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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 4 of 4]

The single most extraordinary fact about the play *Sir John Oldcastle* is that it does not really deal with the life of Sir John Oldcastle. Although there is a loose historical framework, virtually every incident in the play is pure invention, and those few incidents which are not invented are turned into comic episodes or otherwise so distorted as to bear no real resemblance to historical fact. The problem which arises from this violence done to history is obvious: why did the author of *Sir John Oldcastle* write the play at all? If he did not want to write a play about a Protestant martyr's life and beliefs, why choose Sir John Oldcastle as his subject?

The answer seems to be that the life and times of Sir John Oldcastle were chosen for their historical parallels with critical events in the final years of the life of Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk. The Ficket Field rebellion, the Cambridge conspiracy, and the trial of Oldcastle all occurred in the first three years of the reign of Henry V. Similarly, the events which preoccupied Elizabeth and her courtiers during a three-year period from 1569-1572 were the Northern Rebellion, the Ridolfi plot and the trial of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk.

The parallels can best be appreciated by examining some of the play's curious departures from history.

One of the oddest things about *Sir John Oldcastle* is

its failure to mention by name Oldcastle's nemesis, Archbishop Thomas Arundel (Fiehler 52). In *Oldcastle*, Arundel's part is given to the Bishop of Rochester. But, as Rittenhouse notes:

A Bishop of Rochester is referred to in Foxe but the *Oldcastle* character truly corresponds to Archbishop Arundel, a personage mentioned in all the sources (53-4).

The omission of Arundel's name is, however, easily explicable in terms of the political situation in 1569-72. The Earl of Arundel at the time, Henry FitzAlan, was Norfolk's father-in-law, a man suspected of Catholic sympathies who had himself been briefly confined to house arrest just prior to the Northern Rebellion (Williams 32, 98, 161-2). With Arundel's loyalty in question and his son-in-law Norfolk in the Tower, it would have been particularly inflammatory to associate the name of Arundel in the Queen's mind with the Catholic Archbishop of Henry V's reign. Thus, the choice of an alternate name for Oldcastle's persecutor.

Another curious feature of the play is the prominence given to the Cambridge conspiracy of 1415. Historically, this affair occurred almost two years after Oldcastle's excommunication and escape from the Tower, at a time when he was an outlaw in Wales. The chroniclers generally do not connect Oldcastle with the Cambridge conspiracy in any way. In the play, however, the Cambridge conspiracy occurs at roughly the same time as the Ficket Field rebellion, and there is a dramatic scene in which the conspirators try to persuade Oldcastle to join their ranks. This scene has clearly been designed to give Oldcastle

an opportunity to spurn the conspirators' proposals and demonstrate his loyalty to his sovereign. This demonstration of loyalty to King Henry is pointless in terms of the historical Sir John Oldcastle who, prior to his escape from the Tower, had not been accused of disloyalty but of heretical beliefs. In terms of Norfolk, however, the scene is very apposite, the most serious charge against the Duke being his alleged complicity in a conspiracy against the Queen. Thus, the play's emphasis on the Cambridge conspiracy, despite the lack of historical evidence that Sir John Oldcastle had anything whatever to do with the conspiracy.

Another interesting unhistorical detail in the play is Cambridge's contention, in the speech in which he broaches the conspiracy, that his brother-in-law Edmund Mortimer is already dead:

Camb.

Edmund, Roger, Anne, and Eleanor —
Two daughters and two sons. But those three
Died without issue (Rittenhouse 161).

In fact, at the time of the Cambridge conspiracy in 1415, Edmund Mortimer still had ten years to live (Cokayne 451), and the purpose of the Cambridge conspiracy was to put Edmund Mortimer on the throne, Cambridge's plan being that his own line would succeed after Mortimer's death:

For diverse write that Richard earle of Cambridge did not conspire with the lorde Scrope and sir Thomas Graye to murther kyng Henry to please the Frenche kyng withal, but onely to thentent to exalte to the croune his brotherinlawe Edmond earle of Marche as heyre to duke Lyonel. After whose death consideryng that the earle of Marche for diverse secrete impediments was not hable to have generacion, he was sure that the croune should come to him by his wife, or to his children (Hall 61).

Cambridge's claim is set out in the play as follows:

Scroop.

Once more, my Lord of Cambridge, make rehearsal
How you do stand entitled to the crown.

Camb.

This Lionel, Duke of Clarence, as I said,
Third son of Edward (England's King) the Third,
Had issue Philip, his sole daughter and heir,
Which Philip afterward was given in marriage
To Edmund Mortimer, the Earl of March,

And by him had a son called Roger Mortimer,
Which Roger had of his descent
Edmund, Roger, Anne, and Eleanor —
Two daughters and two sons. But those three
Died without issue. Anne that did survive
And now was left her father's only heir,
My fortune was to marry. . .

Scroop.

So that it seems your claim comes by your wife
As lawful heir to Roger Mortimer
(Rittenhouse 160-1).

Edmund Mortimer thus seems to have been eliminated by the playwright for the specific purpose of making the Cambridge conspiracy parallel the Ridolfi plot. In *Oldcastle*, Cambridge schemes to gain the crown for *himself*, not for Edmund Mortimer. Thus, he more closely resembles Mary, Queen of Scots, who was supposedly attempting to gain the Crown for herself by unseating Elizabeth through the Ridolfi plot.

Another odd aspect of *Sir John Oldcastle* is its emphasis on treason. According to Rittenhouse:

The *Oldcastle* dramatists adjust the time sequence [of the Ficket Field rebellion and the Cambridge conspiracy] for dramatic reasons, for they surely want to convey to the audience Cobham's near helplessness in the face of all this treasonous activity springing up around him and his good name (29).

Rittenhouse thus pinpoints the fact that a major focus of the play is on the "treasonous activity" springing up around Oldcastle. Historically, however, this focus on "treasonous activity" is completely inaccurate. It was not for "treasonous activity" that the historical Sir John Oldcastle was excommunicated and imprisoned in the Tower. In the historical sources, Oldcastle is portrayed either as a heretic or as a martyr who died for his Protestant beliefs. He challenged King Henry openly on the matter of religion, was turned over by the King to Archbishop Arundel's ecclesiastical court, and was tried and condemned for heresy (Fiehler 53-69). Foxe in particular is at great pains to point out the fact that Oldcastle was executed as a heretic, not a traitor, citing among other proofs the fact that he was burned, which was the penalty for heresy, rather than hung, hanging being the penalty for treason (Rittenhouse 273-6).

All this is completely altered in the play. There is no heresy trial in *Sir John Oldcastle*, and although complaint is made to the King that Oldcastle “maintain[s] a strange religion/ And will not be compelled to come to mass” (Rittenhouse 121), this fact is almost incidental to the plot. What Oldcastle is repeatedly accused of in the play is treason. The most obvious example of this is the dialogue which takes place at the time of Oldcastle’s arrest:

Cromer.
 Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, in the king’s
 majesty’s name I arrest ye of high treason.
 Cobham.
 Treason, Master Cromer?
 Harpool.
 Treason, Master Shrieve? ‘Sblood, what treason?
 Cobham.
 Harpool, I charge thee stir not but be quiet still.
 Do ye arrest me, Master Shrieve, for treason?
 Bishop.
 Yea, of high treason, traitor, heretic.
 Cobham.
 Defiance in his face that calls me so!
 I am as true a loyal gentleman
 Unto his highness as my proudest enemy
 (Rittenhouse 206).

The playwright makes it abundantly clear that these accusations of treason are false and unjust. Oldcastle is portrayed throughout as a loyal subject of the King, surrounded by enemies who try to persuade the King of his disloyalty and rebels and conspirators who continually try to implicate him in their plots.

The play’s insistent thematic focus on Oldcastle’s innocence has been noticed by several commentators. According to Rittenhouse, for example, *Oldcastle* presents “a resolute hero caught up in a web of circumstantial evidence.” The play, he says, is “about an innocent being destroyed”, and is “deliberate [and] compelling in its creation of the hostile world in which its hero lives.” (71). Rittenhouse also cites M.G.M. Adkins’ comment that the play’s authors “repeatedly assert Cobham’s loyalty to the king and constantly defend and demonstrate Cobham’s innocence” (78).

Rittenhouse also notices that it is this thematic focus on Cobham’s innocence and the blackening of

his reputation which lends unity to the disparate incidents in the plot:

Cobham and his reputation are always the focus of the play: the comic Sumner, Murley, Tower of London, Bell Inn, and Hertford trial scenes are far from being extraneous to the plot. They provide examples either of how people acting in Cobham’s name sully his reputation through their own actions, or of the rush and whirlwind of events in which Cobham is caught up. The Sumner, for example: this foolish, petty bureaucrat has the misfortune to meet up with Harpool, Cobham’s family servant, and so the lord is blamed for his servant’s impetuous actions. In the Murley scenes, we see the braggart Murley connecting his treacherous intentions to the innocent Cobham. Moreover, we see a character whose conceptions of honour, conscience and loyalty. . .are clearly contrasted and counterpointed to those of Cobham. Even the somewhat strange ending of *Oldcastle*, where Cobham is brought to trial for a murder he did not commit, is connected closely to the play’s concern with the question of innocence and reputation. In this case of a private crime, paralleling the cases of Cobham’s alleged political and religious crimes, where hearsay is “proof”, the purely circumstantial evidence of a bloody handkerchief and unsheathed knives is used against the blameless accused man (72).

A “blameless accused man”, “hearsay [as] proof”, “purely circumstantial evidence”. These observations about the Sir John Oldcastle of the play clearly illustrate how far the playwright has departed from the circumstances surrounding the downfall of the historical Sir John Oldcastle. The latter may have been unjustly persecuted for religious beliefs which were ahead of his time, but he was not unjustly convicted on the basis of “hearsay” or “purely circumstantial evidence”. On the contrary, both Hall and Foxe record that the historical Sir John Oldcastle was convicted from his own mouth and by his own hand. As Hall puts it:

After that he [King Henry] sendyng for hym, godly exhorted and lovyngly admonished hym to reconcile hymself 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 writyng the foundacion 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 xxiiij. daie of Septembre, a solempne session was appointed in the cathedrall churche of saint Paule, and another the xxv. da of the said moneth in the hal of the Friers prechers in London, in wiche places thesaid lorde was examined, apposed and fully heard, & in conclusion by the archbishop denounced an hereticke. . . (48).

The thematic focus on Cobham's innocence is also reinforced through the speeches of authority figures in the play. There is, for example, the speech of the Judge after the fray at Hereford:

Judge.

Note, as an instance, this one perilous fray:
What factions might have grown on either part,
To the destruction of the king and realm.
Yet, in my conscience, Sir John Oldcastle
Innocent of it, only his name was used
(Rittenhouse 114).

As Rittenhouse notes:

[The] Judge's fair-minded opinion of Cobham is one of many examples of the authors' careful but simplistic colouring of their audience's responses. This authority figure is used, much like King Harry is used in later scenes, as a character witness to underline Cobham's innocence (114).

The confidence which the King himself reposes in Cobham's loyalty is demonstrated a few lines later:

King.

We do find it here
There was in Wales a certain fray of late
Between two noblemen. But what of this?
Follows it straight Lord Cobham must be he
Did cause the same? I dare be sworn, good knight,
He never dreamt of any such contention.

Bishop.

But in his name the quarrel did begin
About the opinion which he held, my liege.

King.

How if it did? Was either he in place
To take part with them, or abet them in it?
If brabbling fellows, whose enkindled blood
Seethes in their fiery veins, will needs go fight,
Making their quarrels of some words that passed
Either of you, or you, amongst their cups
Is the fault yours, or are they guilty of it? . . .

King. [In scorn.]

Report did never yet condemn him so,
But he hath always been reputed loyal,
And in my knowledge I can say thus much,

That he is virtuous, wise, and honourable.
If any way his conscience be seduced
To waver in his faith, I'll send for him
And school him privately (Rittenhouse 120-2).

Presumably, these pointed and scornful remarks of King Harry's would have reminded Queen Elizabeth of her own experience with Norfolk and, in particular, of the fact that he had "always been reputed loyal". They would also have reminded her of the fact that Norfolk was in the Tower during the Northern Rebellion, and not "in place/ To take part with [the rebels] or abet them".

As mentioned earlier, the most convincing demonstration of Oldcastle's unimpeachable loyalty occurs in the scene in which Cambridge and his followers attempt to involve him in their plot to kill the King. Oldcastle hospitably invites the conspirators, (who have arrived unannounced at Cooling) to take part in a staghunt, and Cambridge uses the invitation as a way of broaching the conspiracy in metaphor:

Camb.

Nay, but the stag which we desire to strike
Lives not in Cooling. If you will consent
And go with us, we'll bring you to a forest
Where runs a lusty herd. Amongst the rest,
A stately beast, that when his fellows run
He leads the race and beats the sullen earth
As though he scorned it with his trampling hoofs.
Aloft he bears his head, and with his breast
Like a huge bulwark counter-checks the wind.
And when he standeth still, he stretcheth forth
His proud ambitious neck, as if he meant
To wound the firmament with forked horns.

Cobham.

'Tis pity such a goodly beast should die.

Camb.

Not so, Sir John, for he is tyrannous
And gores the other deer, and will not keep
Within the limits are appointed him.
Of late he's broke into a several
Which doth belong to me, and there he spoils
Both corn and pasture. Two of his wild race,
Alike for stealth and covetous encroaching,
Already are removed; if he were dead,
I should not only be secure from hurt
But with his body make a royal feast.

Scroop.

How say you then, will you first hunt with us?

Cobham.

Faith, lords, I like the pastime. Where's the place?

Camb.

Peruse this writing. It will show you all,
And what occasion we have for the sport.

[Cobham reads]

Cobham.

Call you this hunting, my lords? Is this the stag
You fain would chase, Harry, our dread King?
So we may make a banquet for the devil,
And in the stead of wholesome meat prepare
A dish of poison to confound ourselves! (Rittenhouse
165-7).

The whole of this episode is, of course, completely unhistorical. However, its function in the play is quite clear. It focuses attention, not on the line of succession of Henry V, but rather on the line of Henry VIII. No two historical personages of Henry V's lineage fit the description of "two of his wild race" who "already are removed" (Rittenhouse 166). If the "wild race" is, however, the Tudor line of Henry VIII, the two who "already are removed" are Mary I and Edward VI. The "stag" whom the conspirators wish to hunt is Queen Elizabeth herself, and Cambridge is Mary, Queen of Scots. With Edward VI and Mary Tudor "already removed", Mary would be "secure from hurt", and able to "make a royal feast", if Elizabeth "were dead". Thus, Oldcastle's horrified reaction to the conspirators' suggestion is intended to demonstrate Norfolk's innocence of the Ridolfi plot and his complete loyalty to the Queen.

Parenthetically, it is also worth noticing in connection with this speech that the entire conspiracy plot has here been committed to writing. As Cambridge says: "Peruse this writing/ It will show you all." Later in the scene, Cobham persuades each of the conspirators to sign this document, and the scene closes with a soliloquy in which Cobham, now in possession of the conspirators' plans, vows to reveal them to the King. Rittenhouse cannot help commenting on Cambridge's stupidity in signing the document:

Cambridge is unwaveringly stupid — a conspirator in intent but absolutely lacking in style. Thus we see him eagerly sign his name to the "platform", a complete outline of his plot — something that no self-respecting conspirator would ever do, and something that no self-respecting audience would ever believe, except from a comic or satiric perspective (77).

As Rittenhouse suggests, no "self-respecting audience" would ever believe that a conspirator would

be so simple-minded as to commit his entire conspiracy to writing, sign it, and let it out of his hands. It is thus of some interest that this is exactly what was alleged against Mary, Queen of Scots, in the Norfolk trial. As Edwards says:

One of the most important letters intercepted by Barker was a spurious letter of the Scottish Queen purporting to be written to [the Bishop of] Ross on February 8, 1571. This letter virtually summarized the whole conspiracy, including the dethronement of Elizabeth, and aimed to prove the connivance of Mary in the wildest part of the scheme. This was one of the letters found under the mats in the Duke's apartments. When it was read at the trial, the Duke showed signs of genuine bewilderment - he was no actor (178).

This particular scene in the play thus accords perfectly with a historical detail from 1571, and confirms that Cambridge represents Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Cambridge conspiracy, the Ridolfi plot.

One of the strangest episodes in *Oldcastle* is the trial of Oldcastle for a murder he did not commit. The whole of the last ten scenes in the play dealing with this episode are completely unhistorical. An Englishman, Sir Richard Lee, is murdered by his treacherous Irish servant, MacShane. On the basis of specious circumstantial evidence, Oldcastle is charged with the murder, tried, and eventually acquitted.

In terms of the historical Sir John Oldcastle, the substitution of this bizarre episode for Oldcastle's heresy trial seems absurd. If Oldcastle represents Norfolk, however, the reason for the change is clear. Norfolk was on trial for treason, not heresy, and a heresy trial would have deflected the play's impact. There is the further point that Norfolk (in the playwright's view) was on trial for a crime he did not commit, and the specious murder charge preferred against Oldcastle in the play makes this point very economically.

There is in these final scenes of the play another interesting parallel with Norfolk's situation. Some of the most damaging evidence given against Norfolk was that of his servant William Barker (as, for example, the letter from Mary, Queen of Scots, mentioned above). The playwright seems to be pointing clearly to the unreliability of Barker's evidence when

he casts the servant as the murderer, and has the Mayor of St. Albans tell his men to “Keep fast that traitorous rebel his [Oldcastle’s] servant there” (Rittenhouse 236).

One further point which cannot be passed over in connection with Norfolk is the fact that MacShane’s treacherous murder (and the final ten scenes of the play) take place in or near St. Albans.

There is, in Walsingham, a brief mention of St. Albans: the historical Sir John Oldcastle apparently had a hiding place there at some time during his years of outlawry (Fiehler 204). But St. Albans was also an important locality in connection with Norfolk. The most damaging evidence obtained against him was brought to the house of Sir Nicholas Bacon at St. Albans. As the Bishop of Ross tells the story:

As soon as this bearer [Brown] was out of London he took his journey to pass by St. Albans, where understanding that my Lord Keeper [Bacon] was resident resorted unto him and there opened the matter of set purpose, as it was supposed, who, refusing to open the money, sent him with one of his own servants to the court where the Queen was in progress, and there opened the whole matter to some of the Council. Which he did either for that he had been suborned and enticed to bewray the same, or else in hope of some goodly reward for the same (Edwards 164-5).

The murder trial scenes in *Oldcastle* thus seem to have been invented in order to associate the ideas of “treachery” and “circumstantial evidence” with St. Albans, thus disposing the audience to view with distrust the evidence against the Duke brought to St. Albans by the treacherous bearer Brown.

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that the play *Sir John Oldcastle* is concerned, not with Oldcastle the Lollard heretic, but with some other person — someone unjustly accused of being implicated in treasonable plots — and that the dominant impression given by the play is of this individual’s innocence. The parallel with Norfolk’s situation as Oxford and some of his contemporaries would have seen it is obvious.

Many additional aspects of the play could be cited as examples of the manner in which the facts sur-

rounding the historical Sir John Oldcastle have been distorted to suit the author’s purpose. The distortions of history in the play all detract from, rather than add to, an account of life of the historical Sir John Oldcastle. At the same time, the changes make eminent sense in terms of Norfolk and the events of 1569-1572, and serve to highlight Norfolk’s innocence of the treason charges against him.

As has been pointed out earlier, the historical period in which Sir John Oldcastle lived, with its Ficket Field Rebellion, its Cambridge conspiracy, and its trial of a powerful peer, offered useful parallels with the Northern Rebellion, the Ridolfi plot, and the Duke of Norfolk’s trial for treason. The life of Sir John Oldcastle was therefore simply a convenient vehicle for the dramatization of the way in which a loyal subject could be entrapped in a web of circumstantial evidence pointing to treason.

Once this is accepted, the hypothesis of Oxford’s authorship of the play becomes a virtual certainty. No other Elizabethan playwright writing in the 1570’s could have written such a play, nor would any other have dared risk the Queen’s wrath by doing so.

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The description of the horrible and cruell martirdome
of the Lorde Cobham, called fyr Ihon Old Cast le.



Thon. nr.
S. p. m. in

This terrible kinde of death, with galowes
chaines, and fyre, appeareth not verye pccious
in the eyes of men that be carnal, no moze thā
did the death of Christe when he was banged
vp amonge theues. The righteous seemeth to
dye (saith the wise man) in the syggte of them
whiche are vn'wise, and their end is taken for
verge of iusticion. Angodly soles thincketh ther

earnestlye commaunded to wypte: that blessed
are the dead which hence departed (in the lord.
Righte deare (saith David) in the syggte of
God is the death of his true seruants. Thus
realeth this valeaunte Christen Knighte, fyr
Ihon Oldcastle vnder the aultare of G O D
whiche is Iesus Christe) amonge that godlye
company which in the kingdome of pacience,

¶ Gal. c. 2

¶ 1. cor. 13.
¶ 1. cor. 13.

The martyrdom of Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham.
From John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583)