



The Devonshire Collection Archives

GB 2495 DF38

Material relating to marital dispute between Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury [Bess of Hardwick] and George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury

Administrative/Biographical History:

On 1 November 1567 Elizabeth St. Loe (née Hardwick) married, as her fourth husband George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury (c. 1522-1590), one of the richest and most powerful men in the north of England. At the time of their marriage Shrewsbury's property included the castles of Tutbury, Pontefract, and Sheffield, as well as a manor house at Sheffield and a lodge at Handsworth, hunting lodges at Tutbury and Worksop, and the converted monastic buildings at Rufford Abbey. Shrewsbury's union with Bess, which brought together two great fortunes, was cemented-at Bess's insistence-by the arranged marriages of four of their children: Gilbert Talbot, who became the seventh earl, wed Bess's daughter Mary, and Bess's eldest son, Henry Cavendish, wed Shrewsbury's daughter Grace.

In 1568 the queen designated Shrewsbury the keeper of Mary, queen of Scots, and the following year he and Bess received the Catholic queen at Tutbury. Mary remained in Talbot's custody until 1584, during which period she was moved on numerous occasions between Shrewsbury's various properties.

During the period of the Scottish queen's captivity, relations between the earl and countess steadily deteriorated. Bess repeatedly accused her husband of infidelities, including a probably unfounded charge that he had been intimate with Mary, queen of Scots. (This allegation may well have been designed primarily to damage Mary, with whom Bess-despite an initial period of friendship-had fallen out.) The earl, whose debts were mounting as a result of the expenses incurred as gaoler to the Scottish queen, chafed at the amount of time and money Bess devoted to the renovations at Chatsworth. In 1584 Bess separated from her husband and retired to Chatsworth.

At the time of their separation Shrewsbury attempted to claim Chatsworth as his under the terms of their marriage settlement. A legal battle ensued, which was finally resolved in 1587 when the courts awarded Bess both Chatsworth and a sizeable income from her husband.

Edited extract from Elizabeth Goldring, 'Talbot [née Hardwick], Elizabeth [Bess] [called Bess of Hardwick], countess of Shrewsbury, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). By permission of Oxford University Press.

Custodial History:

No information about the whereabouts of these letters before purchase is known.

Source of Acquisition:

DF38/1, 3-8 were purchased from a Sotheby's sale in December 1981. There is no further information about the provenance of these letters in the sale catalogue.

DF38/2 was purchased by J Lees Milne as a gift for the Devonshire family, and DF38/9 was purchased from a third party in 1990.

Although not a true archival collection, DF38/2 and 9 had been placed together with DF38/1, and 3-8, in the 1990s, and when this this group was catalogued in 2017 it was decided to keep this correspondence by/relating to the Shrewsburies in one place.

Scope and Content:

DF38/1-2 are two pieces of correspondence, the first by the earl to the countess wishing her better health; the latter a letter from Bess to Sir Thomas Cornwallis in relation to marriage arrangements between Bess's son, Charles Cavendish, and Kitson's daughter, Margaret.

DF38/3-7 is correspondence from various parties involved in the Shrewburys' marital dispute including the earl and countess of Shrewsbury, Queen Elizabeth I and Francis Walsingham. DF38/8 is a collection of five pieces of Shrewbury's notes relating to the case, including memoranda and draft letters for the Queen.

DF38/9 is a letter from Grace Cavendish (wife of Henry Cavendish) to Bess' lady in waiting Mrs Elizabeth Digby.

Conditions Governing Access:

The collection is open for consultation. Access to the archive at Chatsworth is by appointment only. For more information please visit: <https://www.chatsworth.org/art-archives/access-the-collection/archives-and-works-of-art/>.

Conditions Governing Reproduction:

Copies of material in the archive can be supplied for private study and personal research purposes only, depending on the condition of the documents.

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System of Arrangement:

Material has been arranged chronologically.

Extent:

8 items and 1 file (containing 5 pieces)

Language of Material:

English.

Preferred citation:

Devonshire MSS, Chatsworth, DF38/1 (etc).

Related Material:

See Hardwick Manuscripts (GB 2495 HM) for various early Cavendish household accounts from the 16th and 17th centuries; Hardwick Manuscripts Additional (GB 2495 HM/ADD) for legal material relating to Bess' and her children's marriages; and some further correspondence of Bess survives at Chatsworth in the Hardwick Drawers Collection (see specifically GB 2495 H/143).

DF38/1	Letter from George, Earl of Shrewsbury, to Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury	[1570s]	Item
	<p>George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury writes to his wife, Bess (countess of Shrewsbury), to say that he is sorry to hear she is unwell and he thinks it long since he has seen her. He plans to travel to London soon.</p> <p>Description from https://www.bessofhardwick.org</p>		
DF38/2	Letter from Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury to Sir Thomas Cornwallis	24 November [1582?]	Item
	<p>Bess (countess of Shrewsbury) writes to Sir Thomas Cornwallis, thanking him for 'finishing and perfecting of the books between my brother Sir Thomas Kitson and me' (in relation to marriage arrangements between Bess's son, Charles Cavendish, and Kitson's daughter, Margaret).</p> <p>Description from https://www.bessofhardwick.org</p>		
DF38/3	Instructions by Queen Elizabeth I, signed by Burghley, Walsingham and Sir Thomas Bromley, orders relating to the material dispute between the Shrewsburys	8 May 1586	Item
DF38/4	Letter from Queen Elizabeth I to George, Earl of Shrewsbury	12 May 1586	Item
	<p>Intervening in the marital dispute between Elizabeth and George, earl and countess of Shrewsbury, urging them to reconcile their differences and for Shrewsbury to obey the settlement agreed by the courts.</p>		
DF38/5	Letter from Francis Walsingham to Shrewsbury, denying any partiality in the marital dispute	17 June 1586	Item
DF38/6	Letter from Francis Walsingham to Shrewsbury, regarding the marital dispute	7 July 1586	Item
DF38/7	Letter from Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, to George, Earl of Shrewsbury	4 August 1586	Item
	<p>Bess (countess of Shrewsbury) writes to her husband, George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, regarding offences he has accused her of having 'committed since her Majesty reconciled us'.</p> <p>Description from https://www.bessofhardwick.org</p>		
DF38/8	George, Earl of Shrewsbury's papers relating to the material dispute with Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury's	1586	File

- 1) Draft letter by Shrewsbury to the Queen, with revisions by another party, arguing that his wife had used devious means to win the case.
- 2) Another draft of the same letter.
- 3) Copy of a letter by Shrewsbury to the Queen complaining about Henry Beresford his 'mortal enemy'
- 4) Memo to the Queen regarding the deed of gift to William and Charles Cavendish.
- 5) The Earls answer to the articles set down by under the hand of the Lord Chancellor.

DF38/9	Letter from Grace Cavendish to Mrs Elizabeth Digby	c.1590	Item
	Grace Cavendish was the wife of Henry Cavendish. Elizabeth Digby was lady-in-waiting to Bess of Hardwick.		