

## Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton



English, probably from the workshop of Marcus Gheeraerts; dated 1622

Oil on canvas

Elizabeth Vernon was born in 1572 and died in 1655. She was a celebrated beauty at the Court of Elizabeth I in her youth, and secretly married William Shakespeare's famous patron, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, in 1598.

She is shown here richly dressed in black velvet trimmed with jewels and pearls. Her underskirt is heavily embroidered with gold, and she wears a set of matching lace-trimmed ruff and cuffs. Her pearl-trimmed silk gauze headdress, held in place by a jewelled coronet, is wired to frame her face and has a fine veil attached at the back.

The Countess's aristocratic status is confirmed by the furnishings which are so prominently and carefully depicted in this life-sized painting. The lavishly embroidered chair and the matching cushion upon which she rests her hand are symbolic of high rank, but unlike 'The Kimberley Throne' there is no canopied 'cloth

of estate' to symbolize royalty. Instead, in a theatrical manner, two silk curtains with embroidered borders are swept back to reveal the Countess, who stands on a rare and precious imported oriental carpet. Most carpets like this one were used to cover tables at the time - only the very rich could afford to stand on them.

This type of portrait became fashionable in the first years of the 17th century. Two English artists were particularly associated with the style - William Larkin (died 1619) and Marcus Gheeraerts (1562-1636). This painting is not thought to be by Gheeraerts himself, but is probably from his workshop or by an artist trained there.

The serene pose and elaborate clothing suggest she was the epitome of Tudor nobility writes Alastair Dalton.

But the Imposing life-size portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Elizabeth I's maid of honour marks a little-known but altogether more colourful aide to the 17th century aristocrat.

Behind the finery lies a royal sex scandal and claims that Vernon bore a child to William Shakespeare. The £280,000 painting has been acquired by the Burrell Collection in Glasgow to complement its collection of Tudor furniture and carpets. It shows Vernon richly dressed in black velvet, trimmed with jewels and pearls, with her underskirt heavily embroidered with gold.

Vernon outraged the queen by having a clandestine four-year affair with Shakespeare's patron, Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, and secretly marrying him. Elizabeth I was so angry she imprisoned the couple.

Their daughter, Penelope, later married the second Baron Spencer, whose descendant, the ninth Earl Spencer, was the father of Diana, Princess of Wales and grandfather of Prince William. However, some historians have linked the lady-in-waiting with Shakespeare, claiming Penelope was his child and that Vernon was the "Dark Lady" referred to in the bard's sonnets.

Dr David Starkey, writer and presenter of the recent Channel 4 series on Elizabeth I, said: "Sex was very important in that period as a means of making alignments between different families, just like political alignments today. Up to a third of brides went to the altar pregnant and it would have been a catastrophe for Vernon if Southampton had not married her."

The 6ft Burrell portrait, which was painted in 1622, was purchased by the trustees in 1999- with a £140,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund - from a London gallery.