

SUMMARY: The undated letter below, written by Mary, Queen of Scots, to Queen Elizabeth, is filled with gossip which Mary alleges was relayed to her by Elizabeth Talbot (1527?-1608), Countess of Shrewsbury, better known as Bess of Hardwick. The Countess' husband, George Talbot (c.1522-1590), 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, was jailer to Mary, Queen of Scots, from February 1569 until September 1584. The Countess thus had ample opportunity to supply Mary with gossip gleaned from her own infrequent visits to court and from letters and visits from friends and relatives. The general nature of many of the allegations in the letter is confirmed in a letter of 11 May 1573 written by Gilbert Talbot (1552-1616) to his father, the Earl of Shrewsbury, and in one particular instance, the mention of an otherwise obscure individual named 'Rolston' in Gilbert Talbot's letter lends credibility to an allegation made by Mary concerning Rolston (see Talbot Papers, vol. F, f. 79).

Mary's letter is noteworthy for its allegations that Queen Elizabeth engaged in sexual indiscretions with the Earl of Leicester (unnamed in the letter, but clearly alluded to in several passages), Sir Christopher Hatton, Francois (1554-1584), Duke of Alencon and Anjou, and Alencon's agent, the French courtier Jean de Simier. Simier came to England in January 1579 to woo Queen Elizabeth for his master by proxy. He visited the Queen at Richmond while staying for 7 days at Syon. Alencon himself arrived in England in August 1579, and stayed for 12 days at Greenwich.

Although Oxford is mentioned in the letter, it is significant that there is no allegation that the Queen engaged in sexual indiscretions with him. It is merely stated that Oxford was afraid to reconcile with his wife for fear of losing the favour he hoped to gain from the Queen by 'making love' to her. At the time, the phrase meant courtship, as in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*:

HORTENSIO Now shall my friend Petruchio do me grace,
And offer me disguised in sober robes
To old Baptista as a schoolmaster
Well seen in music, to instruct Bianca;
That so I may, by this device, at least
Have leave and leisure to make love to her
And unsuspected court her by herself. (I, ii, 131-7)

Many of the persons named in the letter were closely related. Lady Margaret Douglas (1515-1578), Countess of Lennox, was the mother of the murdered Henry Stuart (1545/6-1567), Lord Darnley, the first husband of Mary, Queen of Scots. Lady Lennox' younger son, Charles Stuart (1555/6-1576), Earl of Lennox, married Elizabeth Cavendish (1554?-1582), the daughter of the Countess of Shrewsbury and her second husband, Sir William Cavendish (1508-1557). They had one child, Lady Arabella Stuart (1575-1615), who after her mother's death in 1582 was brought up by her grandmother, the Countess of Shrewsbury. Because of this complicated web of family relationships, Lady Lennox was the mother-in-law of both Mary, Queen of Scots, the Earl of Shrewsbury's prisoner, and the mother-in-law of the Countess of Shrewsbury's daughter, Elizabeth Cavendish.

As the letter indicates, the Countess of Shrewsbury was for a time a close friend of Lady Lennox. The Countess of Shrewsbury was thus in the odd position of being a close friend of the mother of the murdered Lord Darnley, as well as in close proximity to, and apparently on friendly terms with, Darnley's widow, Mary, Queen of Scots, who was allegedly complicit in his murder. The 'Lady Talbot' mentioned in the letter was Gilbert Talbot's wife, Mary Cavendish (1557-1632), the Countess of Shrewsbury's daughter by her second marriage to Sir William Cavendish.

Besides its description of the Queen's sexual indiscretions, the letter contains many other derogatory allegations. The Queen is said to have used insulting words to Sir Christopher Hatton and to Thomas (c.1544-1590), Lord Paget, to have given a box on the ear to a member of the Killigrew family, to have broken Mistress Scudamore's finger, and to have given another servant, waiting on her at table, a blow with a knife. She is alleged to have betrayed matters of state to Simier, to have been prodigal to three or four of her favourites but a niggardly and ungrateful miser to all others, and to have exerted unfair control over the marriages of members of the nobility. A number of these allegations accord with remarks about the Queen attributed to Oxford in the Howard/Arundel documents.

The translation below is by Frederick Chamberlin, who states that it was made from the original manuscript at Hatfield House (see Chamberlin, Frederick, *The Private Character of Queen Elizabeth* (London: Bodley Head, 1921). Where the translation below departs from Chamberlin's, the changes are shown in square brackets.

The transcript in French below is taken from Murdin, William, *A collection of state papers relating to affairs in the reign of Queen Elizabeth from the year 1571 to 1596 transcribed from original papers and other authentic memorials never before published, left by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and repositied in the library at Hatfield House* (London: William Bowyer, 1759) pp. 558-60.

A Letter from the Queen of Scots to Queen Elizabeth

LM: From the original.

Suivant ce que je Vous ay promis et avez depuis desire, je vous declare ores, qu'aveques regret, que telles choses soyent amenees en question, may tres sincerement et sans auqune passion, dont jappelle mon Dieu a tesmoing, que la Comptesse de Schreusbury madit de Vous ce qui suit au plus pres de ces Termes. A la plus part de quoy je proteste avoir respondu, reprenant la ditte dame de croire ou parler si lisientieusement de Vous, comme chose que je ne croyois point, ni croy a present, congnoissant le Naturel de la Comptesse et de quel esprit elle estoit alors poulsee contre vous.

According to what I promised you and you have since desired, I declare to you now, with regret that such things should be brought into question but very sincerely and without any anger, which I call my God to witness, that the Countess of Shrewsbury said to me about you what follows as nearly as possible in these terms, to the greater part of which I protest I answered, rebutting the said lady for believing or speaking so licentiously of you as a thing which I did not at all believe and do not now believe, knowing the disposition of the Countess and by what spirit she was then urged on against you.

Premierement, qu'un, auquel elle disoit que (p.559) vous aviez fait promesse de mariage devant une Dame de vostre chambre, avoit couche infinies foys avecques Vous avec toute la licence et privaulte qui se peut user entre Mari et femme; Mays qu'indubitablement Vous nestiez pas comme les autres femmes, et pour ce respect cestoit folle a touz ceulx qui affectoient vostre Mariage avec Monsieur le Duc d'Anjou, d'autant qu'il ne ce pourroit accomplir; et que Vous ne voudriez jamais perdu [sic for 'perdre?'] la liberte de Vous fayre fayre l'amour et auvoir vostre plesir tousjours avecques nouveaulx amoureux, regretant ce, disoit elle, que l'ous [sic for 'vous?'] ne vous contentiez de Maister Haton, et un aultre de ce Royaulme; mays que pour l'honneur du pays il luy faschoit le plus, que vous aviez non seulement engage vostre honneur avecques un estrangier Nomme Simier, l'alant trouver de nuit en la chambre dune dame, que la dicte Comtesse blasmoit fort a ceste occasion la, ou Vous le baisiez et usiez avec luy de diverses privaultes deshonestes; mays aussi luy revelliez les segretz du Royaulme, trahisant vos propres Conseillers avvesques luy: Que Vous vous estiez desportee de la mesme dissolution avec le Duc son Maystre, qui vous avoit este trouver une nuit a la porte de vostre chambre, ou vous laviez rancontre avec vostre seulle chemise et manteau de nuit, et que par apres vous laviez laisse entrer, et qu'il demeura avecques Vous pres de troys heures.

Firstly, that one to whom she said you had made a promise of marriage before a lady of your chamber had lain [numberless] times with you, with all the licence and familiarity which husband and wife can use to one another, but that undoubtedly you were not as other women, and for this reason all those who desired your marriage with the Duke of Anjou, considering that it could not be consummated, were foolish, and that you would never wish to lose the liberty of making love and gratifying yourself with new lovers, regretting this, said she, that you would not content yourself with Master Hatton and another of this kingdom. But on account of the honour of the country that which vexed her the most was that you had not only compromised your honour with a foreigner named Simier, going to find him at night in the chamber of a lady whom the said Countess greatly blamed in this affair, where you kissed him and indulged in divers unseemly familiarities with him, but also you revealed to him the secrets of the kingdom, betraying your own counsellors to him. That you had disported yourself with the same dissoluteness with the Duke his master, who had been to find you one night at the door of your chamber, where you had met him with only your nightdress and dressing gown on, and that afterwards you had let him enter and that he had remained with you nearly three hours.

Quant au dict Haton, que vous le couriez a force, faysant si publiquement paroître l'amour que luy portiez, que luy mesmes estoit contraint de s'en retirer, et que Vous donnastes un soufflet a Kiligreu pour ne vous avoir ramene le dict Haton, que vous avviez envoiay rappeler par luy, s'estant desparti en chollere d'aveques vous pour quelques injures que luy auviez dittes pour certains boutons dor qu'il auvoit sur son habit.

As for the said Hatton, that you ran him hard, showing so publicly the love that you bore him that he himself was constrained to withdraw from it, and that you gave a box on the ear to Killigrew for not having brought back the said Hatton to you after he had been sent to recall him, having departed in anger from you for some insulting words you had said to him because of certain gold buttons which he had on his coat.

Qu'elle auvoit travaille de fayre espouser au dit Haton, la feu Comtesse de Lenox sa fille, mays que de creinte de Vous, il ne osoit entendre; que mesme le Comte d'Oxford nosoit ce rappointer aveques sa famme de peur de perdre la faveur qu'il esperoit recepvoir par vous fayre l'amour: Que vous estiez prodigue envers toutes telles gens et ceulx qui ce mesloient de telles mesnees, comme a un de Vostre Chambre Gorge, auquel Vous avviez donne troys centz ponds de rante pour vous avvoir apporte les nouvelles du retour de Halton: Qu'a toutz aultres Vous estiez fort ingrate chische, et qu'il ni avoit que troys ou quatre en vostre Royaulme a qui Vous ayez jamays faict bien: Me conseillant, en riant extremement, mettre mon filz sur le rancs pour vous fayre l'amours, comme chose qui me serviroit grandement et metroit Monsieur le Duc hors de quartier; qui me seroit tres prejudisable si il i continuoit;

That she had worked to bring about a marriage between the said Hatton and the late Countess of Lennox's daughter, but that for fear of you he dared not consent. That even the [Earl] of Oxford dared not reconcile himself with his wife for fear of losing the favour which he hoped to receive by [making love to you]. That you were lavish towards all such people, and those who lent themselves to such practices, as to one of your chamber, [Gorges], to whom you had given three hundred pounds [of rent] a year for having brought you the news of the return of Hatton. That to all others you were very ungrateful and niggardly, and that there were only three or four in your kingdom to whom you had ever been generous, advising me, while laughing unrestrainedly, to place my son in the ranks of your lovers as a thing that would be of very great advantage to me, and would put Monsieur the duke out of the running, in which he would be very disadvantageous to me if he continued.

et lui repliquant, que cela seroit pris pour une vraye moquerie, elle me respondit que Vous estiez si vayne et en si bonne opinion de vostre beaute, comme si vous estiez quelque deesse du ciel; qu'elle prandroit sur la teste de le vous fayre croire facilement et entretiendroit mon filz en ceste humeur; Que Vous preniez si grand plesir en flateries hors de toute rayson, que l'on vous disoit, comme de dire, qu'on ne vous osoit par foys regarder a plain, d'aultant que vostre face luysoit comme le Soleil: Qu'elle et toutes les aultres Dames de la Court estoients contreintes d'en user, et qu'en son dernier voyage vers Vous, Elle et la feu Comtesse de Lenox parlant a Vous n'osoient s'entregarder l'une et l'autre de peur de s'eclater de rire des cassades quelle vous donnoit [sic for 'donnoit?'],

me priant a son retour de tancer sa fille quelle n'avoit jamais sceu persuader de fayre le mesme;

And answering to her that that would be taken for unfeigned mockery, she replied to me that you were as vain and thought as highly of your beauty as if you were a goddess of heaven, that she would become responsible for making you believe it readily, and for receiving my son in that humour. That you took such great pleasure in flatteries beyond all reason that you were told for example that at times one dared not look full at you because your face shone like the sun. That she and all the other ladies of the court were constrained to use such flatteries, and that in her last visit to you, she and the late Countess of Lennox, while speaking to you, dared not look at one another for fear of bursting out laughing at the tricks she was playing on you, begging me on her return to rebuke her daughter, whom she had never been able to persuade to do the same,

et quant a sa fille Talbot, elle s'assuroit qu'elle ne faudroit jamais de vous rire au nez; la dicte dame Talbot lors quelle vous alla fayre la reverance et donne le ferment comme l'une de voz servantes, a son retour imediatement, me le comtant comme une chose fayte en moquerie, me pria de l'accepter pareill, may plus ressent et entier vers moy, du quel je feiz long tems refus; may a la fin a force de larmes je la laissay faire, (p.560) disant quelle ne voudroit pour chose du monde estre en vostre service pres de vostre personne, d'autant quelle auroit peur que quand seriez en cholere ne luy fissies comme a sa cousine Skedmur, a qui vous auviez rompu un doibt, faciant a croire a ceulx de la court, que cestoit un chandelier qui estoit tombe dessusz; et qu'a une aultre vos servant a table [sic for 'table'?] auviez donne un grand coup de cousteau sur la mayn; Et en un mot, pour ces derniers pointz et communs petitz raportz, Croyez que vous estiez jouee et contrefaite par elles comme en commedie entre mes femmes mesmes; ce qu'apercevant, je vous jure que je deffendis a mes femmes ne ce plus mesler.

and as for her daughter Talbot, she was sure that she would never fail to laugh in your face. The said Lady Talbot, when [she] went to make her courtesy to you and to take her oath as one of your attendants, immediately on her return, relating it to me as a thing done in mockery, begged me to allow a similar ceremony, as she has more feeling and fealty for me, which I for a long time refused but in the end, influenced by her tears, I let her have her way, saying that she would not for anything in the world be in your service near your person, that she would be afraid that when you were angry you would do to her as you did to her cousin Skedmur [=Scudamore], whose finger you had broken, making those of the court believe it was a candlestick which had fallen on it, and that to another who was serving you at table you had given a violent blow on the hand with a knife, and in a word as to these last points and common gossip, you were played and imitated by them as in a comedy amongst my women themselves perceiving which, I swear to you I forbade my women to take part any more.

Davantage, la dicte Comtesse ma autrefois advertie que Vous voulliez appointer Rolson pour me fayre l'amour et essayer de me deshonerer, soyt en effect ou par mauvais bruit, de quoy il avoit instructions de vostre bousche propre: Que Ruxby veint ici, il i a environ

VIII ans, pour atempter a ma vie, ayant parle a vous mesmes, qui luy auviez dit quil fit ce a que Walsingham luy commenderoit et dirigeroit.

Further the said Countess warned me formally that you wished to order Rolston to make love to me and try to dishonour me, either in reality or by evil report, about which he had instructions from your own mouth. That Ruxby came here about eight years ago to attempt my life after having spoken to you, who had told him that he should do what Walsingham would command and direct him.

Quant la dicte Comtesse poursuivoit le mariage de son filz Charles avecques une des niepees du Milord Paget, et que daultre part Vous voulliez lavoit par pure et absolue auctorite pour un des Knoles, pour ce quil estoit vostre parent; elle crioit fort contre vous, et disoit que cestoit une vraye tyrannie, voulant a vostre fantasie enlever toutes les heritieres du pays, et que vous aviez indignement use le dit Paget par parolles injurieuses; mays qu'enfin la Noblesse de ce Royaume ne le vous soufrisoit pas mesmement, si vous adressiez a telz aultres quelle connoissoit bien.

When the said Countess was promoting the marriage of her son Charles with one of the nieces of Lord Paget, and you on the other hand wished to keep him by complete and absolute authority for one of the Knollyses because he was related to you, she complained bitterly against you, and said that it was nothing but tyranny, your wishing at your caprice to carry off all the heiresses in the country, and that you had treated the said Paget disgracefully with insulting words, but that finally the nobility of this kingdom would not permit it to be repeated to the same degree if you addressed yourself to certain others whom she knew well.

Il y a environ quatre ou sing ans que Vous estant malade et moy ausi au mesme temps, elle me dit, que vostre Mal provenoit de la closture d'une fistulle que vous aviez dans une jambe; et que sans doute venant a perdre voz moys, Vous mourriez bien tost, s'en resjouissant sur une vayne imagination quelle a eue de long temps par les predictions d'un nomme Jon Lenton, et d'un vieulx liuvre qui prediroit vostre mort par violence, et la succession dune aultre Royne, quelle interpretoit estre moy, regretant seulement que par le dit liuvre il estoit predit que la Royne qui vous deubroit succeder ne regneroit que trois ans, et mouroit comme vous, par violence, ce qui estoit respresente mesme en peinture dans le dit liuvre, auquel il y avoyt un dernier feuillet, le contenu duquel elle ne ma jamais voulu dire. Elle scait elle mesme que jay tousjours pris cela pour une pure follie, mays elle fesoit bien son compte destre la premiere aupres de moy, et mesmement que mon filz epouserait ma niepce Arbela.

About four or five years ago when you [were ill, and I also] at the same time, she told me that your malady came from the closing of a fistula that you had in one leg, and that no doubt losing your monthly period you would very soon die, rejoicing in a vain fancy which she has long had through the predictions of a certain Jon Lenton, and of an old book which predicted your death by violence and the succession of another Queen, whom she interpreted to be me, regretting only that by the said book it was predicted that the queen who would succeed you would reign only three years, and would die like you by

violence, which was represented in a painting in the said book in which there was a last leaf, the contents of which she never would tell me. She herself knows that I have always held this as pure folly, but she laid all her plans well to be the first of those about me, and even that my son should marry my niece Arbella.

Pour la fin je vous jure encores un coup sur may foy et honneur que ce que desubz est tres veritable; et que de ce qui concerne vostre honneur, il ne mest jamays tombe en l'entendement de vous fayre tort par le reveller; et qu'il ne ce scaura jamays par moy, le tanant pour tres faulx.

[To end], I swear to you once more on my faith and honour that what is above is quite true, and that as to what concerns your honour, it has never come into my mind to wrong you by revealing it, and that it will never be known through me, holding it as quite false.

Si je puis avoir cest heur de parler a vous, je vous diray plus particulierement les noms, tems, lieux et aultres sirconstances pour vous fayre congnoistre la verite et de cessi et d'aultres choses que je reserve, quant je seray tout a fayct asseuree de vostre amitie, laquelle comme je desire plus que jamays, aussi si je la puis ceste foy obtenir, vous neustes jamays parente, amy, ny mesmes subject, plus fidelle et affectionnee que je vous seray. Pour Dieu asseurez Vous de celle qui vous veult et peult Servir. De mon lit forcant mon bras et mes douleurs pour vous satisfayre et obeir. Marie R.

If I can have that good fortune of speaking with you. I will tell you more particularly the names, times, places and other circumstances to let you know the truth both about [these] and about other things which I reserve when I am quite assured of your friendship, which as I desire more than ever also if I can this time obtain it, you never had relative, friend or even subject more faithful and loving than I shall be to you. For God be certain of her who wishes [to and can serve you. From] my bed, compelling my arm and my sufferings to satisfy and obey you. Marie R.