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Does the Langham *Letter* reveal its author's identity in the first two paragraphs?

In its beginning paragraphs, the *Letter* provides details of the author's position at court, his sobriquet, and his activities in France and Flanders. These details effectively set up a "cover" identity -- Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber, and quondam Mercer. At the same time, they are cleverly made use of to reveal the identity of the *Letter's* true author, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

The first two paragraphs of the *Letter* read as follows:

Untoo my good freend, Master Humfrey Martin Mercer. After my hartly commendacionz, I commend me hartely too yoo. Understand ye, that syns through God and good freends, I am placed at Coourt heer (as ye wot) in a worshopfull room: Whearby, I am not only acquainted with the most, and well knoen too the best, and every officer glad of my company: but also have pooour, a dayz (while the Councell sits not) to go and too see things sight woorthy, and too be prezent at any sheaw or spectacl, ony whear this Progress reprezented untoo her highnes: And of part of which sportez, having taken sum notez and observacionz (for I can not be idl at ony hand in the world) az wel too put fro me suspicion of sluggardy, az to pluk from yoo doout of ony my forgetfulnes of freendship: I have thought it meet to impart them untoo yoo, az frankly, az freendly, and az fully az I can. Well wot yet the blak Prins waz never stained with disloyaltee of ingratitude toward ony, I dare be his warrant, hee wyll not begyn with yoo, that hath at hiz hand so deeply dezerved.

But heerin, the better for conceyving of my minde and instruction of yours, ye must gyve me leave a littl, az well to preface untoo my matter, as too discoors sumwhat of Kyllingwoorth Castl. A territory of the right honorabl, my singular good Lord, my Lord the

Earl of Leyceter: of whooz incomparable cheering, and enterteynment thear unto her Majesty noow, I wil sheaw yoo a part heer, that could not see all, nor had I seen all could well report the hallf: Whear things, for the parsons, for the place, tyme, cost, devisez, straungnes, and aboundans, of all that ever I sawe (and yet have I been, what under my Master Bomsted, and what on my oun affayrs, while I occupied Merchaundyze, both in Frauns and Flaunders, long and many a day) I saw none ony whear so memorabl, I tell you playn (Kuin 36).

The first thing the *Letter* tells its readers about the author is that he is "placed" at court in a "worshipfull room". The word "worshipful" is defined as:

notable or outstanding in respect of some (good) quality or property; distinguished, imposing; reputable, honourable (*OED*, v.20, 577:1).

A "room" can be an appointed, or hereditary, position:

An office, function, appointment; a post, situation, employment. Exceedingly common in the 16th century.

An office or post considered as pertaining to a particular person, esp. by right or inheritance (*OED*, v.14, 82:12a, 13a).

The *Letter* then tells us that the occupant of this "worshipfull room" is "acquainted with the most, and well knoen too the best, and every officer glad of [his] company". The word "officer" has two very different meanings which could apply in this context:

A person engaged in the management of the domestic affairs of a great household or collegiate body, of a

private estate, etc.; formerly, also, a subordinate of such an officer; a menial, domestic.

One who holds a public, court, or ecclesiastical office; a servant or minister of the king, as one of the great functionaries of the royal household, etc. (*OED*, v.10, 732: 2a, 2b).

The first definition describes the type of officer who might be found in the company of a minor court functionary like Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber. The second definition describes the sovereign's ministers and the great functionaries of the royal household, individuals who would not be found in Robert Langham's company, but who might be found in the company of someone like the 17th Earl of Oxford, who, as hereditary Lord Great Chamberlain, occupied an important "room" or position at court.

The *Letter* goes on to say that its author has "poour a dayz (while the Councill sits not) to go and too see things sight woorthy". The word "power" can mean "authority given or committed; hence, sometimes, liberty or permission to act" (*OED*, v.12, 260:4b). This definition of "power" as "permission" is applicable to a minor court functionary like Langham, who would certainly not have had the freedom to intrude himself at will as a spectator at royal entertainments. On the other hand, "power", if applied to someone filling an important hereditary position at court like Oxford, would imply, to a much greater extent, the ability to act without seeking permission. In both cases, this "power" would be exercised "while the Councill sits not", since members of the Council were the Queen's companions at court entertainments.

The language in the first part of this paragraph is thus deliberately ambiguous. It creates uncertainty as to the author's identity. Is he a minor court functionary (Langham), or an important court personage (Oxford)? The language suits both interpretations equally well, although there is a slight hint of levity in the description which suggests that it might be a mistake to take literally the author's claim to be a minor court functionary.

In the next few lines of the opening paragraph, the

Letter resolves some of the ambiguity via an allusion to "the Black Prince". This tips the balance decisively in favour of Oxford as the *Letter's* author, since Langham's first name was Robert, while Oxford's was Edward.

The *Letter* leads up to this revelatory allusion by stating that Humfrey Martin is being provided with an account of the Kenilworth "sportez" in order to assuage any doubts which he might have about the author's neglect of their friendship. Humfrey is then assured that the Black Prince was never "stained" with "disloyaltee of ingratitude toward ony", and that the author himself dares be the Black Prince's warrant that he will not begin with Humfrey, "that hath at hiz hand so deeply deserved". In this passage, the antecedents of the pronouns "he" and "his" ("hee will not begyn with yoo, that hath at hiz hand so deeply dezerved") are conflated, with the result that the Black Prince and the author are, momentarily, one and the same individual. Earlier commentators on the *Letter* have been perplexed by the author's deliberate identification of himself in this way with the Black Prince. It would seem, however, that the explanation is entirely straightforward: the author identifies himself with the Black Prince because he, like the Black Prince, is named Edward.

In that regard, it is significant that the use of the sobriquet "the Black Prince" to refer to Edward Plantagenet (1330-1376), Prince of Wales and Aquitaine, eldest son of King Edward III, was not current during Edward Plantagenet's own lifetime, nor for two hundred years thereafter. As Emerson notes, the sobriquet "the Black Prince" made its first appearance in 1563 in Grafton's *Chronicle*:

In 1563, the chronicler Grafton was the first to refer to him [Edward Plantagenet] as the Black Prince, claiming, without substantiating it, that the French used to call him *Le Neoir*. Shakespeare read Grafton's *Chronicle of England* and used it as a source for his histories. Once Shakespeare's Henry V had been enjoined to emulate his great-uncle the Black Prince, previous names were cast aside (Emerson 1-2; *OED*, v.2, 251:1).

Unfortunately, Emerson goes directly from the first usage of the sobriquet (*Le Neoir*) in Grafton's *Chronicle* to what she considers the popularization of both

the Black Prince himself, and his sobriquet, in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. But it is clear from the *Letter* that Edward Plantagenet was already known to Elizabethan readers as "the Black Prince" in 1575. The *Letter's* author uses the sobriquet in a manner which indicates his expectation that his readers will recognize it. We can be reasonably certain that the *Letter's* readers did not acquire this familiarity with the sobriquet "the Black Prince" via Grafton's *Chronicle*, and there must therefore be another explanation for their familiarity with it in 1575.

It is the hypothesis of the present article that the vehicle by which "the Black Prince" became known to the Elizabethans prior to 1575 was the anonymous play, *The Reign of King Edward the Third*. In issue #10 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, evidence was adduced to suggest that the first version of this play was written circa 1569 by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. That evidence will not be rehearsed in detail here. However, in 1569, as a young man of nineteen years of age, Edward de Vere gained first-hand experience of Scotland when he accompanied the Earl of Sussex on his Scottish campaign during the Northern Rebellion. The first two acts of *The Reign of King Edward III* are set in Scotland, and depict the king's attempt to seduce the Countess of Salisbury while he was campaigning in that country. More importantly, with respect to explaining the allusion in the Langham *Letter*, the latter part of *The Reign of King Edward III* features the young Black Prince in a stirring role at the Battle of Crecy.

If *The Reign of King Edward the Third* was first written by Edward de Vere, as suggested, circa 1569, the familiarity with "the Black Prince" which the author of the *Letter* takes for granted in his readers can be accounted for: readers of the *Letter* would have been familiar with "the Black Prince" through the play. Moreover, it is significant that the author of the *Letter* also takes it for granted that his readers will agree with his assessment of the Black Prince as one "never stained with disloyalty of ingratitude toward any". This description accords with the portrayal of the Black Prince in *The Reign of King Edward the Third*, where he is depicted as the em-

bodiment of chivalric ideals.

As the play's author, it is not unreasonable that Edward de Vere would have come to be identified to some extent with the Black Prince, particularly since he and the Black Prince were both named Edward. However, the fact that the author of the *Letter* goes much further, and actually calls himself the Black Prince, suggests an even closer association. It is thus possible, although the suggestion must necessarily be put forward with some diffidence, that, as a young man of nineteen or twenty, Edward de Vere played the role of the young Black Prince in court performances of the play.

There is no firm evidence of the date of composition of *The Reign of King Edward the Third*. However, statistical evidence shows that the play as we now have it consists of a mixture of scenes, some of which have been retained from an original version, and some of which exhibit substantial revision in a style said to be superior to that of the original (Slater 132-5). Moreover, when the play was first entered on the Stationers' Register in 1595, it was said to have been "sundry times plaid about the Citie of London" (Slater 1). Since this revised version was already well known prior to 1595, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the original play could have been written by Oxford twenty-five years earlier, circa 1569.

In the second paragraph of the *Letter*, the anonymous author both builds on the ambiguity of the first paragraph by furnishing additional details which support the "cover" identity, and supplies further details which reveal his true identity. He begins by saying that he will show only "a part" of the Kenilworth entertainment because he "could not see all". This ambiguous statement could apply to a minor court functionary such as Robert Langham, who cannot credibly be envisaged as being at the Queen's elbow throughout her nineteen-day stay at Kenilworth. At the same time, it could apply to Edward de Vere, who could by no means "see all" because he was not at Kenilworth in the summer of 1575 but, as a frequent participant in courtly entertainments of the past, was certainly in a position to

show his friend Humfrey "a part".

The author then goes on to praise the Kenilworth entertainment by comparing it to events of a similar nature which he has seen in the past. He claims to have been in France and Flanders "long and many a day", while he "occupied Merchaundyze"; as a result of this experience, he considers himself qualified to comment that "thinges" at Kenilworth exceeded "all that ever I saw". On the one hand, this detail offers support for the "cover" identity, since there was a London Mercer by the name of Robert Langham who may have traded in France and Flanders, although this individual was not necessarily the same Robert Langham as the Keeper of the Council Chamber (Kuin 13). On the other hand, a trader is not admitted to the courts of princes to share in their pastimes, and it is difficult to imagine what a trader to France and Flanders might have seen which would bear comparison with Leicester's splendid entertainment. Thus, unless the remark is to be construed as deliberately belittling to the Kenilworth entertainment, there must be more to it than appears on the surface.

If the remark is construed as coming from Oxford as the true author of the *Letter*, it acquires a meaning which is extremely complimentary to the English court. In his travels on the continent, Edward de Vere was admitted to the courts of princes to share in their pastimes. If, then, the magnificence of the Kenilworth entertainment exceeds "all that ever I saw", the comparison is an extraordinarily flattering one, since he has seen nothing in the courts of foreign princes to equal the splendid entertainment offered to the Queen of England. Moreover, the phrase "all that ever [i.e., E. Ver] I saw" serves to reveal the author's surname.

In assessing the plausibility of this interpretation of the phrase "all that ever I saw", it must be reiterated that, in the mouth of Robert Langham -- whether Keeper of the Council Chamber, or mercantile trader in France and Flanders -- the phrase "all that ever I saw" is either an essentially foolish comparison or a deliberate denigration of the Kenilworth entertainment. In the mouth of Edward de Vere, in contrast,

it is a meaningful compliment based on experience of other courtly entertainments worthy of comparison with the Kenilworth entertainment. At the same time, it is a play on words which reveals Oxford's surname, Vere, his first name having been revealed in the allusion to "the Black Prince".

In the final sentence of this second paragraph, the *Letter* offers a further detail which, again, both supports the "cover" identity and, simultaneously, reveals the author's true identity. The author is said to have travelled to France and Flanders "under my Master Bomsted". This mention of "Master Bomsted" supports the "cover" identity, since, according to Kuin, both a Robert Langham (although not necessarily the same person as the Keeper of the Council Chamber) and a Christopher Bompsted were members of the Mercers' Company.

A Robert Langham was admitted to the freedom of the Mercers' Company in 1557, after serving as apprentice with William Leonard. "My master Bomsted", as Langham calls him, must have been Christofer Bompsted, who was admitted in 1541 after serving his apprenticeship with Walter Mersche (13).

Apart from the fact that both were members of the Mercers' Company, however, there is no evidence of any association between the two men. It is not even clear that Langham and Bompsted were members of the Mercers' Company at the same time, since Bompsted was admitted in 1541, and Langham sixteen years later, in 1557. More importantly, the author of the *Letter's* reference to "my Master Bomsted" is clearly erroneous when applied to the London mercer, Robert Langham, since the historical records show that Robert Langham's master was William Leonard. However, the *Letter's* mention of the name "Bomsted" in connection with trading in France and Flanders adds another plausible detail to the "cover" identity, since there were men named Langham and Bompsted who were members of the Mercers' Company, and who could conceivably have traded in France and Flanders.

It is also important to notice that there is nothing in the wording of the *Letter* which actually requires that "my master Bomsted" be interpreted in terms of a master/apprentice relationship. The word "mas-

ter" can refer to "the captain of a merchant vessel" (*OED*, v.9, 441:2). "Bomsted" may thus have been the master of a vessel on which Oxford travelled to France or Flanders, or which was used in connection with a trading venture in which Oxford participated. While there is no mention of Oxford's participation in such ventures prior to 1578, in that year he backed the third Frobisher expedition, and in 1581 and again in 1585 he was involved in other voyages of exploration and trade. It is thus not impossible that Oxford participated in such ventures, as did other members of the court, prior to 1575. It is also important to notice that the author does not specifically say that he "occupied Merchandyze" under "my Master Bomsted", i.e. in a master/apprentice relationship. The *Letter* merely refers vaguely to the author's "own affayres" while he "occupied merchandise":

and yet what have I been, what under my Master Bomsted, and what on my own affayrs, while I occupied Merchaundyze, both in Frauns and Flaunders, long and many a day . . . (Kuin 36).

It is possible to read this passage as indicating that the anonymous author's association with "Bomsted" was entirely separate and distinct from his "own affayres" in France and Flanders.

It is also perhaps not a mere coincidence that the London mercer, Christopher Bompsted, was known to Queen Elizabeth and her courtiers. Among the papers of Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Burghley, is a memorandum from Bompsted to the Queen, "shewing the necessity of coining small moneys, and the precedents which there are for the same" (*CSP*, 190). The memorandum is dated 1561, the same year in which Lord Burghley carried out the only reform of the coinage which took place during Elizabeth's reign (Bindoff 199). The name "Bomsted" was therefore a familiar one to the Queen, Lord Burghley, and perhaps other members of the court circle who were among the *Letter's* intended audience.

At the same time, the name "Bomsted" was known to these individuals in another way, one which would have reminded them of the Earl of Oxford. Certain of Oxford's estates in Essex contained the name

"Bomsted". Modern maps of Essex show these communities today as Helions Bumpstead and Steeple Bumpstead. In an indenture of January 30, 1575, Oxford's estate is referred to as "Bumpsted Comitiss", i.e., Earl's Bumpsted (*Essex*).

As the foregoing discussion has demonstrated, the first two paragraphs of the *Letter* are both ambiguous and revelatory. Ambiguous details of the author's position at court, his relationship with the "Black Prince" and "my Master Bomsted, and his affairs in France and Flanders are used, on the one hand, to establish a "cover" identity which appears to be an amalgam of two different individuals -- Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber, and Robert Langham, London Mercer -- and, simultaneously, to reveal the identity of the true author, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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