copies of Bale's manuscripts remained in the possession of the Earls of Oxford. Among them may have been Bale's life of Oldcastle, as well as his *King John*, which suggested to Oxford the technique of dramatizing contemporary problems in terms of parallel events in previous reigns. Finally, Oxford's avid interest in history would likely have familiarized him long before 1571 with the variants of the Oldcastle story set out in Hall, Walsingham, Fabyan, and the other chroniclers.

What, then, did the author of *Oldcastle* take from all these sources? The answer is that he took very little, other than Oldcastle's name, the accusation of heresy, his escape from the Tower, and a few details of the Ficket Field rebellion and the Cambridge conspiracy. In *Sir John Oldcastle*, both the heretic and the Lollard martyr have all but vanished, and the focus is on an Oldcastle accused of treason. There is no heresy trial; instead, Oldcastle is tried for a crime he did not commit. In assessing the relationship between the historical Sir John Oldcastle and the Oldcastle of the play, the Judge's remark cited earlier is apposite: "only his name was used". More

than any other single argument, the unhistorical nature of the play suggests that it was not written for the purpose of portraying the life of a Lollard martyr, but was written by Oxford in an attempt to win the Queen's sympathy for his cousin, Norfolk.

The third part of this four-part article will discuss the topical references which point to the play's having been written in 1571/2.

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## Appendix A: Hall and Holinshed

There is very little difference between Hall and Holinshed's versions of Oldcastle's life: Holinshed has for the most part, simply copied Hall word for word. The principal passage on Oldcastle in Hall is as follows:

Duryng this first yere, sir John Old Castle, whiche by his wife was called lorde Corham, a valiant capitain and an hardy gentleman, was accused to the Archbishop of Cauntorbury of certain poyntes of heresy. Whiche bishoppe knowyng hym to be highly in the kynges favor, declared to his highnes the whole accusacion. The kyng first having compassion of the noble man, required the prelates that if he were a straied shepe, rather by gentlenes then by rigoure to reduce hym to his old flocke. After that he sendyng for hym, godly exhorted and lovyngly admonished hym to recconcile hymselfe to God and his lawes. The lorde Cobham not onely thanked the kyng of his moste favourable clemencye, but also declared firste to hym by mouthe and afterwarde by wrytyng the foundation

of his faith, the ground of his belefe and the botome of his stomacke, affirmyng his grace to be his supreme hed and competent judge & none other persone, offeryng an hundred knightes and esquires to come to his purgation, or els to fight in open listes with his accusors. The kyng not onely knowing the lawes of the reame, but also persuaded by his counsaill, that hereticall accusacions ought to be tried by the spiritual prelates, sente hym to the tower of London there to abide the determination of the clergie according to the statutes in and for that cace provided. After whiche tyme the xxij daie of Septembre, a solempne session was appointed in the Cathedrall church of saint Paule, and another the xxv.da of the said moneth in the hal of the Friers prechers in London, in whiche places thesaid lorde was examined, apposed and fully heard, & in conclusion by the archbishop denounced an hereticke and so remitted again to the toure of London: From whiche place, ether by help of frendes or corrupcion of kepers, he prively escaped and cam into Wales, where he remained by the space of thre yeres and more (48-9)

The comparable passage in Holinshed is virtually identical:

Also in this first yeere of this kings reigne, sir John Oldcastell, which by his wife was called lord Cobham, a valiant capteine and a hardie gentleman, was accused to the archbishop of Canturburie of certeine points of heresie, who knowing him to be highlie in the kings favour, declared to his highnesse the whole accusation. The king first having compassion for the noble man, required the prelates, that if he were a straied sheepe, rather by gentlenes than by rigor to reduce him to the fold. And after this, he himselfe sent for him, and right earnestlie exhorted him, and lovinglie admonished him to reconcile himselfe to God and to his lawes. The lord Cobham not onelie thanked him for his most favourable clemencie, but also declared first to him by mouth, and afterwards by writing, the foundation of his faith, and the ground of his belefe, affirming his grace to be his supreme head and competent judge, and none other person, offering an hundred knights and esquiers to come to his purgation, or else to fight in open lists in defence if his just cause.

The king understanding and persuaded by his councill, that by order of the lawes of his realme, such accusations touching matters of faith ought to be tried by his spirituall prelates, sent him to the Tower of London, there to abide the determination of the clergie, according to the statutes in that case provided, after which time a solempne session was appointed in the cathedrall church of saint Paule, upon the three and twentieth day of September, and an other the five and twentieth daie of the same moneth, in the hall of the Blacke friers at London, in which places the said lord was examined, apposed, and fullie heard, and in conclusion by the archbishop of Canturburie denounced an heretike, and remitted againe to the Tower of London, from which

place, either by helpe of freends, or favour of keepers, he privilie escaped and came into Wales, where he remained for a season (62-3).

## Appendix B: Bale's influence on Hall

In his *Acts and Monuments*, John Foxe testifies as to the manner in which John Bale influenced Hall's version of the life of Oldcastle. Foxe writes that Bale's life of Oldcastle:

was privily conveyed by one of his servants into the study of Hall, so that in turning over his books it must needs come to his hands. At the sight whereof, when he saw the grounds and reasons in that book contained, he turned to the authors in the aforesaid book alleged; whereupon, within two nights after, moved by what cause, I know not, but so it was, that he, taking his pen, rased and cancelled all that he had written before against sir John Oldcastle and his fellows, and which was now ready to go to print, containing near to the quantity of three pages . . . the very selfsame first copy of Hall, rased and crossed with his own pen, remaineth in my hands to be shown and seen, as need shall require. The matter which he cancelled out, came to this effect. Wherein he, following the narration of Polydore, began with like words to declare how the sacramentaries here in England, after the death of John Huss, and Jerome of Prague, being pricked, as he saith, with a demoniacal sting, first conspired against the priests, and afterwards against the king, having for their captains sir John Oldcastle the lord Cobham, and sir Roger Acton, knight; with many more words to the like purpose and effect, as Polydore, and other such like chroniclers do write against him. All which matter, notwithstanding, the said Hall with his pen, at the sight of John Bale's book, did utterly extinguish and abolish; adding in the place thereof the words of Master Bale's book, touching the accusation and condemnation of the said lord Cobham before Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, taken out of the letter of the said archbishop, as is in his own story to be seen (Harris 116-7).

Thus, the version of Oldcastle's life found in the four Tudor sources is almost wholly Bale's: his own life of Oldcastle, Foxe's "lightly-edited version" of the same, the account in Hall, and the copy of Hall's account found in Holinshed.