

8-1-1957

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### Recommended Citation

Fiehler, Rudolph (1957) "Sir John Oldcastle Reconsidered," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 28, Article 43.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol28/iss1/43>

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# Sir John Oldcastle Reconsidered

BY RUDOLPH FIEHLER

FROM among the Puritan saints whose lives are told in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of These Latter Days*, it has not been the fashion for some time to single out Sir John Oldcastle, "the good Lord Cobham," as a special example of heroism and piety. Writers of history have become accustomed to set down this high-placed follower of John Wyclif as a hot-headed adventurer whose intemperate ambition led him to bring about a foolhardy armed uprising against his liege, the gallant and pious Henry V. Shakespeare scholars have had an interest in Sir John Oldcastle because, according to an early biography of the poet, the part of Falstaff was written originally under the name of Oldcastle, whereat the Puritans of the day were so mightily offended that Queen Elizabeth herself commanded that the name of the comic character be changed.

Caricatures of Sir John Oldcastle have not been limited to the stage. Evidence of opprobrium attaching to the name appears startlingly in an otherwise innocuous essay by Oliver Goldsmith entitled "Reverie at the Boar's Head Tavern," the allusion being to the tavern scenes in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, in which the future king bandies insults with the fat clown who was originally called Oldcastle. Goldsmith wrote of the Wyclifites that they were "sometimes eating dead bodies torn from the grave" and that "Sir John Oldcastle, one of the chief of the sect, was particularly fond of human flesh."

So deeply rooted are these unpleasant notions about Sir John Oldcastle that even close students of John Foxe's book have preferred to forget that the man was ever accorded a place in Protestant hagiology. John Wesley, for instance, omitted all mention of Oldcastle in his abridgment of the *Book of Martyrs*, and, instead, referred editorially to "trash which that honest unjudicious writer (Foxe) has heaped together and mingled with those venerable records which are worthy to be had in everlasting remembrance."

One wonders whether a chill and hazy fog might not have hung over Smithfield, outside the walls of London, on the December day in 1417 when Oldcastle was executed with the noose and with fire, just a hundred years before the principles of reform for which he stood were vindicated by the work of Martin Luther. A gray mist, seasonal and appropriate though it would have been, must remain a matter of surmise, for the cloistered scribes who chronicled the melancholy event did not regard the weather as particularly notable. They wrote nothing about it, just as they left unrecorded many another point of information which would today clarify some of the mysteries which still surround the shadowy figure of the knight who was hanged as a traitor and burned as a heretic.

John Oldcastle came originally from Herefordshire, near the Welsh border, where members of his family for several generations had been sheriffs and representatives to parliament.<sup>1</sup> His earlier years were lived in that brief era of intellectual freedom and literary activity which marked the otherwise tragic reign of the boy-king Richard II. For the year of his birth we have today only the word of the ardent papist Thomas of Elmham, who felt it appropriate to designate the year as 1378, when the great schism produced the spectacle of two popes, one at Avignon and one at Rome, each anathematizing the other. During the several decades of this much-lamented "division of Christ's tunic," voices of protest and reform were raised in many places, but nowhere more forcefully than in England, where Oldcastle was coming into manhood.

Already in 1374 John Wyclif had defied papal authority in England by opposing payment of an annual tribute that had been instituted in the days of John, the king of unhappy memory. Five years later he further angered the ecclesiastics by preaching against the doctrine of transubstantiation. Marked thereafter as a trouble-maker, he was blamed for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and in 1382 twenty-four of his conclusions were condemned as heretical by a council at Canterbury; but as parish priest at Lutterworth

<sup>1</sup> The best biographical studies of Sir John Oldcastle are an article by James Tait in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and W. T. Waugh, "Sir John Oldcastle," *English Historical Review*, XX (1905), 434 ff.

in the Midlands he continued his vigorous efforts toward reform until his death in 1384.

The poor priests, or Lollards, whom Wyclif armed with his translation of the Bible, were particularly active in Oldcastle's native Herefordshire, which was probably also the birthplace of Nicholas of Hereford, Wyclif's collaborator in the work of translation. There also William Swynderby, who later avoided the fagot through recantation, carried on his preaching. At the royal court the followers of Wyclif were in high favor, and through Richard's queen, Anne of Bohemia, the new doctrines of reform were being transmitted to Prague, there to be proclaimed through John Hus. During those years Geoffrey Chaucer with impunity described the foibles of certain hangers-on of the church, and the hopes of the common people for better things found expression in the *Vision of Piers the Plowman*.

The deposition of Richard in 1399 by his Lancastrian cousin was followed by military developments that brought Oldcastle quickly to prominence. The Welsh regarded the new King Henry IV as a usurper, and they were quickly roused to revolt by Owen Glendower, who had something of a reputation as a wizard. Herefordshire became a base of operations against the rebels, and Oldcastle's aid was soon and effectively enlisted in the cause of the king.

The king's campaign was also in a particular way the cause of Prince Hal, the future Henry V, whose prestige as Prince of Wales was at stake; so, in fighting for the crown, Oldcastle was in a special way defending the prerogatives of the prince. Thus the way was prepared for the notion in later years that Oldcastle-Falstaff and the young Prince Hal must have been close friends, and perhaps even playfellows, as they are made out to be in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays. In a similar way, Oldcastle's espousal of Wyclif's doctrines, contrasted with the prince's subsequent loyal support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, supplied the basis for an easy surmise that Oldcastle must have been a hypocritical reprobate bent on misleading the future king, and therein may be found the original suggestion for the uproarious picaresques of Hal and Falstaff in the Shakespeare plays.

About 1408, Wales having been pacified, Oldcastle abruptly left the west country to remove to Kent, southeast of London. In a sudden change of fortune, he had married the Lady Joan de Cobham, three times widowed and now sole heir to one of the wealthiest baronies of the land. The Cobham inheritance was immense, including about a dozen manor houses besides Cowling castle, built by old John de Cobham, the bride's grandfather, who had died at an advanced age shortly before the marriage took place.

As the new Lord Cobham, Sir John Oldcastle was summoned to the parliament of 1410, and the anticlerical temper of this session may well have been due to his influence. Of this parliament the monk Thomas Walsingham wrote that the *milites parlamentales (vel, ut dicamus varius, satellites Pilatales)*, intent on spoiling the church, presented a bill in which they set forth that confiscation of the temporalities of the clergy would enable the king to provide for fifteen new earls, 1,500 knights, 6,200 esquires, and to found a hundred almshouses besides. These figures echo a condemned tract of John Purvey, the friend and associate of Wyclif, and they had an interesting later history, as they were reproduced by the historian Raphael Holinshed, upon whom Shakespeare relied, and thus appear again in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which has to do with negotiations between the crown and the clergy for support of the king's projected invasion of France.

In the face of anticlerical opposition, the churchmen fought back vigorously, and their natural targets were the itinerant preachers who still carried the torch of Wyclif's reforming zeal. Activities of these unlicensed priests had already been interdicted through a series of regulations set forth in 1408, and the threatened penalties were now extended to any and all persons who should presume to favor or support such prohibited activities.

These provisions were invoked against Oldcastle during the three-week Easter recess of the parliamentary session. The circumstances under which action was pressed must have been peculiarly embarrassing, as the marriage of Oldcastle's stepdaughter, the sole prospective heir to the Cobham line, was about to take place. On April 3 the Archbishop of Canterbury directed a letter to his diocesan at Rochester imposing the interdict on the

three churches within Oldcastle's demesne. The letter began by reviewing the regulation governing the licensing of preachers, by which no person was to preach in the province of Canterbury unless he were first approved by the archbishop or by the diocesan in his locality and could show for inspection such letters as the curate in his own area should require. Notwithstanding this, the letter continued, a certain Sir John, pretending himself a chaplain, together with Sir John Oldcastle, had dared to preach in the churches now to be placed under the interdict, thereby spreading poison, tares, heresy, and errors repugnant to the holy mother church, and especially had this been done in the church at Cowling. The aforesaid Sir John, then in hiding, was to be publicly cited to appear before the archbishop twelve days hence to show cause why he should not be duly punished.

This drastic pronouncement must have evoked some show of compliance, for the interdict on Cowling church was lifted two days later by the terms of another letter from the archbishop which made it very clear that the marriage of the Cobham heiress was to be solemnized by a priest in good standing. The archbishop must have been afterward satisfied also regarding the matter of unlicensed preaching, for there is another letter totally and entirely relaxing the interdict. The matter, so far as it concerned Sir John Oldcastle, appeared to be closed. However, there is evidence that, far from conforming to the discipline of the Archbishop, Oldcastle continued to be the spokesman and bulwark of Lollardy. This appears from a letter which he directed to the Bohemian Hussites in the following September, urging them to stand staunch and never to draw back from truth, even in the face of death.<sup>2</sup>

Some eighteen months later, in March of 1412, the archbishop was once more pained to note that Sir John Oldcastle was again encouraging the activities of unlicensed preachers. At a convocation of the clergy in St. Paul's in London, notice had been taken of a certain chaplain there present who was suspected of heretical pravity. On being questioned, this chaplain identified himself as John Lay, ordained in the diocese of Lincoln. He had, he said, celebrated that very day before the Lord Cobham, but when he

<sup>2</sup> The letter to the Bohemian Hussites is summarized by J. H. Wylie, in *The History of England Under Henry the Fourth* (London, 1884), III, 462.

was asked for such credentials as were required of preachers in Canterbury, he was unable to produce them.

The matter of John Lay became of secondary importance in the face of further developments. The archbishop continued the convocation to the sixth of June, further meetings being held in the parish church at Lambeth. Here sweeping judgment was passed on some three hundred tracts, which were declared to be erroneous and heretical and were ordered forthwith to be burned. Still other heretical writings were brought to the attention of a provincial synod in July of the next year. Among these were a number of tracts in the form of an unbound quarto, discovered in the possession of a "lymnore" or illuminator in Paternoster Row, London, who asserted that they belonged to Sir John Oldcastle. Certain passages from these tracts were read before the king, Oldcastle being present. The king, greatly horrified, pronounced the tracts to be the worst against the church and the faith that he had ever heard.

Oldcastle now fortified himself at Cowling, and there defied an ecclesiastical summons. Resorting to more drastic procedure, the archbishop had him cited openly through the public crier. As he still did not appear, the king, as the secular arm of churchly authority, had him apprehended and confined to the Tower of London. Brought finally before the court of the Archbishop of Canterbury on Saturday, September 23, 1413, he boldly declared his adherence to Wyclif's principles, while rejecting the smoothly phrased warnings of his prosecutor. Two days later, on the following Monday, he was confronted a second time by the archbishop's court, which was now complemented by a formidable panel of judges. As he remained firm in his stand, he was declared to be a stubborn and stiff-necked heretic and forthwith excommunicated.

Ironically, it was the archbishop himself who wrote the account that was later to become the basis for the martyr-history of Sir John Oldcastle. In a letter dated October 10 and directed to be read in the churches he gave a careful and extended explanation of the proceedings.<sup>3</sup> Writing in ponderous Latin, he closed his

<sup>3</sup> In English translation the archbishop's account of Oldcastle's trial was appended by John Foxe to his edition of the martyr history. In its original

letter with the sentence of excommunication, which, by way of warning, was extended to any and all who might in the future be receivers, favorers, or defenders of heretics.

For the purpose of assessing the charge of treason which was later to be lodged against Oldcastle, the significant sections of the archbishop's account are the man's statement of his position and belief and the authoritarian demand for conformity which the court sought to impose. These two statements in themselves clearly define the issues which were at stake.

In his statement before the court, Oldcastle boldly declared himself for Wyclif's doctrine. If he uttered so much as a single word of censure against the secular authority, his prosecutor did not at the time find it worth recording:

I, John Oldcastle, knight, lord of Cobham, will that all Christian men wit and understand that I clepe Almighty God to witness that it hath been, and now is, and ever with the help of God shall be mine intent and my will to believe faithfully and fully all the sacraments that ever God ordained to be done in holy church.

And moreover, to declare me in these four points, I believe that the most worshipful sacrament of the altar is Christ's body in form of bread, the same body that was born of the blessed virgin, our lady Saint Mary, done on the cross, dead and buried, the third day rose from death to life, the which body is now glorified in heaven.

Also as for the sacrament of penance, I believe that it is needful to every man that shall be saved to forsake sin, and to do due penance for sin before done, with true confession, very contrition, and due satisfaction, as God's law limiteth and teacheth, and else may he not be saved, which penance I desire all men to do.

And as of images, I understand that they be not of belief, but that they were ordained, since the belief was given of Christ, by suffrance of the church, to be calendars to lay men, to represent and bring to mind the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and mar-

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Latin it is found in *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wycliff cum Tritico*, a documentary collection of measures against the Lollards assembled by Thomas Netter of Walden (ed. W. W. Shirley, London: Rolls Series, 1848). It is found also in Bishop Wilkins' *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, III, 329, where Oldcastle's statement of belief and the determinations of the court are given in English. It is from this latter source, with rationalized spelling, that these two sections are here reproduced.



tyrdom and good living of other saints, and that whoso it be that doth the worship to dead images that is due to God, or putteth faith, hope, or trust in help of them as he should do to God, or hath affection in one more than in another, he doth in that the great sin of idolatry.

Also I suppose this fully, that every man in this earth is a pilgrim toward bliss or toward pain, and that he that knoweth not, nor will not know, nor keep the holy commandments of God in his living here, albeit that he go on pilgrimage to all the world, and he die so, he shall be damned. And he that knoweth the holy commandments of God and keepeth them to his end, he shall be saved, though he never in his life go on pilgrimage, as men use now, to Canterbury or to Rome, or to any other place.

The learned doctors who sat as judges replied in a counter-statement which plainly was intended to leave Oldcastle no way out except through recantation and submission:

The faith and the determination of holy church touching the blissful sacrament of the altar is this, that after the sacramental words have been said by a priest in his mass, the material bread that was before is turned into Christ's very body, and the material wine that was before is turned into Christ's very blood, and so there remaineth in the altar no material bread nor material wine, the which were there before the saying of the sacramental words. How feel you this article?

Holy church hath determined that every Christian man living here bodily on earth ought to be shriven to a priest ordered by the church if he may come to him. How feel you this article?

Christ ordained Saint Peter the apostle to be his vicar here on earth, whose see is the church of Rome, ordaining and granting the same power that he gave to Peter should succeed to all Peter's successors, the which we call now popes of Rome, by whose power, in churches particular, special (persons) are ordained prelates as archbishops, bishops, curates, and other degrees, whom Christian men ought to obey after the laws of the church of Rome. This is the determination of holy church. How feel you this article?

Holy church hath determined that it is needful to a Christian man to go on pilgrimage to holy places, and there specially to worship holy relics of saints, apostles, martyrs, confessors, and all saints approved by the church of Rome. How feel you this article?

On the Monday when the hearings were concluded, Oldcastle once more boldly upheld the principles set forth by John Wyclif. In the Latin of the Archbishop's letter:

*Interrogatus, quem honorem faceret imagini ipsius crucis, respondit verbis expressis, quod illum solum honorem faceret sibi, quod bene mundaret eam, et poneret in bona custodia.*

Quite clearly, the archbishop interpreted Oldcastle's reply concerning the holy cross as just another manifestation of stiff-necked disobedience to churchly discipline. But the time was not far off when partisans of reform, never wholly subdued by persecution, were to interpret matters in quite another way.

As will appear below, it was probably some fifty years after the Archbishop Thomas Arundel passed his awful sentence of excommunication upon Sir John Oldcastle that his casuistical Latin account of the trial was originally reworked into the stirring story of martyrdom that was ultimately incorporated into John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. The author, according to Sir Thomas More, was one George Constantine. In the retelling, Oldcastle's simple assertion that he would do no further honor to the holy cross than to take good care of it was expanded as follows:

"Why, sir," said one of the clerks, "will ye not worship images?"

"What worship?" said the lord.

Then said friar Palmer, "Sir, ye will worship the cross of Christ that he died on."

"Where is it?" said the lord.

The friar said, "I put case, sir, that it were here before you."

The lord said, "This is a ready man to put to me a question of a thing that they wot never where it is. And yet I ask you, what worship?"

A clerk said, "Such worship as Paul speaketh of, that is this: 'God forbid me to joy but in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.'"

Then said the lord, and spread his arms abroad, "This is a very cross."

Then said the Bishop of London, "Sir, ye wot well that he died on a material cross."

Then said the lord, "Our salvation came in only by Him that died on the cross and not by the material cross, and well I wot that this was the cross that Paul joyed on, that is, in the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Archbishop said, "Sir John, ye must submit you to the ordinance of the church."

The lord said, "I wot not whereto."

Then the Archbishop read a bill of his judgment and convicted him for an heretic.

By the time the story found its way into John Foxe's book, it had been further elaborated. For example:

Then said the Lord Cobham, and spread his arms abroad, "This is a very cross, yea, and so much better than your cross of wood, in that it was created of God. Yet will I not seek to have it worshipped."

The martyr history of Sir John Oldcastle was first put into print in 1530 at the instance of William Tyndale, who by his translation of the Bible had furthered the coming of the Reformation to England and was now an exile in the Low Countries awaiting the official acceptance of Luther's doctrines in his own land. It was printed along with a similar account of another fifteenth-century Lollard, William Thorpe, who like Oldcastle had been tried as a heretic before the Archbishop of Canterbury. Identity of type faces suggests that the volume was printed in Cologne on the same press from which a fragment of Tyndale's New Testament had issued several years before. Under the designation of "Book of Thorpe" it was banned the following year in England and ordered burned. A single copy, perhaps unique, is preserved in the British Museum.

If the martyr histories of Thorpe and Oldcastle were written by the same hand, and similarities of style suggest that they were, then the date of composition was at least seventy years before the printing. The evidence is found in a quaint note inserted between the two sections of the printed version, where a scribe, as scribes often did before their labors were lightened by the printing press, made note that he had completed part of his stint:

Here endeth sir William Thorpis testament on the Friday after the rode daye and the twentye daye of September, in the yeare of our lorde a thousand foure hundred and sixtie. And on the Sonday nexte after the feste of seynt Peter that we call Lammesse daye in the yeare of our lorde a thousand four hundred and seven the said sir William was accused of these poyntes before written in this booke before Thomas of Arundell Archbishoppe of Canter-

bury as it is said before. And so was it than betwixt the daye of his accusing and the daye that this was wryten three and fiftye yeare and as mekill more as fro the Lammesse to the rodemesse. Behold the ende. . . Here foloweth the Examinacion of the Lorde Cobham.<sup>4</sup>

Tyndale's hand in the printing of the martyr history was made generally known when in 1544 the section of the book telling of Oldcastle was again put into print, this time in England. Tyndale himself had been strangled at the stake eight years before, but the Reformation had officially come to England through the Act of Supremacy, and the once-interdicted publication could now be received with general high favor. Promoter of the new printing was John Bale, a former Carmelite monk, but now a zealous producer of Protestant polemics. In an introduction to his *Brefe Chronycle Concernynge the Examinacyon and Death of the Blessed Martyr of Chist syr Johan Oldcastell the Lord Cobham* Bale credited Tyndale with having put the story into print fourteen years before. Unfortunately, he was elsewhere misled, being betrayed into an easy assumption that the Lord Cobham who was John Oldcastle was the same Lord Cobham who had built Cowling castle and who had been prominent in the days of Richard II—the grandfather, that is, of the Lady Cobham whom Oldcastle married. In this way the notion originated that the "Good Lord Cobham" was an exceedingly old man at the time of his death, an error which Foxe did not correct and which helps to explain why the Falstaff of the Shakespeare plays, who was originally Oldcastle, was portrayed as an aged toper.

John Foxe published a brief Latin account of the labors and trials of Wyclif and Hus already in the days of Catholic Queen Mary. In his more comprehensive *Acts and Monuments of These Latter Days*, first published in 1563, this older material was translated into English and was supplemented with stories of other heroes of Protestantism, among whom it was obviously fitting to include Sir John Oldcastle.

Unreconciled opponents of the Reformation soon seized upon the account of Oldcastle in John Foxe's book as a point of attack

<sup>4</sup> For this study the text of the British Museum copy of the martyr history printed in 1530 was made available through microfilm at the University of Michigan.

—and there was undeniably something which had been left untold. In the Archbishop Thomas Arundel's account the narrative had been left hanging in air with the sentence of excommunication. The writer who reworked the material probably never heard of his hero's military exploits and must have assumed that the sentence of excommunication was followed promptly by execution, for he concluded his tale simply: "And then he was led again to the Tower of London, and thus was the end."

Actually, there was much more to the story. Three weeks after he had been sentenced, Oldcastle escaped from the Tower of London and was not apprehended until four years later, when he was captured in Wales. Brought to London shortly before Christmas in 1417, he was given a perfunctory hearing before parliament and then taken to St. Giles to be hanged and burned as a traitor and a heretic. During the four years Oldcastle spent in hiding he was blamed for every unexplained act of mischief against the realm. He was conspicuously absent when his liege lord, the gallant Henry V, embarked on his ambitious venture into France, which was most signally crowned by the famous victory at Agincourt. As one who might have shared the glory of the king's victory, Oldcastle was reproached as a coward. Much more serious, though, was the charge that within seven weeks after his escape from the Tower he had fomented an armed uprising of some thousands of men at St. Giles, outside the walls of London, with the intent of destroying the king and the realm. Ultimately, it was for this alleged crime that Oldcastle found a place in the popular histories.

Though John Foxe took over in its entirety the martyr history of Sir John Oldcastle as it had been republished by John Bale, he was not caught off guard. Conscious of his responsibility as historian, he appended to the martyr history a translation of the Archbishop Thomas Arundel's original Latin account of Oldcastle's trial, "to the intent," as he wrote, "that the mind of the wrangling caviller may be satisfied, and to stop the mouth of the adversary, which I see in all places to be ready to bark."

The adversary was soon heard from. Three years after the *Book of Martyrs* appeared, it was attacked by Nicholas Harpsfield,

better known in literary history as the biographer of Sir Thomas More. Under the title *Dialogi sex* Harpsfield published six colloquies between Irenaeus, an Englishman, and Critobulus, a German, in which were defended successively the institutions of the papacy, monasticism, invocation of saints, and adoration of images. The whole work was concluded with an attack upon Foxe for having made a martyr of one who deserved rather to be remembered in infamy as a traitor. For historical authority, Harpsfield relied on the chronicle of Robert Fabyan, a onetime sheriff of London, whose *New Chronicles of England and France*, first printed in 1516, had been developed out of an expansion of his personal diary. Fabyan's history was compiled long after Oldcastle's execution, and the information concerning the attendant circumstances could hardly have been based on firsthand knowledge. The entry for the year 1414 begins:

In this year and month of January certain adherents of the forenamed Sir John Oldcastle, intending the destruction of this land and subversion of the same, assembled them in a field near unto Saint Giles in great number, whereof the king being informed took the field before them and so took a certain of them, among the which was Sir Roger Acton knight, Sir John Beverly priest, and a squire named Sir John Brown, the which, with twenty-six more in number were after convict of heresy and treason, and for the same hanged and burned within the said field of Saint Giles.

Harpsfield had been a clerk at Oxford during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary, but at the time he launched his attack on Foxe he was a prisoner in the Fleet. To protect himself, therefore, he issued his dialogues under the name of one Alan Cope, then a refugee on the Continent.

Foxe replied to his elusive opponent in the second edition of his *Acts and Monuments* with a lengthy "Defence of the Lord Cobham." Though ostensibly replying to Cope, Foxe hinted that the dialogues had been "penned and framed by another Pseudo-Copus, whatsoever, or in what fleete soever he was." The veiled allusion to Harpsfield and his imprisonment was made more pointed in the third edition of 1576 by giving Fleete a capital F, but only in the fourth edition of 1583 were the dialogues described

as "compiled in Latin by Nicholas Harpsfield, set out by Alanus Cope."<sup>5</sup>

Taking his cue from the chronicle, Foxe questioned whether any great number of adherents of Sir John Oldcastle could have been encamped at Saint Giles, particularly since there was no note of any blow struck in defense and only a small number were captured. The most telling point in his argument had to do with an examination of the original instruments through which Oldcastle was formally accused. Foxe reproduced both the commission ordering an inquiry into seditious purposes of Lollards and the indictment formally accusing Oldcastle before the parliament. He pointed out that no apparent time had elapsed between the issuance of these two documents; that is, both bore the same date, the Wednesday after Epiphany in the first year of Henry V, the tenth of January 1414. It was even more strange, Foxe observed, that this same *die Mercurii proximo post festum Epiphaniae Domini* should be given in the indictment as the day on which Oldcastle and his followers proposed to meet in St. Giles field to plot the assassination of the king. This triple concurrence of the same date suggested at the very least a certain undignified haste in the judicial process, and at the worst, a strong presumption that judgment was rendered against Oldcastle on the basis of trumped-up charges under circumstances that made any sort of defense impossible.

Foxe's statement of the case still holds good, though the writers of history have largely discounted the force of his argument. If the matter were to be taken up where Foxe left it, plenty of evidence could be found in the publications of the British Public Record Office to show that the story of an ominous foregathering outside the walls of London was not nearly so fearsome in the second week of January as it became in the weeks following, when suspected adherents of Lollardy were individually hunted down.<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered also that in the days of the militantly pious Henry V no dissenter from the established religious order

<sup>5</sup> R. W. Chambers, "The Life and Works of Nicholas Harpsfield," in *Harpsfield's Life of More* (London: Early English Text Society, 1932), p. cxcvi.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, a proclamation against the Lollards dated January 11, 1414, *Close Rolls, 1 Henry V*, membrane 10d. This should be compared with a pardon issued January 23, 1414, to Henry Dene as one of the conspirators, *Patent Rolls, 1 Henry V*, v, membrane 16.

could expect anything like impartiality from those who were entrusted with the writing of the chronicles.<sup>7</sup>

Vilification of Oldcastle was carried to extremes in a versified chronicle written by the monk Thomas of Elmham, the chaplain to Henry V on his French adventure. An introductory section alludes to *illius videlicet satellitis infernalis heresiarchae sive archilollardi, Johannes de Veteri Castro, cujus putredo ad nares Catholicorum horribiliter ascendisse sed quasi sterquilinum*, and the final verse tells how this stench from the dunghill, this dogma of *malae vitae* (a pun on Wyclif—"wycked life"), perished in fire with Sir John Oldcastle, who had been born, appropriately enough, in the year that marked the beginning of the papal schism. Oldcastle is described as a behemoth, a beast with horns and a tail, and his crimes are spelled out in detail: he had renounced the mediation of Christ's mother, had asserted that confession to God alone was sufficient and that in the Sacrament was the substance of bread, and had agitated the Wyclifian heresy condemning temporal possessions for the church.

During the century and a half after his death, the reputation of Sir John Oldcastle underwent a progressive pejoration such as only his worst enemies could have wished. His story became invidiously involved in the legend of the Wild Prince Hal, the unpromising youth who ascended the throne to become Henry V, the victor at Agincourt, and in later memory England's ideal king.

<sup>7</sup> The most extended and the most generally cited account of Oldcastle's rebellion is found in the St. Alban's chronicle of Thomas Walsingham. The story appears in exactly parallel form in the three otherwise widely different versions: *Historia Anglicana* (known to Foxe and now available in the Rolls Series of the British Public Record Office), *Ypodigma Neustriae* (Rolls Series, 1876), and *MS Bodley 462* (ed. V. H. Galbraith, Oxford, 1932). Walsingham abridges the archbishop's account of the trial, and in a later section he relates at length the way in which the king forestalled a gathering of Lollards at St. Giles, for he had been warned that 25,000 persons were ready to assemble.

Of the dozen or so other fifteenth-century chronicles that describe Oldcastle as a traitor, only the histories written by Thomas of Elmham seem definitely to have been written near the time when the events in question took place. His prose chronicle *Gesta Henrici Quinti Regis Angliae* (ed. B. Williams, London, 1850) hardly supports the notion that any considerable number of persons were assembled at St. Giles, though it describes Oldcastle as still lurking at large and hence must have been written before the end of 1417. His versified chronicle *Liber Metricus de Henrico Quinto* (ed. C. A. Cole, London: Rolls Series, 1858) tells colorfully of Oldcastle's capture, but it had hardly a line that can be interpreted to mean that any considerable number of would-be rebels were assembled at St. Giles in January of 1414.



The first English life of Henry V, expanded from an earlier Latin version and printed in 1513, gave currency to an old bit of gossip. The scapegrace prince had waylaid his father's tax receivers and then spent the proceeds of the robbery with his profligate companions at a tavern; however, when he became king, he turned over a new leaf, and dismissed from him all of his former evil associates, warning them not to come within ten miles of his presence.<sup>8</sup> This engaging fancy was repeated by Edward Hall in his compendious chronicle, first published in 1548.

It remained for an unknown cobbler of plays, the author of the crude old drama *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, to make the easy assumption that Sir John Oldcastle was one of those evil companions who had presumably incited the young prince to play highwayman and then had been exiled from the court when the prince behaved himself more fittingly as king. Shakespeare's debt to the *Famous Victories* has been much discussed, but the prince's boon companion in the *Henry IV* plays unmistakably resembles both the highwayman Oldcastle and the clown Dericke in the older play. The combination of these two roles appears to have carried the original suggestion for Shakespeare's famous comic, who robs with a sort of cowardly bravado, falls victim to the young prince's japes, and is finally sent away in empty humiliation.<sup>9</sup> Nearly a century after the passing of the Stratford playwright, in 1709, his first careful biographer, Nicholas Rowe, observed:

This part of Falstaff is said to have been written originally under the name of Oldcastle; some of the family being then remaining, the Queen was pleased to command him (Shakespeare) to alter it; upon which he made use of Falstaff.

It seems that those English Puritans who had been contemporaries of John Foxe and who appealed to the queen in behalf of his knightly hero had a better appreciation of the true character of Sir John Oldcastle than more recent students of the martyrologist have had.

Ruston, Louisiana

<sup>8</sup> *The First English Life of Henry the Fifth*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1931).

<sup>9</sup> The role of Sir John Oldcastle in the Elizabethan drama is discussed in my article "How Oldcastle Became Falstaff," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XVI (March 1955), 16-28.