

# Notes

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## Lear's Cordelia, Oxford's Susan, and Manningham's Diary

Oxfordians long ago recognized that the family relationships that dominate Shakespeare's *King Lear* reflect those of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, near the end of his life. Like Lear, Oxford was the father of three motherless daughters—Elizabeth, Bridget, and Susan Vere, his daughters by his first wife, Anne Cecil, the daughter of William Cecil, who died in 1588. The two eldest daughters married in Oxford's lifetime. Susan Vere did not marry until after her father's death in 1604. Like Gloucester, Oxford was also the father of two sons—a legitimate son and heir, Henry de Vere, later the 18th Earl of Oxford, by his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, and, as Charles Wisner Barrel first established, an illegitimate son, Sir Edward Vere, by Anne Vavasor.

No one would argue that Goneril, for instance, *is* Elizabeth Vere, the Countess of Derby, the wife of William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby. Goneril is a character in a play or, even more accurately, words on pages, a collection of speeches, not a person at all. Nonetheless, when Lear is driven to distraction by the treatment he receives from his eldest daughter, he alludes to a slander against Anne Cecil de Vere—a charge of adultery that, if credited, would have made Elizabeth Vere illegitimate—in a speech addressed to Regan in Act II, scene iv. "I'm glad to see your highness," Regan says. Lear responds:

Regan, I think you are. I know what reason  
I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad,  
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,  
Sepulchring an adultrous.

Similarly, no one would argue that Cordelia *is* Susan Vere, Oxford's youngest daughter. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing to the similarities of their situations when the play opens—and to the possibility that the character in the play is drawn in part, at least, from a living model. Professor Alan Nelson of the University of California at Berkeley has turned up evidence that increases the likelihood that Susan Vere served as a model for Shakespeare's Cordelia.

Nelson drew attention to a couplet recorded in the *Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple 1602- 1603* that was used as part of a courtly entertainment before the Queen in the summer of 1602 (see Nelson's Web site at [www.violet.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson](http://www.violet.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson)). Ladies of

the court drew lots and each gift was accompanied by a couplet. Manningham recorded the verses along with the names of the ladies who received them and the nature of the accompanying gifts. Manningham wrote:

Blank: LA[DY] Susan Vere  
Nothing's your lott, that's more then can be told  
For nothing is more precious then gold.

The drawing of lots at courtly entertainments was prearranged, the nature of the gifts and verses going to each participant not actually left to Fortune, as the fable of the entertainment indicated. Instead, the gifts and verses often represented in-jokes, a kind of commentary on the situation of the recipient.

Nelson drastically misinterprets the couplet drawn by Susan Vere. Thinking the language of tabloid headlines spotted at the checkout counter of a supermarket appropriate to a description of Elizabethan court life, Nelson rushes to the unlikely conclusion that this couplet shows that Oxford was recognized at court as a "deadbeat Dad," someone who failed to provide for his youngest daughter. I say this conclusion is unlikely because it ignores what the couplet says, who the author of the couplet was, and the occasion at which the couplet was publicly read. More than that, because of his misreading of the couplet (and his prejudice concerning the identity of Shakespeare), Nelson fails to hear in the couplet an echo of *King Lear*.

The couplet to Lady Susan Vere and the entire entertainment staged before the Queen at Harefield, the home of Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, in Middlesex, was written by John Davies, now best remembered as Sir John Davies, although his life as a poet was virtually over by the time he was knighted by King James. Davies, as I have shown elsewhere (see "The Singing Swallow: Sir John Davies and Shakespeare" in *ER* 1:1), was associated with Oxford and wrote an epithalamion consisting of ten sonnets for the marriage of Elizabeth Vere and William Stanley, Lord Derby.

The entertainment Davies wrote to welcome the Queen to Harefield was first published in the second edition of Francis Davison's *Poetical Rhapsody* (1608). It is there described as consisting of a mariner with a box under his arm which contained "all the several things following, supposed to have come from the Carrick." Some of the gifts distributed in this way to the ladies present were such things as a scissors case, a dial for telling time, and writing tables. The couplets that accompanied the gifts commented on them. But some of the ladies were to receive blanks, that is, verses but no gifts. The mariner described how this apparent misfortune was to be interpreted in his introductory speech: "Come ladies, try your fortunes, and if any light upon an unfortunate blank, let her think that fortune doth but mock her in these trifles, and meanes to pleasure her in greater matters."

Even if John Davies had been hostile to Oxford or his family—as he demonstrably was not—he would not have used this occasion to expose Oxford publicly as a “deadbeat Dad” and to humiliate his youngest, unmarried daughter, as she accompanied the Queen on a visit.

More importantly, though, the couplet clearly indicates that Lady Susan Vere is the recipient of a priceless gift—one that is both “more than can be told” and “more precious than gold,” a very special kind of “nothing” indeed. The couplet is in fact a riddle, awarding Susan Vere an inexpressible and precious gift that merely *appears* to be “nothing.” What could that be? A look at the text of *King Lear* unravels the riddle.

In the first scene of *King Lear*, the scene that precipitates the action of the play, a kind of drawing of lots take place. Lear divides his kingdom and announces the “dowers” or dowries to be awarded to his three daughters. He gives equal portions of the realm to Goneril and Regan and their respective husbands, Albany and Cornwall. He reserves the largest portion of the kingdom for his youngest daughter, the unmarried Cordelia. To be awarded this portion, she is to declare publicly her love for her father in terms that will please him—no doubt by renouncing marriage in her father’s lifetime. The dialogue, beginning with the words of Lear, runs:

	what can you say to draw A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
Cordelia:	Nothing, my lord.
Lear:	Nothing?
Cordelia:	Nothing.
Lear:	Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
Cordelia:	Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty According to my bond, no more nor less.
Lear:	How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little Lest you mar your fortunes.
Cordelia:	Good my lord, You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I Return those duties back as are right fit, Obey you, love you, and most honor you. Why have my sisters husbands if they say They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed, That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry Half my love with him, half my care and duty. Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, To love my father all.
Lear:	But goes thy heart with this?
Cordelia:	Ay, my good Lord.
Lear:	So young, and so untender?

Cordelia:        So young, my lord, and true.  
Lear:            Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower!

This dialogue solves the riddle of the couplet John Davies wrote for Susan Vere in 1602, when she fifteen years and unmarried, and recorded by John Manningham in his diary. Truth, a pun on her family name and a reference to the motto used by her father, *vero nihil verius*, or nothing truer than truth, is the “nothing” that is at once “more then can be told” and “more precious then gold.” Poor as he was, Oxford provided his youngest daughter with a priceless dowry—his name, truth, that is the point of Davies’s couplet and the kind of Elizabethan compliment and in-joke that the Queen and courtiers at Harefield would have understood and appreciated.

Unlike Cordelia, Susan Vere did not marry in her father’s lifetime. She eventually married Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, one of the “incomparable paire of brethren” to whom the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays was dedicated. Perhaps we only now begin to glimpse the actual value of the “nothing” Susan Vere inherited from her father, the truth contained in Shakespeare’s plays.

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## Lady Macbeth's Curds and Whey

**A**fter reading Macbeth’s letter telling of his meeting with the witches, Lady Macbeth famously soliloquises:

Glamys thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be  
What thou art promis’d: yet doe I feare thy Nature.  
It is too full o’th’ Milke of humane kindnesse,  
To catch the neerest way. (I.v.15-18)

“The milk of human kindness” has become proverbial, though there has been extensive discussion of just what Lady Macbeth meant by it. What has not been observed, however, is the way it suggests a pun in the following line. A straightforward paraphrase of “catch the nearest way” would read something like “take the most expedient route,” but the dense texture of Macbeth works everywhere against such reduction. If “way” puns on “whey,” as I suggest it does, the “milk” metaphor is extended, and we have a typical example of the reverberative effect of a strong metaphor.

In the late twentieth century we encounter milk on a daily basis, but have little, if anything, to do with whey. In the early seventeenth century it was almost the other way round. Dairy historian G.E. Fussell states that: “It is probably safe to say that our Tudor ancestors did not