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Is the Langham *Letter* an eye-witness account of Queen Elizabeth's entertainment at Kenilworth in 1572, rather than 1575?

[The De Vere Press has just published a modern spelling edition of the Langham *Letter*. The preface, which contains a discussion of the foregoing question, is reprinted below.]

In the summer of 1575, the Earl of Leicester entertained Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire. The Queen's nineteen-day sojourn at Kenilworth was spent in an endless round of spectacle and activity — pageantry, fireworks, banquets, masques and plays, hunting, bear-baiting, music and dancing. These pleasures were enhanced by the beauty of the surroundings, including the artificial lake which partially encircled the castle, the large chase, and the exquisite garden with its arbours, walks, fountains, sculptures of marble and porphyry, and aviary filled with exotic birds.

The record to which historians invariably turn for a description of the Queen's stay at Kenilworth is the Langham *Letter*, an 18,000-word account of the entertainment in the form of a letter to one Humfrey Martyn, the thirty-year old son of a wealthy mercer and former Lord Mayor of London.

The manuscript of the *Letter* and all copies of the original edition of 1575 are lost. Two subsequent editions have survived, the one probably printed in 1577, the other a few years later, both privately published without name of printer or date of publica-

tion (O'Kill 42).

Who was the *Letter's* author? No-one really knows. The *Letter* itself contains a few overt but enigmatic clues in which the author suggests that he is someone named "Laneham" or "Langham", a minor court official whose existence has been documented, and whose duty it was to provide boughs, flowers and fire-tongs for the Privy Council chamber (Scott 299).

But through this rather transparent persona the reader glimpses the brilliant and highly individual personality of the true author — a young man widely read in history and mythology; conversant in Latin and at least three foreign languages; trained in the law; familiar with architecture, the intricate symbolism of heraldry, the etiquette of the court and the terminology of the royal pastime of hunting; possessed of remarkable powers of observation and a bouyant sense of humour, and, above all, a skilled musician and a surpassing literary stylist.

The latter two characteristics, in particular, provide a "fingerprint" by which the author can be identified, since pronounced musical ability and literary talent are only rarely encountered in a single individual. The Langham *Letter* abounds in evidence of the author's comprehensive knowledge of music. Similarly, his delight in the music of language is demonstrated in his pervasive use of alliteration and assonance. His inventive originality with language is further evidenced in the *Letter's* many stunning descriptive passages, its extensive and rare vocabulary,¹ and the author's coinage of more than two dozen new words.²

Among the individuals who fill the pages of Elizabethan history is one whose personality, education and achievements tally significantly with those of the unknown author of the Langham *Letter*. Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was awarded degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford, had a marked interest in history, was a skilled linguist, took legal training at Gray's Inn, excelled at sports, spent many years as a courtier, and was known for his sense of humour. Most importantly, he also possessed the unique combination of pronounced musical ability and extraordinary literary talent which distinguishes the author of the *Letter*, being praised in his own day as one who had surpassed professional musicians in skill and was, in drama, one of "the best for comedy" (Ward 204, 264).

At the time of Queen Elizabeth's visit to Kenilworth, the Earl of Oxford, then twenty-five years of age, was travelling on the continent. This seems to rule him out as the author of the Langham *Letter*, which purports to be an eye-witness description of the 1575 entertainment. However, many things in the *Letter* are not as they appear on the surface. There are significant discrepancies, for example, between certain details in the *Letter* and details in the account given in the *Princely Pleasures*, attributed to George Gascoigne.³ Since Gascoigne's involvement in the preparation of the entertainment and his physical presence at Kenilworth in the summer of 1575 are historically documented, where the account in the *Princely Pleasures* differs from that in the *Letter*, the account in the *Princely Pleasures* must perforce be the more accurate, thus casting some doubt on the *Letter's* reportage of actual events. In addition, the version of the *Letter* which we possess is not the original edition of 1575, and there is no way of knowing how closely the two later editions, which may incorporate revisions, compare with the original. And, of course, a number of scholars openly doubt that the *Letter* was written by someone named Langham (Scott 300). These anomalies invite consideration of the very real possibility that the Langham *Letter* is not an eyewitness account of the Kenilworth entertainment of 1575.

If the *Letter* is not an eye-witness account, how was

the Earl of Oxford able to give his description of Kenilworth Castle, the surrounding countryside, and the various entertainments put on for the Queen a degree of verisimilitude which has convinced readers for four centuries that the author of the *Letter* was at Kenilworth in the summer of 1575? The description of Kenilworth Castle itself, as well as the author's knowledge of the surrounding countryside, present no difficulty. The Earl of Oxford owned property at Bilton, not far from Kenilworth (Ogburn 713). History also records that Oxford was one of the courtiers present during the Queen's 1572 visit to Warwick Castle, the seat of Leicester's brother, Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick. During that visit, which lasted for approximately two weeks, the Queen spent a total of ten days at nearby Kenilworth (Nichols 318-9). Oxford was thus familiar with the physical layout of Kenilworth, and with the surrounding area.

As for the details of the specific entertainment staged for the Queen at Kenilworth in 1575, it is worth noticing that there are certain marked similarities between it and what little we know of the earlier entertainment in 1572. During her reception at Warwick in 1572, for example, the Queen was greeted by a speech which rehearsed the ancient history of Warwick (Nichols 312-3); the Langham *Letter* opens in a manner which is very reminiscent of this, with an account of the history of Kenilworth. Similarly, the account of the two-hour display of fireworks interspersed with the firing of artillery at Kenilworth in 1575 is very reminiscent of the account in the Black Book of Warwick of the fireworks and the firing of artillery during a mock battle on the Avon at the time of the Queen's visit in 1572, a mock battle in which the Earl of Oxford played a prominent part (Nichols 319). Unfortunately, there is no extant description of the manner in which Leicester entertained the Queen at Kenilworth during the ten days she spent there in 1572; the laconic comment in the Black Book merely records that while the Queen was at Kenilworth "such princely sports [were] made to her Majesty as could be devised" (Nichols 318). If an account of these "princely sports" were available, it would perhaps be apparent that Oxford created in the Langham

Letter a clever pastiche of the 1572 entertainment, into which he interpolated verses and other material prepared for the 1575 entertainment of which he had knowledge prior to his leaving for the continent in early February, 1575. One can imagine the avidity and amusement with which such a work would have been read by courtiers who had been present when the Queen was at Kenilworth in 1572 and who were now, three years later, again the recipients of Leicester's splendid and extravagant hospitality.

One pertinent question which is seldom asked about the Langham *Letter* involves its form. Why a letter? By its very nature, a letter is personal, informal and thus, in many respects, limiting — an unusual choice of literary form for a description of Leicester's magnificent 1575 entertainment for the Queen. However, a letter is a natural choice of literary form for one who is hundreds of miles away from the intended recipients, as Oxford was. Moreover, if the Langham *Letter* is, as has been suggested, essentially a reminiscence of the Queen's 1572 visit to Kenilworth and Warwick, its literary form is not an unusual choice, its intimacy and informality being in that case well suited to its subject and its audience.

There is very little extant evidence of contemporary reception of the *Letter*. The sole document which appears to have survived is a letter from William Patten to Lord Burghley of September 10, 1575, in which Patten advises Burghley that he has retrieved all copies of a book he had previously distributed, the book having been suppressed "for that Langham had complained upon it, and otherwise for that the honourable entertainment be not turned into a jest" (Scott 301). Patten's comment gives the reader pause. Taken at face value, the *Letter* describes Leicester's splendid entertainment of the Queen in the most respectful, even adulatory, terms. By what standard could it be considered a "jest"? However, if, as has been posited, Oxford wrote the *Letter* under a pseudonym, describing an entertainment at which he himself was not even present, the meaning of Patten's obscure comment is much clearer.

It may be objected that assigning authorship of the

Langham *Letter* to the Earl of Oxford reduces its value as a historical document. In one respect, this assessment is accurate, in that history has not left us, as we had supposed, a brilliant eye-witness account of the 1575 Kenilworth entertainment. However, there can be little question that the minutely detailed events described in the *Letter* — the porter's welcome to the Queen, the quintaining, the bear-baiting, the Hock Tuesday play, the water pageants, the fireworks, the hunting scenes, and more — are events which the author actually witnessed, whether at Kenilworth in 1572 or at other times. They bear the stamp of authentic observation. And they are the more valuable in that they were witnessed and described by an intimate of the court, one who could indeed "see all". Viewed from the perspective of the Earl of Oxford's authorship, the Langham *Letter* is of signal historical value.

Was the Earl of Oxford the author of the Langham *Letter*? In the final analysis the reader will, of course, have to form his own judgment on the basis of the internal evidence found in the *Letter* itself. It is hoped that this modern spelling edition will facilitate access to the *Letter*, and assist the reader in making that determination.

Works Cited

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Notes

- ¹ When the rare word test devised by Eliot Slater is applied to the vocabulary of the Langham *Letter*, fully one-third of the vocabulary in the *Letter* is found to consist of rare words. A description of Slater's test is found in his *The Problem of 'The Reign of King Edward III': A Statistical Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

² *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the first recorded usage of the following words is to be found in the Langham *Letter*: gracify, altitonant, fulminant, capretties, schoolation, sizely, lubberworts, flappet, specialty, quintaining, tonsword, umberty, ambrosial, salsipotent, smugly, setting stick, soily, newelries, poeticalites, respirant, ceruleous, lanuginous, fuskin, atlantes, titubate, binities, etc.

³ Nichols, John. *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*. Vol. 1. New York: Franklin, 1823, pp. 485-523. Among the specific details which differ are the following: (1) According to the *Princely Pleasures*, Triton appeared in the water pageant "in likeness of a mermaid" whereas, in the *Letter*, Triton "came there upon a swimming mermaid"; (2) In the version in the *Princely Pleasures*, "Protheus appeared, sitting on a dolphin's back" while in the *Letter* it is Arion "riding aloft upon his old friend the dolphin"; (3) The *Princely Pleasures* makes no mention of fireworks prior to those on the evening of Sunday, July 10, although the *Letter* says that the noise and flame of the fireworks and peals of guns on the night of the Queen's arrival on July 9 were "heard and seen a twenty mile off"; (4) The *Letter* says nothing about events which took place during the entire final week of the Queen's visit; however, the shows and pageants described in the *Letter* and those described in the *Princely Pleasures* are substantially the same, apart from the detailed description in the *Princely Pleasures* of Gascoigne's appearance as Sylvanus on the Queen's departure from Kenilworth. This leaves the reader with a choice of alternatives: either there was no entertainment staged for the Queen during the final week of her visit (which seems unlikely), or the show and pageants mentioned in both the *Letter* and in the *Princely Pleasures* were spread out over the nineteen-day period, contrary to the chronology set out in the *Letter*.