

SHAKESPEARE FOOLERY, 1623: THE FIRST FOLIO AND THE COUNTESS OF MONTGOMERY'S DISAPPEARANCE

By Joella Werlin

Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again
Lear to Cordelia (*King Lear* I, I, i)

It may seem premature, making too much of ‘nothing’, to conclude that a search for a vital being named Susan Vere (1587–1629), youngest daughter of the illustrious Edward de Vere 17th Earl of Oxford and Anne Cecil de Vere, daughter of Queen Elizabeth’s most powerful minister, will lead to dead ends.² To be sure, there are numerous accounts of Lady Susan’s popularity and travails, and accolades to her by many of the most famous literary and political figures of her day. But, apart from a few surviving letters she wrote to her grandfather William Cecil, Lord Burghley, or to her uncle Robert Cecil, Lord Treasurer to King James, nothing has been found so far that reveals her own story in her own words. Building suspicions, traces vanish that encourage deeper probing. Perhaps my early conclusion should be stated more starkly: Susan Vere’s story has been erased – or she erased it herself – because she was the tell-tale daughter of the man who *we are not meant to know* moved the pen of ‘William Shakespeare.’

Let me connect the lacunae with examples, beginning with the substantial, very recent – 13 May 2021 – biographical entry in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB): **Herbert [*née de Vere*], Susan, countess of Montgomery**, by Edwina Christie. The titled subject, identified as ‘courtier and literary patron’, is portrayed to be a woman we would honor as a luminous star were she in the current court circle. Once you scroll past the peculiarly selective biographical details to the description of Susan and Philip Herbert’s marriage – a ‘grand court affair’ hosted and paid for by King James – to the section ‘Court career and literary patronage’, you are awed by a scroll of her court performances in masques and other entertainments and the enumeration of more than a dozen stunning encomiums.

So, what is there to complain about? To begin with, almost the entire introductory bio section, about a quarter of the total entry, hangs on stated failures

of Susan's father, breezily called Oxford, that are cited in contrast to munificent acts of her grandfather and uncle in taking custody of his daughters – all drawn from Alan H. Nelson's damning biography of Edward de Vere, *Monstrous Adversary*.³ Why begin that way? The stage is set to obscure Susan's birth family connections and, of course, any reference to Shakespeare. The ODNB description of Susan and Philip's fabulous wedding alludes to entertainments and lavish gifts and offers gossip accounts by noble witnesses, yet it fails to mention the ensuing theatrical celebration at Whitehall Palace that included seven Shakespeare plays.

'As part of the *Sidney-Herbert circle* [my italics] of writers and literary patrons,' we are told 'Lady Susan was celebrated by a number of Jacobean writers' – a circle, the reader is not told, that included names strongly identified with her father: Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Donne and Anthony Munday. The list of encomiums omits others to Philip and Susan: For example, the dedication in 1619 of an impressive folio-sized volume *Arxaiio-Ploutos* by soon-to-be First Folio publisher (Isaac) Jaggard, which reads: 'To the most Noble and Twin-like Paire/ of truly Honourable and compleat perfection, Sir Philip/ Herbert, Knight of the Bath [etc.]' ... also, 'To the truly virtuous and Noble Countess his Wife,/the Lady Susan, Daughter to the right Honourable Edward Vere, Earle of Oxen- /ford , Viscount Bulbec, Lord Sandford ... Lord High Chamberlaine/ of England, etc. [sic].'⁴ The author also omits a eulogy to Susan by poet William Browne. It concludes:

In thy name there is a tomb,
If the world can give it room;
For a Vere and Herbert's wife
Outspeaks all tombs, outlives all life.⁵

The one image of Susan Vere illustrating the ODNB entry is the head and torso of a luridly painted stone statue of a young Susan kneeling by tombs bearing effigies of her mother and grandmother in the Chapel of St. Nicholas at Westminster Abbey, erected by Lord Burghley. Under 'Likenesses', the author mentions only one other: an 'unsubstantiated' depiction of Philip Herbert's wife in the



great Van Dyck portrait that ‘may be a posthumous depiction of Lady Susan.’⁶ The point must be made here that, while there are a number of disputed portraits of Susan Vere, the ODNB might easily have reproduced the charming pen drawing *identified* as ‘The Countess of Montgomery/Thomyris Queen of Stygia’ by artist Inigo Jones, costumed for Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Queens*, 1609.

The ODNB article describes Lady Susan as ‘a prominent favourite of Queen Anne and a frequent performer in court masques.’ It continues, ‘She and her sister Elizabeth were the only two court ladies to perform in all the queen’s masques for which cast lists are extant,’ naming her roles in several entertainments (including *Masque of Queens*). The author suggests that it was ‘perhaps in these early masques that Lady Susan formed a lifelong friendship with Lady Mary Wroth, daughter of Robert Sidney, Viscount Lisle.’ omitting a closer tie, namely that Lady Mary was a first cousin of Susan’s husband Philip Herbert. Is this connection too deep into family weeds, or is it deliberately downplayed? Consider a later line, ‘Lady Mary dedicated her prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, to Lady Susan, acknowledging the deep and lasting friendship between the two women.’



Anyone curious about the daring work of Susan Vere’s dear friend would want to know something about *The Countess of Montgomerie’s Urania*. What can it mean, then, to call up the *Folgerpedia* entry about the author Mary Wroth and publication history yet find not a line to say who is the Countess of Montgomery or what the title conveys? Turn next to the more expansive entry in *Wikipedia*. Wiki offers colorful details about Wroth’s scandalous relationships, notably an affair with her first cousin William Herbert, Lord Pembroke (Philip’s brother), with whom she

had two children. But, again, not a sentence, not a hint to identify the Countess of Montgomery. And while the reader must have the tenacity of a literary Diana to appreciate what Mary Wroth's fantastical romance is about, experienced hunters in classical sources and mythology can find many disguised members of Jacobean nobility, a world hidden to the unknowing. Evidently our countess and her earl figure without scandal in the intermingled stories. Omitting the identity of the countess in encyclopedia entries with her name in the title cannot be called an oversight.

Connect other lacunae: Susan Vere's 25-year marriage to Philip Herbert produced five offspring who made it to maturity, including the only male successors in the Herbert-Pembroke line. I guessed that Wiltshire archives must offer illuminating documents attesting to their marriage and family experiences. Encouraged through DVS connections, I was led by a Pembroke family spokesperson to 'a lot of information held in the [Wiltshire] centre [in Chippenham] where ... she may be pleasantly surprised.' My archives researcher, who was well familiar with the Wiltshire centre, instead was surprised that the several references to the Countess of Montgomery yielded nothing but pedigree charts and family crests. By contrast, there were numerous references to and images of Lady Anne Clifford, Philip's second wife from their short-lived active marriage, through which there were no descendants.⁷

Lady Anne Clifford and Philip Herbert were married one year plus two days after Susan's death. Whatever the tone of friendship between Lady Anne and Lady Susan might have been, the two women were very well acquainted. They were near contemporaries – Susan being three years older – and both served in the court of Queen Anne. Lady Anne, unlike Susan (to all knowledge), kept an informative personal journal, parts of which have been issued in different editions, among them



The Countess of Montgomerys Urania

The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford, published in 1990 by a family descendant, David Clifford.⁸ Three disconnected details communicate deliberate omissions. The first part of the Clifford diary, 1603-1619, mentions Lady Susan only twice in passing, plus separate references to Lady Derby (Elizabeth Vere, Susan's eldest sister). Lady Anne speaks of a visit to Penshurst where 'Lady Wroth ... told me a great deal of news from beyond the sea.' There is no clue as to what she meant, but her earlier passages allude to court gossip and misunderstandings. More intriguing, Clifford refers twice to her 'Aunt Vavasour' with warmth. The footnote in this edition of the diary (p. 23) states: 'Anne Vavasour ... had caused a minor sensation by giving birth to an illegitimate child in one of the royal rooms at court in 1581. This did not however, prevent her from frequenting court circles some thirty years later, during Lady Anne's time.' Note, no mention of the father of this child: Edward de Vere. David Clifford tells us in his introduction, '... Lady Anne chooses her words with care for fear of the pages falling into the wrong hands. The whole of the year 1618 is unaccounted for in the surviving manuscript, and *family legend would have it that these entries were deliberately suppressed by a later member of the family.*'⁹ [my italics].

The idolized dowager Countess of Pembroke Mary Sidney Herbert – Mary Sidney Wroth's aunt and Susan's mother-in-law – had met or at least heard about Edward de Vere when she was age ten and he was still a ward of William Cecil, as Cecil and his wife for a time negotiated marriage between their daughter Anne and Philip Sidney. We know, however, that Anne married Edward de Vere, with famously unhappy consequences. But, despite the (understandable) antipathy of the politically all-powerful Cecils, enabling them to punish Edward in perpetuity, and the known contention between de Vere and Philip Sidney, it appears the two poets Edward de Vere and Mary Sidney Herbert remained lasting friends.^{10,11} His reputation did not dissuade her and her husband from negotiating a marriage between their son William and Bridget Vere, middle daughter of Edward and his late wife Anne Cecil. Although that negotiation failed, Philip Herbert and Susan Vere found each other without parental agency after both their fathers were dead. Extrapolating from snippets of letters quoted by Margaret Hannay,¹² Mary Sidney and the Robert Sidney family served in loco parentis to Susan, whose father was deceased and who never knew her revered mother except by accounts of others.

As the ODNB entry for Susan Vere might imply, Edward de Vere apparently is persona non grata for every contemporary writer about the Sidney family. Consider this example from *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle*, by Mary Ellen Lamb (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990): ‘While she [Susan Vere] may not have written poetry herself, both of her parents did; her mother Anne Cecil, author of four epitaphs for Susan Vere’s brother, provided an early model for female authorship. Thus, Vere’s family provided another “safe house” in which women could write...’ Granted, Lamb’s focus is on the emergence of female writers, but the slide over Edward de Vere is suspect given that Susan was age one when her mother died and there never was a Vere ‘safe house.’ What greater model of writer and poet did Susan have until age 16 than her father?

A touching but unsettling portrait of Susan emerges in brief passages throughout Margaret Hannay’s engrossing biography of Mary Wroth: *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (Routledge, 2010). Hannay expresses her indebtedness to Viscount de L’Isle, revealing his trust in giving her access to private family papers. Regrettably, we will never know more about Susan from Hannay, a fine scholar and sensitive storyteller who died in 2016. In her Lady Wroth book, she says little about Susan Vere’s ancestry, other than noting her parentage and Cecil relationships. But her citations from correspondence between Robert Sidney and his wife suggest she deduced more than she divulged about the relationship between Susan and Philip, that this storybook romance did not end happily ever after. In one instance, Hannay alludes to a period sometime between 1608 and 1612 when ‘something sad and mysterious happened to Susan, and Wroth tried to help her good friend.’ She quotes from an undated letter of Robert Sidney, explaining to his wife that he was delayed because ‘I was held until 12 of the clock by my Lord Treasurer [Robert Cecil] about this unlucky business of my Lady of Montgomery. At the last, it is resolved that she shall presently go to some house of my Lord Treasurer and not at all to my daughter, which I am very glad of.’ Hannay elaborates on this ‘tantalizing undated reference,’ saying ‘it sounds more politically sensitive than the various illnesses for which she “took physic” at the Wroth home.’¹³

In an earlier book – *Philip’s Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (Oxford UP: 1990) – Hannay’s introductory comments and acknowledgments are especially

relevant. Most significant, she says: ‘I would like to thank the Viscount De L’Isle, V.C., K.G. for graciously opening to me his collection of family papers at Penshurst Place, including the Davies Psalter.’ She cites private holdings of other families, noting the privilege of being able to see, but not always to reproduce, certain documents. Earlier in these pages she mentions ‘Most records of the Countess’s life, her extensive correspondence with her brothers Philip and Robert... and quite possibly some of her writings were destroyed by fire (Wilton burned in 1647 and Baynard’s Castle in 1666).’

Hannay offers a tantalizing end note to her chapter ‘Patroness of the Muses,’ describing Mary Sidney’s literary reputation, support to other writers, and presumed ambiguous view of Shakespeare – whose identity Hannay does not openly question. However, this long note must be quoted at length in order to deduce that Hannay recognized there was some veracity to the claim of friendship between the Countess and Edward de Vere: ‘A pleasantly eccentric theory [based on a collection of letters of William Cory, printed in Oxford, 1897] ... is that Mary Sidney wrote some of the plays of Shakespeare ...’ Hannay goes on to quote Gilbert Slater (from a work published by Cecil Palmer, 1931): ‘Slater also believes that she [Mary Sidney] ... became the literary executor for Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, devoting the rest of her life to ‘completing his unfinished work and adding to it.’ Hannay adds, in parenthesis, ‘(The Earl of Oxford, of course, wrote the majority of Shakespeare’s plays, according to Slater.)’¹⁴ Hannay is too careful a scholar to have inserted this endnote without serious consideration of its implications.

It takes us too far off course to delve into Philip Herbert’s character or public life, but beyond his unadmirable behavior (cited by contemporaries, by historians, and by his second wife, Anne Clifford), his personal role in King James’s court ordained that his world was intensely political and unsavory for the evidently private Susan, setting aside her friendship with Queen Anne. In cruel ways, it appears Susan’s marriage mirrored that of her mother. But any redeeming virtues Philip might have had could never compare to those of her extraordinary father. The overarching virtue for Philip was his family, a family who loved and protected her.

Conclusion

Lear to Kent (when Kent tries to calm Lear's anger towards Cordelia):

*Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most and thought to send my rest / On her kind nursery.*

Lear to Cordelia: ... *Hence, and avoid my sight!*

Imagination must fill in the lacunae if we are persuaded that Edward de Vere was Shakespeare and that daughter Susan was the driving force who saved his plays for posterity. Their father daughter relationship is not documented anywhere, except in fiction: Susan, transformed as Cordelia in the Folio version of King Lear, helplessly broke his heart. Yet one can imagine how, as a child, Susan enchanted and comforted him – playful and theatrical, cuddling her baby brother Henry, a happy family visiting ancestral Castle Hedingham, listening to his old tales, laughing at gilded butterflies (as Lear says). Yet she must have been very conflicted, recalling the tenderness shown her by her Godmother Queen Elizabeth (did Father love the Queen, or was he forever bitter?), trying to understand his desertion of her sainted mother and his animosity towards her loving grandfather and her uncle. She was shy of 17 when he died, a long relationship all considered.

‘Nothing,’ but to ‘obey you, love you, and most honour you’ is all that Cordelia (Latin: *heart's delight*) is able to give to her father King Lear, just as it was all that Susan could promise to her miserable, ridiculed and foolish father Lord Oxford. But that is not what Oxford (Lear) wanted from her. The ‘more opulent’ portion of his kingdom that he vainly offered was not a mirage of castles or forests, which he had already been forced to endow to her sisters, but *his words: his poetry, his plays!* In the dark period when Oxford was revising King Lear, his older daughters were wise to his ways; through endless family ordeals and humiliations, they were weary of humoring the old man. But Susan, a young teen, not yet married, torn with loyalty to her Cecil family, could not see her way to fulfil his expectations. A burden of the de Vere family blazon, ‘Nothing Truer than Truth’?

Ultimately, in a bold, ironic twist, Susan Vere, the Countess of Montgomery, dared to pass on to the world as much as she could of her father in the First Folio,

the collected plays of William Shakespeare. And, from all we can tell, she chose to leave the stage in silence.

End Notes

1. Ruth Lloyd Miller was mother of Bonner Miller Cutting
2. The three daughters of Edward de Vere and Anne Cecil are: Elizabeth, later Countess of Derby (1575-1627); Bridget, later Countess of Berkshire (1584-1631?); Susan, later Countess of Montgomery (1587-1629).
3. Alan H. Nelson is the author of the most recent ODNB entry for Edward de Vere, last published online 03 January 2008. The first, rather different version, that alerted James T. Looney to Edward de Vere was written by Sir Sidney Lee. The ODNB entry for Susan Vere cites under sources: A. H. Nelson, *Monstrous adversary: the life of Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford* (2003)
4. Roger Stritmatter, “Bestow How, and When you List...”: The de Veres and the 1623 Shakespeare Folio (*The 1623 Shakespeare First Folio: A Minority Report*, Special Issue of *Brief Chronicles*. Published by the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, 2016) 89-94. Stritmatter explains that “*Arxaiio-Ploutos* is a translation and amalgamation of several works detailing the customs and cultural traditions of the Gauls, Spaniards, and Italians...”
5. The poem is reproduced in the introduction to *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth – Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Josephine A. Roberts* (Louisiana State UP, 1998), 28. Roberts gives as her source, *The Poems of William Browne of Tavistock* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1894). Edwina Chase cites another work of Josephine Roberts in her ODNB sources: J. Roberts, ‘Critical Introduction,’ *The first part of the countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, ed. J. Roberts 2005. (The point is that this important tribute was readily accessible.)
6. B. M. Cutting, ‘A Countess Transformed: how Lady Susan Vere became Lady Anne Clifford’ (*Brief Chronicles*, 4, (2012-13), 117-34. Cited under ‘Sources. in the ONDB article.
7. It is relevant to note that in a later part of Lady Anne’s diary, 1620–1649, including the period when Anne is married to Philip Herbert, Anne makes no mention of the Van Dyck family portrait or posing for it. Surely such an experience with the famous artist would have been retained in the diary were it true or ever recorded.

8. David Clifford, editor, *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (UK: Sutton Publishing, 1990)
9. David Clifford, Introduction, xii.
10. The Robert Sidneys bore eleven children, the last a daughter named 'Vere', born in 1602 (d.1606). Since Susan did not enter the Herbert family until late December 1604, who would Vere have been named for other than Edward? While we have no evidence that Edward visited Penshurst, we know from various histories that Edward de Vere was a visitor at Wilton House as late as 1603. Countess Mary welcomed King James's forthcoming residency at Wilton House, saying 'the man Shakespeare is here.' This quotation comes from William Cory's printed diary:

Aug. 5. The house (Lady Herbert said) is full of interest: above us is Wolsey's room; we have a letter, never printed, from Lady Pembroke to her son, telling him to bring James I from Salisbury to see *As You Like It*; "we have the man Shakespeare with us."

11. See also, Bruce Johnson, *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 21, 2019, p.79:

De Vere's animus for Philip Sidney apparently bypassed Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, his wife Mary and their issue. Henry's Pembroke's players staged at least three of Oxford's plays: *The Taming of a Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (Brennan 94–5). Another indication that de Vere's enmity toward Sidney and Dudley did not attach to Mary Sidney Herbert is that Oxford gave her a flattering portrayal as Lady Olivia in *Twelfth Night*.

12. Margaret P. Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (UK: Routledge, 2010)
13. *Ibid*, p.138.
14. Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix – Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (Oxford UP, 1990) 249-50.

