

Greene, entrusts to his legitimate wife, 'in whose face regard not the father so much as thine own perfections' (a quotation which is omitted in the book), as if the bastard took after the legitimate wife.

Peter Moore wades into the stylistic argument and his review of Nelson's *Monstrous Adversary* is particularly damning and will please every Oxfordian, including Nina Green. Particularly witty and apposite is the verdict: 'Unfortunately Nelson the analyst re-

lates to Nelson the researcher as Hyde relates to Jekyll – moreover Nelson's excessive denigration of Oxford carries him from error into fantasy.'

Gary Goldstein's deep care and attention as editor and Uwe Laugwitz's enthusiasm for the production and publishing of the project are some compensation for the loss of the diamond brain of Peter Moore.

R.M.



The Stella Cover-up

by Peter Moore

I am delighted to have obtained permission from Gary Goldstein to reproduce one of Peter Moore's shorter articles here in the Newsletter. I hope it will whet readers' appetites for the book, copies of which are available from Parapress (address on bottom of page 1), Ed.

If 'William Shakespeare' was, as many of us believe, the 17th Earl of Oxford, one implication seems inescapable: Oxford's contemporaries - courtiers, writers and theatre people - must have maintained a remarkable conspiracy of silence. We can go further. The silence must have been maintained well into the next generation, long after Oxford was dead.

At first glance, this seems implausible. Moreover, orthodox Stratfordians scoff at the idea of so extensive a cover-up. As one of them put it, the required conspiracy is so large that it is difficult to see who was left to be deceived.

Yet anyone familiar with human history or modern American society knows that some things are not discussed in public, and that open conspiracies of silence are common events. The number of examples - political, military or social - that could be cited is endless. We might begin with the motto of the *New York Times*, 'All the News that's Fit to Print', which clearly implies that some news is not fit to print. American journalists have often suppressed what they knew about the sex lives of politicians they reported on - though we may well ask whether this amounts to a 'cover-up' or is simply a matter of respecting privacy. When issues of decorum are at stake, it can be



Lady Penelope Rich
(Lambeth Palace Library)

misleading to think of suppression purely in terms of sinister 'conspiracies'. Thomas Bowdler became infamous for producing a censored edition of Shakespeare in 1807, but it was discovered in 1966 that Bowdler's sister Henrietta was really responsible for ridding the Bard of ribaldry. The motive behind the Bowdler cover-up was a simple matter of sexual modesty. If Henrietta admitted reading and understanding the bawdy parts of Shakespeare that she excised, then she could no longer

be a decent woman, and so her physician brother pretended to be the editor. However, a cover-up far more relevant to the Shakespeare authorship question occurred in Elizabethan England, spread to the English colonies in America, and continued into the 20th century.

Sir Philip Sidney wrote his sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, around 1582 and circulated it in manuscript. It was published in 1591, five years after his death, and became an immediate and much-imitated best seller.

'Stella' was Penelope Devereux, Lady Rich. Various writers covertly but unmistakably alluded to this identity, but nobody directly said so in print until 1691, a full century after the sequence was published. What is interesting for our purpose is that the Stella cover-up (to call it that), involved the same society, the same mores and even the same



Saint Sidney,
early 17th-century
engraving:
Renold Elstrack

literary genres and stratagems as the conspiracy of silence that Oxfordians posit in the case of 'William Shakespeare'. It offers a convincing reply to the Stratfordian complaint that such a conspiracy is too far-fetched to be believed.

Most of the literary history in my article comes from Hoyt H. Hudson's essay, 'Penelope Devereux as Sidney's Stella', which I recommend to all readers.¹ I can only give a summary of Hudson's arguments, but will add a few items of which he was unaware.²

Even though much of the story he tells may be imaginary, Sidney's sonnets do not describe a disembodied poet in love with an abstract woman. That Sidney is Astrophel is clearly indicated by, among other things, Sonnet 30's reference to his father's rule in Ireland as the Queen's Lord Deputy; by Sonnet 41's description of a 1581 tournament; and by the closing line of Sonnet 65, 'Thou bear'st the arrow, I the arrowhead,' the arrowhead being the sole device on the Sidney coat of arms.

Stella's identity is made clear for initiates by Sidney's puns on the word 'rich' in Sonnets 24, 35 and 37; by references to her unhappy marriage in several sonnets; by praise of her black eyes and curly golden hair, which were echoed by other poets and which may be seen in her surviving portraits; and by Sonnet 13's mention of her coat of arms as 'roses gules ... borne in silver field'. The Devereux shield was white (which heralds call silver) with a horizontal red (gules) stripe across the middle, above which were three red discs in a horizontal line.

In order to assess the implications of the Stella cover-up, we need to examine the principals. Sidney died in 1586, immediately becoming a cult figure of astonishing dimensions: the perfect English Christian Renaissance knight, virtually the Protestant Saint George. Sidney's Sonnets to Stella are extremely chaste; he woos her, and, taking her by surprise on one occasion, manages to steal a kiss, but she is true to her husband. Sidney's incredible cult lasted through the 17th century. It flagged a bit in the 18th, but revived mightily in the Victorian age.

Lady Rich's reputation went the other way. Beautiful and highly educated, she was shoved into an arranged marriage with the dull and detestable Lord Rich in 1581 when she was only 18. While bearing her husband five children in nine years, she managed to be active in society and politics, and in time became a patron of poets.

In 1590 she took as her lover the dashing Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy, by whom she had six more children. Her husband acquiesced in her adultery, being in awe of her brother, the Earl of Essex. After the latter's execution in 1601, Lord Rich cast his wife out. Meanwhile, Mountjoy had replaced Essex as commander in Ireland and was methodically destroying the rebellion that had cost Essex his reputation. When King James came to the throne in 1603, Mountjoy returned from Ireland as a hero, and Lady Rich moved in with him as his wife. Mountjoy and Lady Rich had both supported the cause of James, and he made them favoured courtiers, promoting both and seemingly indifferent to their blatant adultery. Mountjoy became Earl of Devonshire, Lady Rich, daughter of a junior earl and wife of a junior baron, was given precedence over all barons' wives and almost all earls' daughters.

In 1605 Lord Rich sued for divorce, and Lady Rich confessed to committing adultery with a stranger. Lord Rich and Devonshire wanted to marry and legitimise their children. Divorce was granted, but remarriage was forbidden and legitimising the children was out of the question. King James was infuriated by the divorce proceedings, banished Lady Rich from his court, and reprimanded Devonshire. The two lovers made an illegal marriage and continued to live as husband and wife until Devonshire died in April 1606. Lady Rich died in July 1607 and was buried in a London church without any marking on her grave. The register simply recorded the burial of 'A Lady Devereux.'

James had no objection to adultery among his nobles, but he did expect them to maintain appearances, and was enraged when one of them publicly admitted her offence. After her divorce Lady Rich was regarded as a notorious woman, but that made it all the more important to prevent her name from contaminating the cult of Sir Philip Sidney.

Enough evidence survives to anatomise the cover-up of the 1590s. The three unauthorised editions of *Astrophel and Stella* that came out in 1591 omitted Sonnet 37, the poem that most clearly says that Stella's name is Rich, while a key line in Sonnet 35 was re-worded to make the name less apparent.³ One of these editions included ten songs that are part of the cycle, but cut from one a passage in which Stella confesses her love for Astrophel, and cut from another Astrophel's anticipation of kissing Stella.⁴

This could have been the work of the pub-

lishers, but more likely reflected the manuscripts they had obtained. Sonnet 37, the correct text of 35, and the full text of all ten songs were provided in the 1598 folio edition of Sidney's works that was published by his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. In other words, the Countess, who idolised her brother, saw no need to censor his works to hide Stella's identity. No-one up to that point had publicly named Stella, and if the Countess assumed that the cover-up would continue - well, continue it did.

In 1595, Edmund Spenser published a batch of poems in praise of Sidney, entitled 'Astrophel.' Two of the 'Astrophel' poems clearly imply that Stella was Sidney's wife, which seems like a deliberate deception. Yet Spenser's poem says that Stella died of grief immediately following Astrophel's death. Sidney's widow, Frances Walsingham, had by then re-married, becoming the Countess of Essex, and Spenser's 'Astrophel' is dedicated to her. Spenser was obviously creating a pleasant fiction and, as Hudson points out,⁵ no-one even pretended to believe that Stella was Sidney's wife until 1655. Further, Spenser's 'Astrophel' puns several times on the word 'rich' and describes Stella's hair as yellow; Frances Walsingham was a brunette. One of the 'Astrophel' poems, by Matthew Roydon, provides the only further comment on the matter, saying to Stella, 'Sweet saints! It is no sin nor blame, To love man of virtuous name.'

Meanwhile, as Hudson shows, a number of other poets glanced at the relationship, usually in poems or dedications to Lady Rich. For example, Gervase Markham dedicated a work to Lady Rich and her sister in 1597, which concluded that if the two ladies approved his writing, then his pen would be 'stellified.'⁶ In 1603, Matthew Gwynn wrote a sonnet in her honour saying that 'HE' praised Lady

Rich, followed by ten compliments lifted verbatim from Sidney's sonnets to Stella. As Ringler notes, five out of seven dedications to Lady Rich written between 1594 and 1606 found a way to hint unmistakably at her being Sidney's Stella, without, of course, deliberately saying so.⁷

One contemporary actually stated what so many knew and hinted at: that Stella was Penelope Devereux Rich, but this item went unnoticed until the 20th century. Sir John Harington, godson to Queen Elizabeth, copied Sidney's first sonnet to Stella into a manuscript volume, headed with these words: 'Sonnettes of Sr Phillip Sydneys (uppon) to ye Lady Ritch.'⁸

The cover-up evolved during the following decades and generations, but the central taboo remained. After Lady Rich's divorce, public compliments virtually ceased, and private slurs on her character multiplied, but her rank sheltered her from public attack long after her death. For example, an obscene epitaph penned shortly after she died was published in 1640, but with her name removed. As the generation that knew her in life died off, the attacks subsided, and the fact that she was Stella was gradually forgotten.

It may seem remarkable that her name was protected through the 1640s, a decade of civil war during which pamphleteers of all persuasions freely libelled the characters and families of their enemies. Even here Lady Rich enjoyed posthumous good luck; thanks in part to her adultery, she had, on both sides of the strife, allies with an interest in sparing her reputation.

Lady Rich's oldest legitimate son had become the Earl of Warwick, Lord High Admiral of England, and a leading figure among the parliamentary forces opposing King Charles. Her other legitimate son was the Earl of Holland, a powerful politician who kept changing sides, until Parliament settled things by beheading him in 1649. Lady Rich's oldest illegitimate son was the Earl of Newport, a general fighting for the King.

Other families might also have taken umbrage at full disclosure of the story of *Astrophel and Stella*. Sidney, a moderate Puritan, was a hero to both sides, and his widow's children had a stake in his reputation, if only to deny that he wronged their mother by loving Lady Rich during his marriage negotiations. Frances Walsingham's older son was the Earl of Essex (he was also Lady Rich's nephew), a leading Parliamentary general, while her younger son was the Marquess of Clanricard, one

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of the King's strongest supporters in Ireland. Frances Walsingham's daughter by her Irish husband was the Marchioness of Winchester, a heroine of the Royalist cause in England. Another man who might have taken offence was the Countess of Pembroke's son, Sidney's nephew and godson, the Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, a political supporter of Parliament. Lastly, there was Sidney's brother's son, the Earl of Leicester, the then head of the House of Sidney. He was disaffected from the King but would not oppose him, so he stayed neutral while his son and heir, Viscount Lisle, was active in support of Parliament.

Hudson's article does not make clear when the first public attack was made on Lady Rich's character. He cites only Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, written in the 1670s and published 30 years later, which implies that she was immoral, without actually saying that she committed adultery, a thing she had admitted in open court in 1605.

Other 17th-century discussions of Lady Rich's offence are instructive. The Jesuit Father John Gerard attempted to convert her during his years in the Catholic underground in England, but was foiled by Devonshire. After his return to the Continent in 1606, Gerard wrote a Latin account of his missionary work intended for confidential use within the Jesuit order. It was published in 1870. He described his dealings with Lady Rich and the scandal of her affair with Devonshire, but named neither of them. She is called a 'sister to the Earl of Essex'; Devonshire is identified as the conqueror of Ireland. Lady Rich and Lord Devonshire were openly named and their scandal was discussed by a contemporary historian, Robert Johnston, but his Latin account was published in the Netherlands in 1655. Archbishop George Abbot wrote a lengthy essay on political and religious affairs in 1627 which was published in 1659. Abbot has a paragraph on the scandal, but calls the participants 'the Earl of D' and 'the Lady R'. Peter Heylyn published a biography of Archbishop William Laud in 1668; Laud had been Devonshire's chaplain in 1605 and conducted the illegal marriage of the two lovers. Heylyn does name names, but the whole point of his account is that Lady Rich's 1581 marriage was improper, hence she and Devonshire could rightfully wed.

From the time Sidney died until the late 17th century, biographical books and articles kept appearing, none of which mentioned Penelope, Lady Rich. These included an inspiring account of Sidney's last days, written by George Gifford,

a clergyman who attended at his bedside. Gifford wrote that Sidney was insufficiently sure of salvation but then God delivered him: 'There came to my remembrance a vanity wherein I had taken delight, whereof I had not rid myself. But I rid myself of it, and presently my joy and comfort returned within a few hours.' In 1964, Jean Robertson found a manuscript version of Gifford's memoir, and discovered that between these two sentences was a third which had been deleted from the published versions: 'It was my Lady Rich.'

In 1638, Anne Bradstreet of Massachusetts, a distant cousin of Sidney's, wrote a poem in his praise which was published in London in 1650. The poem mentions their kinship, describes Stella and mildly condemns her, but insists that her love for Sidney was not adulterous. Bradstreet died in 1677, and her poems were re-published in Boston in 1678; the reference to kinship to Sidney had been removed, as had been the attack on Stella. The revised version cites Spenser's claim that Stella was Sidney's wife.

In 1691, Anthony a Wood published *Athenae Oxonienses*, which included a simple, unsupported statement that Stella was 'the Lady Rich'. This assertion was not treated as a scandalous revelation, it was simply a few words in a large book, and it was ignored. Not until the mid-19th century was the literary and social history of Shakespeare's England sufficiently reconstructed in detail for scholars to begin building the case for Lady Rich as Stella. Then, a new obstacle arose to complicate objective scholarship.

The letters of John Chamberlain were published from 1848 to 1861, providing a mine of information on Shakespeare's era. One letter described the death of the Earl of Devonshire, and stated that his will provided for only three of his alleged five surviving children by Lady Rich. The clear implication was that Devonshire was not the father of the other two, which was widely believed in the last century. The matter was not cleared up until Devonshire's will was found. It provided quite generously for all five of his children. Sylvia Freedman also shows that Lady Rich's two sets of children did not overlap, as had previously been believed. She broke off marital relations with Rich before taking up with Blount.

The false belief that Lady Rich mingled her husband and lover, and was not even faithful to the latter, had caused her to seem more wicked than ever. To many Victorians, and some post-

Victorians, Lady Rich's scarlet sins absolutely confirmed that the saintly Sidney could have had nothing to do with her.

In 1934, Professor James Purcell published a book purporting to prove that Lady Rich was not Stella. That provoked Hoyt Hudson's 40-page response, which crushed Purcell (who withdrew and revised his book), and has been considered the definitive article on the subject ever since. Subsequent research has strengthened Hudson's arguments.

Yet one more group continued to hold out: overly zealous professors of English literature of the school called the New Criticism (now obsolete), a powerful force in Academia in the early and mid-20th century. The New Criticism insists that a poem 'stands alone' and must be examined without regard to any background - historical, cultural or linguistic. There is something to be said for this approach, if it is not carried to excess. There is no reason why a Literature professor needs to study the Battle of Balaclava, in order to appreciate Tennyson's 'The charge of the Light Brigade', but we would surely be astonished if the professor heatedly insisted that there had been no such battle.

Some of the New Criticism professors felt that verse was polluted if its background was analysed, or, for that matter, if it was even admitted to exist. Judging by the quotations from Purcell that are given by Hudson, the former was motivated by New Criticism. My own copy of Sidney is the 1969 *Sir Philip Sidney, Selected Prose and Poetry*, edited by Robert Kimbrough of the University of Wisconsin. Kimbrough's introduction to *Astrophel and Stella* complains that 'scholars have fastened on partial and inconclusive evidence to identify Stella as Penelope Devereux -Rich', which Kimbrough dismisses as an 'extraliterary controversy' which would prevent us from 'open[ing] our ears to ... some of the finest music achieved by English poetry'.

We can now characterise the Stella cover-up. That Lady Rich was Sidney's Stella was known to many people, including courtiers and poets. There appears to have been no active attempt to suppress the truth. Indeed, Spenser's 1595 pretence that Stella was Sidney's widow was intended to be taken as a fiction, while Sidney's sister's 1598 edition of *Astrophel and Stella* strengthened the identification. Meanwhile, from 1591 to 1619, various writers (Hudson cites about 15) published works that made the identification in a manner that was covert but perfectly clear to those in the know.

These writers meant to compliment Lady Rich for the honour of inspiring Sidney's sonnets, but decorum required that the compliments be veiled. Presumably the truth was discussed in private. Vested interests in the reputations of Sidney and Lady Rich kept the truth from being uttered openly until exactly a century after Sidney's sonnets were first published. By then, the matter was stale and uninteresting; there was no follow-up. Not until the mid-19th century did scholars begin to assemble the various pieces of evidence, but they still met with decades of opposition from defenders of the cult of Sir Philip Sidney, who were eventually joined by certain English professors of the New Criticism school.

Sexual propriety was the simplest motive behind the Stella cover-up, as, in a different way, it was the motive for the Bowdler cover-up. Sidney's poetical niece, Lady Mary Wroth, had two illegitimate children by her cousin, the Earl of Pembroke, Sidney's nephew, a matter that was managed so discreetly that it escaped notice until the 20th century. Sex probably had something to do with the cover-up of the story behind *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, which make Sidney's seem positively tame. Of course, other factors presumably affected Shakespeare's works, such as the stigma of print, which kept all of Sidney's works in manuscript until after his death.

The Stella cover-up offers remarkable parallels to what we infer concerning the Earl of Oxford and William Shakespeare. It should become the standard response to sneers about conspiracy theories.

ENDNOTES

1. Hoyt H. Hudson, 'Penelope Devereux as Sidney's Stella', *Huntington Library Bulletin*, No.7 (April 1935)
2. W.A. Rigler, *Sidney's Poems* (Oxford 1962), 435-48; Roger Howell, *Sir Philip Sidney: The Sheperd Knight* (London, 1968), 181-82; and Sylvia Freedman, *Poor Penelope, Lady Penelope Rich, an Elizabethan Woman* (London 1983)
3. See Hudon, 92
4. See Ringler, 448
5. See Hudon, 121
6. See Hudon, 96
7. See Ringler, 436
8. Further details are found in Ruth Hughey's *The Arundel Harington Manuscript of Tudor Poetry* (1960), i, 254-55; ii, 352-55.