

Note

AN EARLY REFERENCE TO PENELOPE DEVEREUX AS ‘STELLA’

In a recent article in *The Library*, I identified an anonymous dramatic fragment in Bodleian MS Douce 171—known as ‘Comedy of Stella and Alexis’—as the work of Arthur Wilson (1595–1652), who wrote several plays for the King’s Men in the 1630s.¹ I argued that ‘Stella and Alexis’ dated from an earlier point in Wilson’s career, during the period between 1614 and 1630 when he was working in the household of Robert Devereux, the third Earl of Essex. I further claimed that the play was likely intended for domestic entertainment rather than public performance, and that it therefore yields insight into both the compositional practices of a burgeoning playwright and the nature of early modern private theater.² But there is another aspect of this manuscript that warrants attention: the playwright’s decision to change the name of the female protagonist, who is called ‘Alice’ in the *dramatis personae* (fol. 48v) and the Argument (fol. 49r) but ‘Stella’ upon her first appearance (fol. 57r). Here I will suggest the possibility that the name ‘Stella’ represents a reference to Penelope Devereux, who was the aunt of Wilson’s employer, and who has long been recognized as the inspiration for Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, first published in 1591.³

The precise nature of Sidney’s affections for Devereux has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion, but even by the end of the sixteenth century the link between Stella and Penelope was clear. As Hoyt Hudson concludes through a wide-ranging investigation of available evidence, ‘informed people, from 1591 onwards,

thought or knew that Penelope Devereux was Sidney’s Stella’.⁴ The members of the Essex household in which Wilson lived and worked between 1614 and 1630 would almost certainly have been aware of this linkage, especially given their extensive familial connections to both Penelope and Philip. Although Penelope Devereux died in 1607, she was one of the children of Walter Devereux, the first Earl of Essex, and thus a sister of the second Earl. The third Earl’s mother, Frances Walsingham, was married to Philip Sidney until his death in 1586, after which she married the rebellious and ill-fated second Earl, with whom she had five children. The moniker ‘Stella’ would have had a specific, and significant, resonance in the Essex household, and Wilson’s revision may have been intended to appeal to its inhabitants.

In his autobiography, Wilson recalls of the years between 1621 and 1623: ‘Our publique Sports . . . were Masks or Playes. Wherein I was a Contriver both of Words & Matter. For as long as the good old Countesse of Leicester lived (the Grandmother to these noble Families) her hospitable Entertainment was garnisht with such . . . Recreations.’⁵ The Countess of Leicester was Lettice Knollys, Penelope Devereux’s mother, and Wilson here remembers contriving ‘Masks or Playes’ for her benefit and other members of the household. We cannot be certain that ‘Stella and Alexis’ was performed on one of these occasions—I do suspect that may have been the intention—but it nonetheless speaks to the internal, private purpose of at least some of Wilson’s dramatic endeavors during this period. Perhaps realizing that the play he was already writing would afford an allusion to a departed member of the household, Wilson may have decided to lightly reshape the play accordingly.

A further reference indicating the extent of that revision, and which strengthens the case for the allusion, occurs in the text of the play itself. As Stella’s father, Anthony, and her uncle, Critus, discuss her affection for Alexis, the lover who has abruptly cast her aside, Anthony makes a brief reference to a previous suitor: ‘was not sidney

¹ Daniel Blank, ‘Attributing Authorship to Bodleian MS Douce 171: A Seventeenth-Century Comedy by Arthur Wilson’, *The Library* xxiii.iii (2022), 346–72.

² See also Daniel Blank, ‘Modelled on the Master: The Origins and Authorship of a Seventeenth-Century Comedy’, *Times Literary Supplement* (11 November 2022).

³ See Hoyt H. Hudson, ‘Penelope Devereux as Sidney’s Stella’, *The Huntington Library Bulletin* vii (1935), 89–129 and, more recently, Katherine Duncan-Jones, ‘Sidney, Stella and Lady Rich’, in Jan van Dorsten, Dominic Baker-Smith, and Arthur F. Kinney (eds), *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend* (Leiden, 1986), 170–92.

⁴ Hudson, ‘Penelope Devereux as Sidney’s Stella’, 128.

⁵ Arthur Wilson, ‘Observations of God’s Providence in the Tract of My Life’, in Francis Peck (ed.), *Desiderata Curiosa*, 2 vols (London, 1732–5), II, 13.

more handsome in yo^r eye/then this boy she dotes on, his manlike face/was garded w^ha beard, but for this youth/he hath no heire nor confidence ins lookes' (fol. 51r). No further context is given, but the reference to Philip Sidney courting 'Stella' is clear—likely an effort on Wilson's part to provoke a particular comic reaction from his audience, an in-joke about a memorable episode in their family history. The humor may be amplified by the remark about Sidney's appearance, although its exact meaning is difficult to parse. The reference to Sidney as 'han[d]some' would seem consistent with Alan Stewart's observation that 'Philip's admirers and supporters often praised his physical appearance—the beauty of his face, the strength of his body'.⁶ Anthony's description of Sidney's face as 'manlike' is notable, given the fact that he was sometimes, according to Stewart, 'feminised'⁷; and it is interesting that he is described as having a beard since, as Andrew Hadfield writes, 'Philip remained beardless for a relatively long time'.⁸ Though lost to us, the dramatic value of the reference would have been dependent upon the knowledge—in some cases firsthand, in others probably second-hand—of the figure of Philip Sidney himself.

The reference also suggests that memory of this episode was still going strong as late as the 1620s, a full generation after Sidney's volume was published. Wilson joined a long list of literary figures who memorialized 'Stella' in writing: in verses composed upon the death of Penelope's second husband Charles Blount in 1606, the poet and dramatist John Ford remembered her as 'that glorious starre'; the writer and composer Thomas Campion, in a revised 1619 version of his Latin poem 'Umbra', spoke of 'the British star,

Penelope, who by her face will sometime kindle the loves of Astrophel' [*stella Britanna,/Penelope, Astrophili quae vultu incendet amores/Olim*].⁹ To be sure, Wilson's purpose would have differed from these authors: he sought not to venerate Penelope Devereux, nor to commemorate her beauty, but rather to capitalize on the story of Sidney's love for her through a couple of offhand references. Nonetheless, his manuscript does indicate the longevity of the story, and tells us that within the Essex household, the legend of Sidney and Stella may have outlived its principle characters.¹⁰

Moreover, if we accept that 'Stella and Alexis' was intended for domestic performance rather than the public stage, then the allusion to Penelope Devereux further illuminates the nature of these sorts of dramatic undertakings. Wilson clearly had aspirations toward the professional stage—he would later have his work performed by a leading London company—but here we witness him producing a 'recreation', a theatrical entertainment meant to appeal to a specific audience with a shared body of knowledge and experience. In his female protagonist he may have seen an opportunity to amplify that appeal, and in doing so produced a play which not only sought to entertain current members of the Essex household, but also attested to the legacy of a prominent member.

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⁶ Alan Stewart, *Philip Sidney: A Double Life* (London, 2000), 127.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Andrew Hadfield, *Lying in Early Modern English Culture: From the Oath of Supremacy to the Oath of Allegiance* (Oxford, 2017), 214.

⁹ See Hudson, 'Penelope Devereux as Sidney's Stella', pp. 104, 108.

¹⁰ Nor does the reference suggest that the attitude towards the affair was particularly negative, in contrast to its reception in Sidney's family a generation later: see the discussion of Anne Bradstreet's (a relation of Sidney) negative poetic portrayal in Hudson, 'Penelope Devereux as Sidney's Stella', pp. 108–110. Wilson's manuscript may also represent one of the earliest known references to the story in contemporary drama, although there is a scholarly tradition identifying the character of Penthea in Ford's *The Broken Heart* with Penelope Devereux: see *ibid.*, p. 106.