

“My evil favoured writing”: Uglyography, Disease, and the Epistolary Networks of George Talbot, Sixth Earl of Shrewsbury

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ABSTRACT George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, is infamous among historians and paleographers of sixteenth-century England for the thousands of documents he has left in his horrible handwriting, or *uglyography*. Taking this unanimously bemoaned situation as its point of departure, this study uses a selection of Shrewsbury's surviving letters to explore what more his handwriting can tell us when considered in conjunction with the letters' contents and the Elizabethan sociocultural interpretations of poor handwriting and disease. In particular, “gout” (the term Shrewsbury himself uses for his infirmity) is described as a paleopathological condition that had significant implications not only for legibility but also for the management of Shrewsbury's epistolary networks and the discourse of illness found throughout his correspondence with his second wife, Bess of Hardwick, as well as other period figures, specifically Burghley and Elizabeth I. **KEYWORDS:** early modern correspondence networks; sociopolitical meanings of scribal and holograph letters; gout and arthritis in the Elizabethan era; paleography; disease as metaphor; William Cecil, Lord Burghley

☞ **GEORGE TALBOT (CA. 1522–1590)**, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, was one of the most powerful and well-connected figures in Elizabethan England: a landed magnate and military officer in the north, wealthy industrialist, principal custodian of Mary Queen of Scots during her English captivity, fourth husband of “Bess of Hardwick” (dynast and builder of Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire), and, certainly not least, Elizabeth I's own “faithful Shrewsbury.” Despite such distinctions, Shrewsbury is probably best known to sixteenth-century scholars for his infamously bad handwriting, or what he himself referred to as “my evil favoured writing,” commonly attributed to “gout.”¹ An early account in the *Sheffield Independent Press* (January 30, 1875) deemed Shrewsbury's holograph “the despair of all transcribers”; more recent historians and paleographers

1. *Calendar of State Papers, Relating to Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots*, vol. 5, 1574–1581 (Edinburgh, 1907), letter no. 274, p. 242.

have continued in a similar vein: "surely the most illegible scribble to survive from the Elizabethan period";² "the only thing which historians cannot forgive him . . . atrocious . . . the most indecipherable holograph perpetrated by any leading Elizabethan figure";³ and "all but impossible to read."⁴ The hand of his second wife, known to posterity as "Bess of Hardwick" (née Elizabeth Hardwick and hereafter referred to as Bess) puts his to shame: James Daybell observes that Bess's "writing skills compare favorably with the atrocious hand of her last husband, George Talbot."⁵ Shrewsbury was not alone among his peers in having bad handwriting; indeed, it seems that aristocracy, gout, and bad handwriting quite literally went hand in hand in sixteenth-century England (a socio-cultural dimension that will be discussed later in this essay).⁶ Even so, it is reasonable to say that Shrewsbury's holograph was, on the whole, one of the ugliest. What we might then refer to more aptly as Shrewsbury's gouty *uglyography* has no doubt contributed to the lack of any proper biography or edition of his correspondence—or even that of Bess (until recently).⁷ However, as proved by the now completed transcriptions for *The Letters of Bess of Hardwick: The Complete Correspondence c.1550–1608*, with time and effort, Shrewsbury's handwriting is completely decipherable.⁸

Originally, it was my own work on the *Letters of Bess* project that led me to the questions explored in this essay. For in the process of reading and transcribing letters to, from, and about Shrewsbury, "gout" quickly emerged as a central theme in relation to not only the physical writing of letters and the employment of scribes but also the discursive content of the letters themselves. This led me to explore the immense corpus of Shrewsbury's own writing (i.e., beyond letters involving Bess), at which point I became aware of how ubiquitous the issue of the gouty hand(writing) was in other facets of his correspondence as well.⁹ It seems that for his contemporaries, too, Shrewsbury was often associated with gout.

2. G. Batho, *A Calendar of the Talbot Papers in the College of Arms* (London, 1971), xii.

3. Patrick Collinson, *The English Captivity of Mary Queen of Scots* (Sheffield, U.K., 1987), 18.

4. Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 48.

5. James Daybell, *Women Letter Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford, 2006), 2n4.

6. Stewart and Wolfe, *Letterwriting*, 36. For other scrawling hands from the period, see (for example) facsimile letters 43 (from the Earl of Leicester) and 51 (from Francis Bacon) in Felix Pryor, *Elizabeth I: Her Life in Letters* (London, 2003).

7. Despite its being recorded only in the writing of Robert Southey at the beginning of the nineteenth century, "uglyography, n." is listed in the online *OED*, last modified December 2004, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/208565>.

8. The deciphering of Shrewsbury's hand has been a collaborative effort: in particular, I am grateful to Doctors Alan Bryson and Alison Wiggins for their paleographic skills. The web edition containing all known letters to and from Bess (along with background essays and a paleography tutorial), *The Letters of Bess of Hardwick: The Complete Correspondence c.1550–1608*, is openly available at <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/>. A number of holograph letters from Shrewsbury (to correspondents other than Bess) were transcribed previously in E. Lodge, *Illustrations of British History, Biography, and Manners, in the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth, and James I, exhibited in a series of original papers, selected from the manuscripts of the noble families of Howard, Talbot, and Cecil*, 3 vols. (London, 1791). A brief comparison of these transcriptions suggests that Lodge's versions match my own.

9. The surviving archival record for Shrewsbury's vast Elizabethan social network—including letters to and from all of the period's most powerful figures, but also more familiar correspondence with

In this respect, to convert Shrewsbury's letters into modern regularized type is an aid to the modern reader; however, it is also fundamentally to transform them out of their original state. The purpose of this essay is to return to the original manuscripts in order to consider the implications of Shrewsbury's hand(writing) for his social networking. That he endured years of chronic pain has been a touchstone for biographers of Bess, one they repeatedly look to for explanations of the couple's relationship. All the standard accounts posit his "gout" as an important contributing factor in what supposedly amounted to a virtual mental and physical collapse in the mid-1580s, one that left him irrational and paranoid and that provides the background to his famously vicious letters to Bess following their estrangement.¹⁰ Despite the tendency to return repeatedly to this theme, no one has made a systematic attempt to consider the larger implications of Shrewsbury's bodily condition. Therefore, after briefly describing his handwriting, this essay focuses on both the negative and positive impacts of "gout" on epistolary communication. It considers the difficulties presented by the disabled hand when it came to managing threads of correspondence; drawing on research into Bess's letters, it further addresses the couple's joint epistolary activities and demonstrates how Shrewsbury exploited Bess's literacy in moments of manual infirmity. In contrast, I argue that disability also offered the earl positive opportunities for affective rhetorical display and social bonding at a distance during his long physical absence from court. It also permitted him to exhibit the aristocratic power associated with the "patrician's malady," power manifest in the earl's own uglyography and implied by his control over the hands of scribal servants. First, however, a word about paleopathology.

~ Paleopathology and Uglyography

It is not surprising, given its overwhelming and perhaps exaggerated amplification of Shrewsbury's knightly military prowess—and all the manual strength and skill that implies—that Shrewsbury's tomb effigy at Sheffield Cathedral does not depict him with deformed hands. Nor can we say with certainty which disease afflicted him.¹¹ Today's understanding of the pathological nature of rheumatoid conditions and the distinction between gout and arthritis began to take shape only in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹² Therefore, what Shrewsbury repeatedly refers to as "gout" in his correspondence could very well have been another rheumatoid condition such as

family members and servants—is spread throughout manuscript repositories in Britain and the United States, including (for example) the Folger Shakespeare Library, Lambeth Palace Library, and The National Archives—to name but a few of the larger holdings. The exact number of letters is not known.

10. For example, D. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick, Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast* (London, 1999), 112, 123.

11. Criminal graphologists have attempted diagnoses based on handwriting of general bodily conditions, as have scholars, for example in a highly unconvincing analysis of Shakespeare. See R. W. Leftwich, "The Evidence of Disease in Shakespeare's Handwriting," in *Tenements of Clay: An Anthology of Medical Biographical Essays*, ed. A. Sorsby (London, 1974), 86–96.

12. Roy Porter and George Sebastian Rousseau, *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), 181.

rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis; we must also consider the fact that, as Roy Porter and George Rousseau have noted, “retrospective diagnosis risks sacrificing historical understanding of past medical mentalities.”¹³ Today gout is diagnosed and distinguished from other rheumatoid conditions by measuring uric acid levels in the blood and/or observing bodily deformation. Therefore, unless we excavate his bones, any definitive retrospective diagnosis of Shrewsbury is impossible;¹⁴ in what follows (unless otherwise noted), I will continue to use the word “gout” to refer to the earl’s disease in the catchall early modern sense.

Whether Shrewsbury’s condition was gout, rheumatoid arthritis, or both, it would have deformed his hands (fig. 1). In the case of gout, a buildup of uric acid and possible crystal deposits (tophi) around the joints would have physically altered the makeup of Shrewsbury’s hand and could have actually broken the skin, resulting in open wounds (which would partly explain the use of a cerecloth described elsewhere in his letters).¹⁵ In the case of arthritis, swelling was also a possibility, as well as severe contortion of the joints and fingers (as in the second hand in fig. 1). In either case, then, the stiffness that resulted from pain and the actual physical changes to the joints in the hand would have greatly reduced Shrewsbury’s range of movement and his ability to hold a pen, with significant implications for his holograph script.

Eventually the inflammatory condition in his hands (and other parts of his body) resulted in the earl losing the ability to write much at all. He closes one of his latest holograph letters, in 1586 (to his son Gilbert), with “I end being wery of screbelynge.”¹⁶ This weariness seems by then to have been a constant condition, for there are almost no holograph letters from the mid-1580s until his death in 1590. Even as early as 1580, in asking his father to sign a certificate for Sir Thomas Stanhope, Gilbert chides him to “be careful not to blott this.”¹⁷ The toll of Shrewsbury’s condition and his severe disability in writing is materialized in an exceptionally late example of a holograph postscript of a letter to Burghley, written in 1589, which is otherwise completely scribal. At the end, he signs his name with a very stiff hand, accidentally smearing the ink on the page as he does so, and then writes apologetically, “benge more than halfe lame of my handes” (fig. 2).¹⁸

The specific form of Shrewsbury’s hand was influenced as well by the prevailing scripts of his time. In the broadest, most abstract typological terms, late sixteenth-

13. *Ibid.*, 10.

14. As far-fetched as this might seem, such an excavation was recently done for the sixteenth-century Grand Dukes of Florence: G. Fornaciari et al., “The ‘Gout’ of the Medici, Grand Dukes of Florence: A Paleopathological Study,” *Rheumatology* 48 (2009): 375–77.

15. Shrewsbury exploited physicians who were sent from court to attend to the many and recurrent infirmities of his custodial charge, Mary Queen of Scots. In 1581 he writes to Baldwin on one such an occasion: “this gentyman doctor gylbard was sent from hur majestie [...] I haue spoken to him to send me doune byskett brede wych is nott made by common potekares [i.e., apothecaries] & Also Aserkloth [i.e., a cerecloth] to use for my gouthe”; Lambeth Palace Library, Talbot Papers (hereafter LPL Talbot), MS 3198, fol. 105.

16. *Ibid.*, fol. 345.

17. LPL Talbot, MS 3199, fol. 37.

18. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 423.



FIGURE 1. Advanced stages of a gout-afflicted hand (top) and arthritic hand (bottom). Detail from J. M. Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on Senile and Chronic Diseases* (London, 1881), plate 1. Wellcome Library, London.

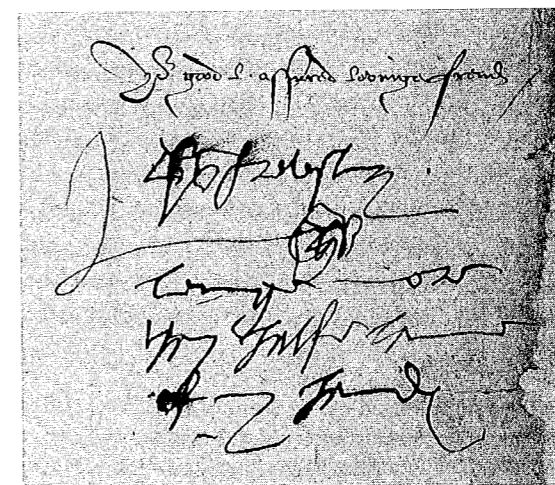


FIGURE 2. One of the latest examples of holograph writing by Shrewsbury—to Burghley in 1589. Lambeth Palace Library, Talbot Papers (hereafter LPL Talbot), MS 3198, fol. 423.

century England had two scripts: italic and secretary. Italic, the precursor to modern-day romanized scripts—originally used in the universities—was increasingly being used by members of the gentry, particularly courtiers, in Elizabethan England and is characteristic of the writing left by period figures such as Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex,¹⁹ and William Cecil, Lord Burghley (also a sufferer from gout, with less dramatic paleographic repercussions).²⁰ Secretary, on the other hand, was older, having come to England via France during the late fourteenth century originally as a “business hand,”²¹ then used ubiquitously throughout much of the sixteenth century. Like most professional scribes, clerks, and secretaries employed by the sixteenth-century ruling classes, the individuals enlisted by Shrewsbury to write his scribal correspondence wrote in a well-formed and typical secretary script, as it was prescribed in this period. Likewise, Shrewsbury’s own writing, while certainly not uniform with the professionals’, is influenced most visibly by secretary forms. Some of the more distinct secretary features of his writing appear in most instances of <h>, <c>, <r>, <s>, and <g> graphs (and for the last two, this is also true of the majuscule graphs of his signature, <G Shrewsbury>). For example, take the closing and postscript from a holograph letter to Bess in 1580 (fig. 3).

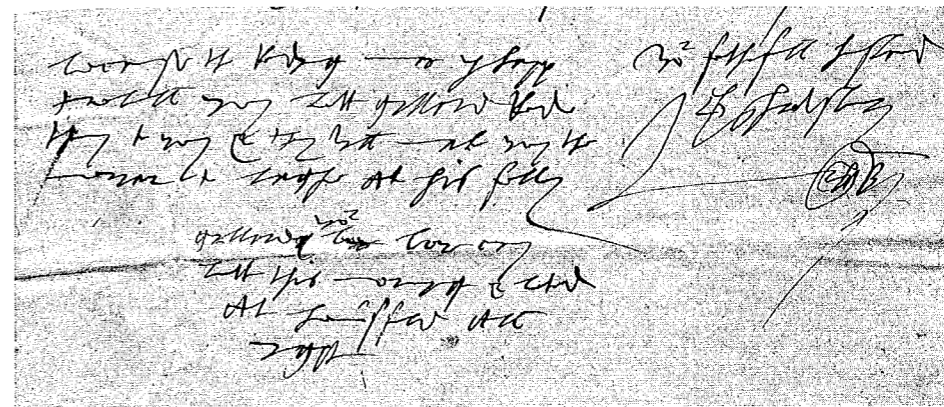
This sample is for the most part representative of all the holograph writing that survives from Shrewsbury. However, there is some archival evidence to suggest that his handwriting got worse over time. Among the very few surviving letters that predate his succession to the earldom of Shrewsbury in 1560, there are several written to his father (then the fifth earl) in the late 1550s. In one holograph letter, from November of 1559,²² the then Lord Talbot writes to his father to report on news from the court regarding the young Queen Elizabeth I. Notably, the handwriting in this letter is clearer than the notorious scrawl in letters of the 1570s and ’80s (as in fig. 3). The overall appearance of the earlier writing is generally more rounded, tighter, and controlled, whereas later on, Shrewsbury seems to lose the ability to complete graphs by adding vertical strokes, closing lobes, or adding the rounded compartments to graphs such as <a>, <o>, and <e>. In particular, the final <e> on many words in the letter of 1559 is more clearly a secretarial <e>, with a looped top compartment, whereas in the later letters the final as well as medial <e> tends to lose its graphic integrity, becoming a thin straight line jutting out from the preceding letter. Also, <a> later becomes a thin, crammed graph, often just a descending vertical line, whereas in the letter to his father, Shrewsbury’s <a> graphs contain a fully visible, rounded (single) compartment and tail. Furthermore, the minim graphs (particularly <u>, <n>, and <m>) which are almost always completely flattened into an indistinct horizontal line in the later letters (again, see fig. 3), are in the earlier letter more often distinguishable as individual

19. For a fuller discussion of Essex’s handwriting, see Roy Davids, “The Handwriting of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex,” *The Book Collector* 37 (1988): 351–65.

20. Italic, deemed easier to learn than secretary, was also the script taught to women in the later sixteenth century.

21. Jane Roberts, *Guide to Scripts Used in English Writings up to 1500* (London, 2008), 211.

22. LPL Talbot, MS 3196, fol. 49.



because the Redyng may perhapes
trobell you lett gylbard Rede
them to you & they wyll make you the
meryar to laghe At his folly²³

yor fethefull husband
G Shrewsbury

gylbardees ^yor^ boy boy cam
butt this mornyng & weted
At hensfeld All
nyght

FIGURE 3. Detail from Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick, 1580, Folger Shakespeare Library (hereafter FSL), MS X.d.428, fol. 103, with transcription. Image reproduced by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

graphs made with vertical strokes of the pen. Tom Davis has described how in handwriting “vertical movements . . . are produced by flexion and extension of the fingers,” whereas “lateral movements are produced by flexion of the hand, pivoting at the wrist.”²⁴ Therefore, it would seem that disease—gout, arthritis, or both—affected Shrewsbury’s fingers most acutely, while the wrist remained relatively mobile. This is further suggested by an analysis of other graphs, in addition to minims, for which Shrewsbury was forced to produce vertical movement. Particularly for graphs that required a dexterous combination of vertical and lateral movement, there seems to be a lack of coordination between the wrist and the fingers. For example, graphs with lobes (i.e., a rounded compartment requiring a combination of vertical and lateral movement), such as miniscule <a> (mentioned above), , and <p>, are produced by

23. It is worth noting that the “folly” Shrewsbury speaks of here is not to do with the reading of his letters, but “how onest Averen [how honest a virgin]” Mary’s agent Bagshaw makes her out to be in his own letters, which Shrewsbury has intercepted, “made sport at,” and forwarded on to Bess.

24. Tom Davis, “The Practice of Handwriting Identification,” *The Library*, 7th ser., 8, no. 3 (September 2007): 251–76 at 262.

Shrewsbury in a hard down-up movement, and in many cases the lobes are lost altogether (for example, the in "because" in fig. 3 looks more like an <l>). This likely indicates that he compensated for the immobility of his fingers with otherwise abnormal movement of the arm while writing. "Healthy" writing practice does not typically include arm movement in the production of individual graphs, as writing this way is much more difficult and jerky when compared to a successful wrist-and-fingers combination.

These idiographic features of Shrewsbury's holograph writing are very similar to those present in the degenerated holograph of Elizabeth as described by Henry Woudhuysen, who writes of the queen's later handwriting: "What has changed is that the pen has a tendency to move horizontally for some words and letters with almost no vertical movement."²⁵ Such idiosyncratic ambiguity—which does not occur in scribal examples written for Shrewsbury—was a direct result of the embodiment of the writing process. That is, embodiment literally, in the sense that human handwriting is made possible by the corporal mechanics of the hand itself: not the abstract "hand" of paleography, analogous to "script," but the hand belonging to a body susceptible to the vicissitudes of pathological influence. In this vein, it is perhaps not mere coincidence that the same disease that was the most influential factor of embodiment for Shrewsbury's writing, what he refers to as his "gout," is also thought to have troubled Elizabeth later in life.

In the following sections, I will further illustrate the resonance of the hand and handwriting by examining the ways in which Shrewsbury's condition had implications that went beyond issues of readability.

~ "Lest I be stayed by my enemy"

Epistolary communication in sixteenth-century England was an indispensable means for the literate classes to create rhetorical presence when physically absent from an addressee: through letters, in Jonathan Goldberg's words, "mouths have become hands."²⁶ The letter was crucial in maintaining news networks, managing household estates in marriages that often saw spouses in different locations, and (certainly not least of all) exerting influence at the increasingly centralized Tudor court—for, as Gary Schneider notes, "when physical presence was impossible, it was imperative that connections to the center of power be maintained through letters."²⁷ Very much a part of this sociopolitical sphere, Shrewsbury spent a considerable amount of time at court before his marriage to Bess in 1567, accruing a rapid succession of honors early in life and gaining recognition as one of Elizabeth's most powerful and loyal courtiers.²⁸ It also seems that Shrewsbury remained at court during his first marriage to Gertrude

25. Henry Woudhuysen, "The Queen's Own Hand: A Preliminary Account," in *Elizabeth I and the Culture of Writing*, ed. P. Beal and G. Ioppolo (London, 2007), 1–27 at 16.

26. Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford, Calif., 1990), 131.

27. Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark, Del., 2005), 38–39.

28. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick*, 54.

Manners;²⁹ one of the earliest surviving letters from Shrewsbury (then Lord Talbot, around thirty-seven years old and already the father of several children) was written from court on court news, to his father, the fifth earl, in 1559. Immediately following his succession to the earldom in 1560, Shrewsbury was made a Knight of the Garter (1561) and soon after promoted (from captain-general) to joint lieutenant-general in the north and then lord lieutenant of the counties of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire. Described by Patrick Collinson as "the nearest thing in that age to the modern tycoon,"³⁰ Shrewsbury was also a voracious business adventurer who dealt in farming, shipping, mining, and glassworks. This multitude of roles made constant correspondence with a large number of people absolutely central to his daily life—a fact reflected in the thousands of letters to and from Shrewsbury spread throughout archival depositories.

Bess's experience in managing households, as well as her literacy (i.e., her ability to read and write letters while her husband was away), would have allowed Shrewsbury to be at court following their marriage in November 1567. And in fact, two of the first letters that survive from Shrewsbury to Bess were written from court in early December 1568. In one, Shrewsbury writes, "it is every nyght so late before I goo to my bedd beinge at play in the preve chambar at premyro [primerio, a popular card game in the sixteenth century] where I have loste almost a hundereth poundes & laked my sclepe [i.e., lacked my sleep]."³¹ He was thus comfortable in leaving Bess to manage estates in his absence, and at this point benefited from in-person privy access to the innermost courtly circles. Yet such placement was not to last, for that same year Elizabeth charged the costly "honor" of hosting the captive Mary Queen of Scots to Shrewsbury (and Bess). Elizabeth's decision to do so was due to a combination of factors, including the earl's moderate Protestantism, his immense material assets, and the remoteness of his multiple northern estates, which were relatively safe from kidnapping or escape plots. Effectively, this meant Shrewsbury's own exile from court.

One of the fundamental strictures of this duty was that Shrewsbury should remain with his charge at all times. Therefore, for the long period of the custody, beginning in February 1569 and lasting until August 1584, Shrewsbury effectively lost his ability to travel and represent himself in person: Collinson notes, "the worst part of the deal, from Shrewsbury's point of view, was that what he always called his 'charge' entailed virtually permanent rustication from the Court, and something like house arrest on his own property."³² That Shrewsbury felt captive right alongside the Scots Queen is evidenced (for example) in a letter to Burghley in June of 1573, in which he refers to himself as "a prisoner" at Sheffield.³³ Furthermore, Shrewsbury's rheumatic condition affected his legs, which compounded his alienation from court by frequently

29. Shrewsbury and Gertrude were married in London on April 28, 1539, and had six children together.

30. Collinson, *English Captivity*, 21.

31. FSL, MS X.d.428, fol. 86.

32. Collinson, *English Captivity*, 20.

33. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), SP 53/9, fol. 8.

making it impossible for him to travel, even on the rare occasion when he received royal permission to do so. The implications this had for his sociopolitical connections were enormous, and he felt great anxiety on occasions when he felt it was necessary to represent his suits in person (e.g., to request money from Elizabeth to feed Mary and her retinue). In a letter to Burghley in 1582, Shrewsbury requests permission to come to court, writing, “now my helth sarves me so well to see & do my dute to hur majestie [...] my desyre is it [i.e., permission to come to court] maye wthin this three wekes [be granted] lest I besteid by my enemy Agenst my wyll” (the “enemy” is gout).³⁴ And in 1586 he wrote to Gilbert, “truly my syknes is nott more grevus than grefe of mynde is that my lamenes shuld so fawle oute At this tyme whan I shuld have done hur heyne sarves,” stating that, “rather than It shuldb^e thought Any want in me to performe my sarvus,” if the queen demanded it, “I wyll cum thow I dye by the waye.”³⁵ In the end Shrewsbury visited court only once between 1571 and 1584, which, as Elizabeth Goldring observes, “had disastrous effects on his reputation and on any future chances of preferment. When he finally took up his seat on the privy council in 1584, he found that rumours were circulating to the effect that he had been disloyal to the English queen by taking up Mary’s cause.”³⁶

Stuck in the north of England, Shrewsbury would have relied almost completely on his ability to communicate and create “presence” (e.g., at court) through epistolary means. He did, of course, have access to scribes to write for him; but the scribal-holograph distinction was not only a matter of convenience or practicality: it was imbued with sociocultural meaning. In particular, writing oneself added significantly to the legitimacy, privacy, and/or personal affect of a letter, whereas the use of a scribe was more impersonal, formal, and (due to the necessary use of a third party) public. Having this option then—to switch between holograph and scribal registers of communication—was a crucial part of a letter writer’s communicative repertoire. But it also presupposes the physical ability to write oneself; faced with paralyzing pain and stiffness in his hand, this option was not always open to Shrewsbury. In this sense, one reading of his correspondence suggests that his illness was detrimental to his control over his social networks.

“I cannot write myself”: Holograph Writing and Social Networks

That the loss of the ability to write could equal a loss of “voice” is observable at various levels in Shrewsbury’s correspondence, including that with Bess. The ratio of scribal to holograph letters from Shrewsbury to Bess is very low in comparison with other

34. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 126.

35. *Ibid.*, fol. 345. To make matters worse, the gout of Shrewsbury’s court contacts could also hinder his influence. In a letter from John Kniveton to Shrewsbury written in 1570, it is reported that “Mr Secretorie [i.e., William Cecil] is still very sore troubled wth the gowte, w^{ch} hyndereth yor Lord’s sute.” W. S. C. Copeman documents the significance of gout in the political career of Burghley, explaining the crucial events it influenced and caused him to be absent from, in *A Short History of the Gout and the Rheumatic Diseases* (Berkeley, Calif., 1964), 59–64.

36. ODNB, s.v. “Talbot, George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury (c.1522–1590), nobleman,” by E. Goldring, last modified May 2015, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26928>.

addressees. While there are two scribal copies of letters to Bess following their estrangement in the 1580s, only one *sent* scribal letter survives. Almost certainly, the earl’s closest family was capable of reading his handwriting; apart from matters of privacy and/or secrecy, the fact that Shrewsbury chose to write to Bess under his own (albeit frequently painful) hand is related to period ideologies that linked the exterior *hand* to the inner *heart*.³⁷ Shrewsbury repeats the trope, often found in early modern letters, to Bess in 1568, when he closes an affectionate holograph letter, “as the pene wrytes so the harte thynkes that offe All erthely Ioyes that hath happenyd vnto me I thanke god chefleste for you.”³⁸ Yet inscribing a direct link to the inner man was not always possible, and the surviving scribal letter to Bess, written in October of 1580, contains explicit reference to the implications of Shrewsbury’s inability to write for the actual content of the letter:

Wyef I haue received yor severall *lettres* and am at this present so troubled wth paine and stifnes in my hand that I cannot write my self and therefore deferre the answeringe of the same w^{ch} I will fully do so sone as it shall please god to restore the streinth of my hand that I may write w^{ch} I hope will be very shortly[.]³⁹

“Answeringe” here refers specifically to writing a holograph letter. Therefore, this scribally composed message communicates simply receipt and an explanation for not “fully” responding to the content of Bess’s original letter (which does not survive). Given the circumstances, the material deferred could have been to do with (for example) sensitive information regarding Mary Queen of Scots, or the discovery of household spies (a very real threat that preoccupied Shrewsbury throughout Mary’s custody). Interpreted literally, then, the first part of this letter indicates that, at times of acute pain, Shrewsbury’s diseased hand prevented him from having some types of correspondence. If one reads on, this letter also offers interesting insights into the way in which Shrewsbury and Bess worked together to regulate the epistolary channels of their households:

I haue returned vnto you my Lord of Leycesters *lettre* and praye you when you write againe let his Lord vnderstand that because I perceaved by his last *lettre* vnto me it was doutfull how sone I shuld obteyne graunte of payment I haue staied funder writinge vnto him therin havinge no dout of his Lordship’s good remembrance & funderance therof when occasion might serve[.]

This section of the letter clearly illustrates the advantage (perhaps even necessity) of both marital partners’ being literate for managing households that saw such an

37. William W. E. Slights, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2008), 87, 163–64.

38. FSL, MS X.d.428, fol. 86.

39. *Ibid.*, fol. 104.

incredible amount of epistolary activity. James Daybell's survey work has shown that it was common for women to seek advice in writing business (as opposed to familiar) letters, but he also explains that "it is not uncommon to find examples of women who gave assistance to men in the writing of their letters."⁴⁰ For Shrewsbury, Bess's literacy (both reading and writing) was a great asset when gout struck, as demonstrated in the letter cited above. Instead of replying himself to a letter from Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, which Bess sent him, he returns it and asks her to respond for him due to the infirmity of his hand. From Bess's perspective, this type of joint epistolary activity would have greatly promoted her own social networks. Even before her marriage to Shrewsbury, Bess was a well-connected woman; however, it is perhaps not completely coincidental that the first surviving letters to and from figures such as Leicester, Burghley, and indeed Elizabeth only appear in what survives of Bess's correspondence following her marriage to Shrewsbury. In this way, while Shrewsbury's ability to keep up with the writing in his own network waned, Bess's influence in that network would have increased—a mutually beneficial situation for husband and wife.

Epistolary delay attributed to illness is also evident in letters to the earl's London steward, Thomas Baldwin; in a brief, purposefully cryptic letter from May 1582, Shrewsbury writes from Sheffield using a scribe, "Now I am troubled some what *with* the gowte in my hand that I cannot well wryte you shall here further from me shortly and will looke to theis matters yow writt of as well as I can."⁴¹ But although Shrewsbury's disease was undoubtedly real, we must also recognize that professions of illness could be used rhetorically: as Gary Schneider notes, "since illness prohibited immediate response, actual or protested maladies were inscribed [in early modern letters] to account for the epistolary delays."⁴² At the time the scribal letter of 1580 to Bess was written, the usual time constraints for Shrewsbury would have been compounded by a number of stresses: the financial strain of supporting the Queen of Scots and her retinue, delays and unexpected costs connected with construction of Workshop Manor (happening at the same time Bess was constructing Chatsworth), demands made by his wife and their children, as well as the major "Glossopdale dispute" between Shrewsbury and a number of his tenants who, much to Shrewsbury's disgrace, had brought their complaints to surprisingly sympathetic ears at court.⁴³ Despite these justifications for using a scribe, it is clear from other correspondence with Baldwin that Shrewsbury did prefer to encrypt particular messages in his own handwriting. For example, there are a number of letters to Baldwin written partly by a scribe and partly by Shrewsbury himself, wherein the holograph section often qualifies information in the scribal. In a letter to Baldwin in 1581, Shrewsbury's scribe writes for him, "I am well

40. James Daybell, "Ples acsep thes my skrybled lynes': The Construction and Conventions of Women's Letters in England, 1540–1603," *Quidditas* 20 (1999): 207–23 at 216.

41. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 141.

42. Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 67.

43. For more on Shrewsbury's dispute with his Glossopdale tenants, see S. E. Kershaw, "Power and Duty in the Elizabethan Aristocracy: George, Earl of Shrewsbury, the Glossopdale Dispute and the Council," in *The Tudor Nobility*, ed. G. W. Bernard (Manchester, 1992), 266–95.

recouered of my gowte," and then Shrewsbury adds a lengthy postscript offering more sensitive information relating to "this lade my charge."⁴⁴ Use of scribes, then, was not dictated by illness only but also by intention and content. If Shrewsbury was physically unable to fully relate sensitive information, this could have caused troublesome delays. When he wrote despite the pain involved, however, illness and its graphic trace in the earl's uglyography could serve to further cement social bonds and emphasize the significance of the holograph gesture.

~ "Our joint enemy": Uglyography and Social Bonding

Just as health formulae shaped discourses of care and remembrance (of love, duty, and friendship), illness also structured early modern epistolary communication; Schneider observes, "bodily indisposition seemed to define an epistolary theme of sorts."⁴⁵ In this vein, comments on Shrewsbury's gouty hand(writing) appeared throughout his own correspondence, and in contemporary letters written *about* him. As an example of the latter, Sir Henry Lee writes to Shrewsbury's son, Gilbert, in August of 1582 regarding improvement in the earl's gout, noticed during a recent visit to Sheffield.⁴⁶ In turn, Gilbert writes letters to Bess reporting news of Shrewsbury's health, both as he knew it to be and as it was rumored to be at court.⁴⁷ Bess's own son (from her second marriage to Sir William Cavendish), Charles Cavendish, writes (ca. 1585?), "I vnderstand my lord of Shrewsbury hath bin more sharply handeled with the gout but now is at good ease."⁴⁸ And while letters from Bess before their estrangement are lacking, it is clear from Shrewsbury's letters to her that she did ask specifically after his hand: in a letter of 1580, Shrewsbury writes to her, "I thanke you for causenge gylbard to wryt to know how my hande dothe."⁴⁹ Of course, in addition to any genuine empathy, public interest in the health of an influential individual might be driven by selfish concerns, since the shifts in power that often followed a magnate's death could benefit the socially and politically connected. Years before he did die, rumors were flying; for example, Charles Cavendish writes to Bess in 1587 how "Heare [at court] was a weake agoe a very great brutt [i.e., rumor] of my Lord of Shrewsbury's death and that his payn of the goutt tooke him."⁵⁰ In this way, much of the discourse surrounding and defining Shrewsbury as a figure in his own time had to do directly with his disease(s)—a reality he would have shared with other leading figures from the period, notably Burghley and Elizabeth. In turn, this community of shared suffering helped make disease, and specifically gout, a significant means of social bonding between those at the center of power.

44. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 95.

45. Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 67.

46. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 363.

47. Sheffield Archives, MD 6279.

48. FSL, MS X.d.428, fol. 4.

49. *Ibid.*, fol. 103. Bess was ill at the time and therefore had their son Gilbert Talbot (from Shrewsbury's first marriage) write for her.

50. Chatsworth House, Devonshire, MSS, H/143/16 (HL/2).

Burghley, like Shrewsbury, was a longtime sufferer of a rheumatic condition referred to by him and his contemporaries as "gout." Given his high status, he was frequently approached by friends, physicians, and hawkers with purported remedies for his infirmity. Shrewsbury sent Burghley many suggestions and enclosures aimed at easing his discomfort, such as "oyle of stags blud, for I am strongly persuaded of the rare and great vertu thereof. I know it to be a most safe thyng, yet some offence there is in the smell thereof."⁵¹ And for his part, Burghley frequently asked after Shrewsbury's condition, sometimes via others: in a letter to Shrewsbury in 1573, Baldwin relates that Burghley asked after his master's gout.⁵² That Shrewsbury thought much of Burghley, and that the two shared some affective affinity, is reflected in the earl's reference to him as "my fathar."⁵³ Bess clearly believed only Burghley could appeal to Shrewsbury on her behalf once her marriage broke down. She wrote him frequently, noting in a letter from 1587 that "I know your Lordship hath euar ben his beste frend."⁵⁴ In addition to the practical care offered by remedies enclosed with letters, exchanges between Shrewsbury and Burghley with regard to illness were central to the mostly textual performance of this "friendship."

There are numerous instances of the personal, affective significance of the diseased holograph in Shrewsbury's correspondence with Burghley—wherein, somewhat ironically, uglyography became a positive sign of writing as a (literally and/or rhetorically) painful labor of love. For example, in a letter to Burghley in May of 1578, Shrewsbury excuses himself for not writing more with his own hand, beginning, "my good lord Althow my ill nebur the gout & this evyll harde weddar nyppes me in my hande so as I can nott wryte yett my fethfull Affeccion & good wyll to yor Lord so caryes me Away that I forgett my grefe"; then, after several lines, he closes, "benge the furst lettar I wrytt this fortnyght wt my one hande I am forsed to end."⁵⁵ Here, as in the scribal letter to Bess discussed earlier, Shrewsbury remarks on his inability to write *in the act* of writing. In the letter to Bess, he mentions it because he could not answer her with his own hand. In the letter to Burghley, it explains his being "forced" to cut his writing short (once he has remembered his duty) due to overwhelming pain. Apologies for not writing more with his own hand continue in a slightly later letter to Burghley in January 1579, written upon recovery from an attack of gout: "I wold oftare [i.e., more often] haue vesetyd yor Lord wt my screbelynge but that I haue bene trobelyd wt my olde enemy butt nowe thanke god I Am Rydd offe At this presente."⁵⁶ Telling here is the verb *visit*, as it suggests how Shrewsbury's hand(writing) took the place of his phys-

51. Copeman, *Short History of the Gout*, 62. Stag's blood may well have been a "family secret," as following the sixth earl's death there is mention of it as an enclosure to a letter sent to Gilbert, seventh Earl of Shrewsbury (who also suffered from "gout") in 1594. LPL Talbot, MS 3199, fol. 771.

52. LPL Talbot, MS 3206, fol. 629.

53. Regarding the father figure in Elizabethan families and the analogues it provided for political structures, see A. Wall, *Power and Protest in England 1525-1640* (New York, 2000), 81-96.

54. TNA, Shrewsbury Papers, State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth I, SP 12/207/31.

55. LPL Talbot, MS 3206, fol. 921.

56. *Ibid.*, fol. 997.

ical presence before an addressee. Shrewsbury greatly valued return "visits" from letters in Burghley's hand; in 1573 he writes from Sheffield:

[I] doo thanke yor Lordship for Rememberenge me nott withstandenge I here summe tymes by gylbard talbott [Shrewsbury's son] of yor Lordship yet wold it well satesfye me to have At leste every fortnyght ones as yor lesare & helthe maye beste suffar Afewe lynes of yor owne hande it wold comforte Apresonar wychange to be nowe & than Remembered of his so dere frende[.]⁵⁷

And again, in line with tropes linking the heart and hand (discussed above in relation to Bess), Shrewsbury writes to Burghley in his final year of life: "if my hand war answerable to my hart I wold enlarg my letter, with soch abundance of thanks and offers of service, as your Lordship shuld be combred with a long readyng."⁵⁸ Since both men understood one another's condition, scribal letters came to implicitly signify the influence of illness (instead of impersonality or formal distance): "And so beinge very sorye that I see not yor Lordship's hand at the *lettre* wherby I coniecture [conjecture] the blowe *you* haue receaved of that our common adversarye is grevous."⁵⁹ In this way, a context-specific understanding of illness came to encode the use of scribes with a particular meaning while also allowing for comment and concern as part of what seems to have been the principal discourse of friendship between Shrewsbury and Burghley.

In several instances, references to the hand's freedom or "liberty" evoke a masculine, militaristic fantasy, in which Shrewsbury and Burghley suffer while fighting in a common cause. In 1587 Shrewsbury writes, "whereby as I was made sorie to thinke of yor greate paines, so was I gladde that *our* ioincte [i.e., joint] enemye hathe giuen to my frendes hande somewhat more libertie then to mine owne *wch* is denyed power almost to holde the penne."⁶⁰ Such language is also clear in responses from Burghley, who ends a letter written in October 1589, "And so leave your Lordship to be free from our Comen enemy."⁶¹ The personification of gout reaches a peak in a letter sent later that year, wherein Burghley writes:

my Lord, I se our enemy may not [be] roughly vsed, if any thyng shall pacefy hym, it must be pacience and warmmth. for though we might fynd to lett hym in ye stocks, yet except he be both fedd and clothed wt warm meales and clothes, he will not yeld.⁶²

57. TNA, SP 53/9, fol. 8.

58. LPL Talbot, MS 3200, fol. 39.

59. Shrewsbury to Burghley, 1583. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 227. In the holograph postscript, Shrewsbury adds, "as yor L[ordship] in yor incoutar wt oure enemy Reseyd A blowe onre the hand so hadd I bene lyke of late in wrastelynge wt him to haue hadd bothe my legges trypped from vndar me."

60. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fol. 372.

61. *Ibid.*, MS 3200, fol. 25.

62. *Ibid.*, fol. 39.

In addition to offering consolation for the physical and social isolation caused by their conditions, exchanges that refers to a "common enemy" are also undoubtedly charged with sociopolitical analogies to the Elizabethan state. Furthermore, the metaphor provides the two with an opportunity to play with language, thus reappropriating a sense of manual control, if only rhetorically—for example, in the rich punning involved in "joint enemy," which implies the sense of *shared*, but also physical joints.

Rhetorically affective themes to do with handwriting and disease also feature prominently in Shrewsbury's correspondence with Elizabeth. Letters from the queen were of course of great significance to any subject of England; however, Shrewsbury was in a position (shared by very few subjects indeed) of being granted requests for writing in Elizabeth's own hand. For example, in a letter to Burghley written from Sheffield in 1572, the earl writes of his concern at the queen's recent bout of smallpox and asks for a word or two in her own hand to assure him of her health.⁶³ The queen's reply came less than a week later, and she did in fact add a holograph postscript to an otherwise scribal letter, addressing him personally: "My faithfull Shrewesbury, Let no grief touche your harte for feare of my disease."⁶⁴ Shrewsbury treasured royal expressions of favor via holograph writing: a letter from the queen to the Shrewsburys in 1577, which contains a holograph subscription and signature from "Your most Assured loving Cousin and Soverayne," is endorsed by the earl himself, "to be kept As the dereste Iuell [i.e., jewel]."⁶⁵ Words directly from Elizabeth also elicited obedient and extensive thanks from Shrewsbury; in this respect, a copy of a letter from Shrewsbury to the queen in 1587 is worth citing at length:

It may please your most excellent Majestie to understand that beyng visited with my old enemye the goute at the comynge downe of my sonne Henri Talbot, and therewithall greatly payned in so much that I feared no recoverye wold have bene before warm wether, yet your Majesties most gracious and comfortable wordes and message sent me by my sonne hath renewed and quickened my vitall spirits wherby the rest of my parts of my bodie are strenthened, that since the acceptation therof I fele myself amended and delivered for this yeare (as I hope) from all his violent assaults. For the which I rendre unto your most excellent Majestie my most humble and hartly thanks. No application of medicine or mynistration of phisike wold have wrought that cure in so short tyme as your majesties most gracious speches hath mynistered reliefe and helpe unto me, that I fynd my bodie will shortly be able and stronge to do your Majestie any service that your Highnes shall commande[.]⁶⁶

63. *Ibid.*, MS 3206, fol. 597.

64. *Ibid.*, MS 3197, fol. 41.

65. *Ibid.*, MS 3206, fol. 819.

66. I was made aware of this letter by Dr. Caroline Bowden and the database created for the now-finished "The Health of the Cecils c.1550–c.1660" project at Royal Holloway, University of London. The text here is taken from *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Bath Preserved at Longleat*,

Shrewsbury's devotion to and adoration of the queen remained strong throughout his life. Living as he did at such a distance from the court, messages from Elizabeth were a great comfort, not only reassuring an endlessly anxious man, but also apparently curing his gout. Furthermore, given the distance between them and the almost total lack of in-person meetings, gout went some way toward grounding Shrewsbury's correspondence with Elizabeth by providing a sense of an embodied "voice," visible in the holograph hand.

Archival evidence suggests that writing holograph letters directly to Elizabeth was unusual and probably (for most) would have constituted a glaring social transgression. How often Shrewsbury did so is not known; however, the discourse of illness was a mainstay throughout his correspondence with Elizabeth—regardless of whether he employed a scribe (much of what survives are holograph copies or drafts from Shrewsbury to Elizabeth). Letters were often circulated and sent indirectly through Elizabethan networks. This is certainly the case with Shrewsbury's writing to the queen: he seems to have frequently written to statesmen at court, particularly Sir Francis Walsingham, the queen's principal secretary, with the expectation that his holograph letter(s) would be physically shown to Elizabeth. This is suggested in the postscript to a holograph letter from Shrewsbury to Walsingham (but really the queen), from Sheffield in 1574:

I thought good to lett you know that there is sundry in my house Infected with the meselles therefore wysche it maye be consydered if it be nott dangerus for hur *majestie* to Reseve before it be very well ered [i.e., aired] Any thyng from hens/ god longe preserve hur. che is Apressyus Iuell [i.e., a precious jewel] to All good men[.]⁶⁷

The chain of epistolary reception at court is more explicitly referenced in a letter to Walsingham (cited at the beginning of this essay), from 1577, in which Shrewsbury writes, "[I] desire you to excuse my evil favoured writing to the Queen's majesty, for by reason of a great ache which has vexed me in the wrist of my right hand a long time, I am able to write no better."⁶⁸ This remark begs the question, "evil favoured" for whom? Evidence for any such commentary does not survive, but had someone else remarked on the earl's uglyography? Or is Shrewsbury only (very reasonably) expecting such a reaction? Either way, disease offered a means of graphically inscribing physical presence, which both presumes familiarity and allows Shrewsbury to make a supplicatory apology and (presumably) elicit pity from his sovereign.

Wiltshire, vol. 5, Historical Manuscripts Commissions Series 58 (London, 1904–80), 85–86. As the letter is a copy, it is not known whether the original was a holograph from Shrewsbury, nor whether the message from the queen he refers to here included any holograph endorsement on her part.

67. TNA, SP 53/9, fol. 150.

68. *Calendar of State Papers, Relating to Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots*, vol. 5, 1574–1581, letter no. 274, p. 242.

Any superficial negative reading of Shrewsbury's illness and its graphic trace must be considered alongside a more rhetorically orientated one that allows for the positive possibilities of this discourse. It served to strengthen his social and familial connections with his "best friend," Lord Burghley, one of the most powerful figures in Elizabethan England, as well as Elizabeth herself. In this way, Shrewsbury's position— isolated from court, ill, and dependent upon epistolary communication—was much like that of his step-granddaughter, Arbella Stuart, who was brought up under Bess's guardianship following the death of her mother (Elizabeth [née Cavendish], Bess's daughter and Shrewsbury's stepdaughter) in 1582. As Sara Jayne Steen has observed, Stuart's illness (which Steen suggests to be porphyria)—albeit very painful and emotionally draining for her—gave her a method of expressing agency, bringing attention to herself and, in a way, managing her social networks. Steen concludes that "any analysis of Stuart's prose must also involve to some degree a reading of her illness."⁶⁹ Like Stuart, Shrewsbury's illness afforded him presence from a distance, and in the remaining sections I will read gout within its larger sociocultural context in order to reveal its scope for expressing the privilege with which it engendered him.

Uglyography and Ease

Given the fact that gout has historically affected (typically Western) men of the upper classes, it is perhaps not surprising that—despite the painful and sometimes grotesque effects it had on the body—this disease has been appropriated by sufferers as a sign of prestige throughout Western history. It has been described variously as "an affliction of the privileged, and therefore highly desired . . . 'the distemper of a gentleman,'"⁷⁰ a disease "of the rich and famous,"⁷¹ or, as in the title of Porter and Rousseau's book-length socio-medical history of gout, "the patrician malady." In this sense, the discourse of illness Shrewsbury shared with Burghley smacks of self-congratulation as well as commiseration. Like other members of the gentry, both Shrewsbury's and Burghley's diets would have consisted of alcohol at most meals, and there is repeated reference to purine-rich meat dishes in Shrewsbury's letters—such as venison pasties (a gift that commonly accompanied letters), capons, and pheasants, all of which might have contributed to the hyperuricemia that brings on gouty symptoms (this relation to diet is why gout has historically affected the privileged).⁷² The history of famous cases is too long to recount here; however, with an illustrious lineage that went back to the ancient physician Galen, who wrote that "Gout is the daughter of Bacchus and

69. Sara Jayne Steen, "How Subject to Interpretation: Lady Arbella Stuart and the Reading of Illness," in *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing*, ed. J. Daybell (Basingstoke, U.K., 2001), 109–26 at 109.

70. S. Bhattacharjee, "A Brief History of Gout," *International Journal of Rheumatic Diseases* 12 (2009): 61–63 at 62.

71. T. Appelboom and J. C. Bennett, "Gout of the Rich and Famous," *Journal of Rheumatology* 13, no. 3 (1986): 618–22.

72. A.-K. Tausche et al., "Gout—Current Diagnosis and Treatment," *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* 106, nos. 34–35 (2009): 549–55. Also, judging by the frequent references to gout in the correspondence of Gilbert Talbot, the seventh earl, it seems that Shrewsbury may have passed on a genetic disposition for the condition to his son.

Venus,"⁷³ gout in the Renaissance was certainly nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, there was even an Order of Knights of the Gouty Humour, who published an encomium at the end of the sixteenth century stating that "Someone who lives in health is not master of his body even though he be of good means, but is unceasingly plagued with others' business. He is almost a serf."⁷⁴

This quote is particularly interesting with respect to afflictions of the hand and their implications for textual composition. In a way, by having gout as a desirable excuse, Shrewsbury was able to prove not only mastery of his own body but also the power he had to enlist others to write for him. In instances where correspondence was delayed (even if only for a day or two), one in good health was of course expected to give an explanation, as epistolary silence and delay were meaningful gestures.⁷⁵ The irascible effects of gout (the symptoms of which could come on quite suddenly, and lift just as quickly) and/or the chronic pain and stiffness elicited by arthritis made for a convenient explanation in instances where a letter and the "remembrance" of one's duty to others had been delayed for any number of other reasons. Therefore, illness provided Shrewsbury with agency and, ironically, mastery of his own body in that he could (when desired) excuse himself and employ others' hands to write for him.

To be sure, there would have been no lack of occasion to employ scribes. For, as we would expect of any figure of sociopolitical consequence in that age, the amount of daily letter writing needed to maintain networks and relations for Shrewsbury would have been great. Furthermore, he was expected to write and respond not only on his own behalf, but also—because of his influential position (particularly with other Elizabethan statesmen), and despite public knowledge of his infirmities—on behalf of others. In December of 1585, for instance, Sergeant Thomas Walmesley asked Shrewsbury to write to Burghley in order to prevent his being appointed chief justice in Ireland and enclosed a suggested draft letter for Shrewsbury to use (a seemingly effective strategy, as not long afterward he wrote to thank Shrewsbury for securing his delivery "oute of the wyld bogges of Ireland").⁷⁶ Scribes probably fulfilled most "business" requests of this nature (although the earl seems to have signed everything himself). However, on other occasions Shrewsbury's own deteriorated hand was called upon by would-be petitioners. One such request came from his son Gilbert in the summer of 1587, to which Shrewsbury responded scribally:

I haue *partelie* satisfied yor desires in the laste *lettres* yow sent me vnsealed by Rutterforthe, but I Could not graunt yor request in all. I haue written to the *lords* and my verye good frendes, accordeinge to yor owne directions in that behalfe, But not withe myne owne hande, (havinge latelie given over to write my self so muche as heretofore) by reason that my handes are sore distempred withe the gowte, assuringe my self the

73. Quoted in Bhattacharjee, "A Brief History," 61.

74. Quoted in Porter and Rousseau, *Gout*, 33.

75. Daybell, *Women Letter Writers*, 160.

76. LPL Talbot, MS 3198, fols. 305, 321, 323.

same *lettres* will be no lesse effectullie Considered vpon by the *lords* then yf myne owne paynes in writinge hadde bene bestowed.⁷⁷

From this response, it is clear that Gilbert has explicitly requested that his father petition the lords using his own hand. However, at this point holograph writing from Shrewsbury was (judging by the archival evidence) a much rarer occurrence. Here, his assurance that a scribal letter will be just as effective may reveal that he saw the letters differently from his son. Gilbert, desiring favor at court and wishing to exploit his father's friendships, would have preferred the letters to be seen as more than just business correspondence and therefore sought to take advantage of the in-group significance afforded a holographic gesture, however ugly. Shrewsbury, however, who in any case had grown less tolerant of Gilbert's continuous requests for money, favors, and courtly sway, had for the most part given up the writing of his own letters, including letters to his best friend Burghley. As all (including Gilbert) were well aware of Shrewsbury's ill-health, scribal letters were most likely expected from him in his last years, and the holograph-scribal distinction would have lost some of its significance as a result. Instead, Shrewsbury's mastership over the well-formed hands of his scribes would have signified "the ultimate aristocratic luxury, ease." In other words, public knowledge of his disease eventually allowed Shrewsbury to transcend the epistolary conventions that he had exploited before (e.g., in "taking pains" to write himself). What then would his holograph signature and flourish and—to go back to that period when Shrewsbury was writing many holograph letters in a gout-ridden scrawl—his own handwriting have communicated in terms of disease and its relation to sociocultural distinction?

If we assume the sociocultural significance of gout as (paradoxically) something to be at once proud of (for oneself) and admired (by others) as well as bemoaned and asked after, then Shrewsbury's handwriting would have surely been a material signifier of these attitudes. It is hard to imagine that a recipient of a holograph letter from Shrewsbury could overlook the physical dimension of composition structured by the condition of Shrewsbury's hand: that is, that the hand actually involved in the composition of the signature or letter was susceptible to influences on the body of which it was part. Whether Shrewsbury's contemporaries could actually decipher his writing (i.e., the words themselves) is another question. For whereas uglyography is common in letters from sixteenth-century aristocrats, Shrewsbury's hand is without a doubt exceptionally bad.⁷⁸ But while the earl himself does excuse his writing on several occasions (some of which were mentioned previously), such excuses are common, and there are no explicit references to the readability of the earl's hand made by others in his epistolary network. Some surely could read his handwriting or had scribes who could "crack" Shrewsbury's scrawl; but even if they did not understand the linguistic

77. *Ibid.*, fol. 361.

78. The surviving examples of Burghley's own handwriting seem relatively less affected by gout than Shrewsbury's. This may have to do with the fact that whereas Shrewsbury was acutely pained in his hands, Burghley's condition struck more often in his legs and/or feet.

content, the graphic, socioculturally communicative gesture of the earl's holograph would have remained: uglyography/gout signaled the aristocratic body and power that lay behind it.

This embodied dimension of the holograph letter—imperceptible in typescript representations—would have contrasted sharply with that of scribal compositions written in a trained secretary script. In *Writing Matter*, Goldberg situates the professional scribe, as well as the secretary script prescribed in his training, as a part of the development of the Elizabethan state that sought to eradicate idiographic identities on the page and, more generally, the letterforms' embodied origins:

the writer has so fully "repressed" the body, so entirely framed it, that it becomes another nature, precisely that "excessive" form that the rigors of a training in the rhetoric of civilization may produce. . . . the secretary is embodied as "the perfection of his hand," a perfection in which his own hand is not his own.⁷⁹

And while smaller, individual idiosyncrasies may have been distinguishable for those closely acquainted with a particular scribe's handwriting, scribes writing in secretary script in Elizabethan England were often purposefully anonymous in the wider world of socio-epistolary networks. By contrast, the uglyography perpetrated by many members of the aristocracy was in fact a visual signal that would have reminded correspondents that they were dealing with specific individuals of power and influence, subject to the "patrician malady," masters not only of their own bodies but also the bodies of others.

These dual associations between *master* and *uglyography*, and *scribal servant* and *legible secretary script*, go some way toward supporting the historical connection between bad handwriting and the upper classes, particularly in Renaissance Europe and England; Goldberg notes that "there remained throughout the sixteenth century a distrust of handwriting, associated as it was with monkish scribes and seen as a mechanical and manual task unworthy of an aristocrat."⁸⁰ Furthermore, Stewart and Wolfe point out that in "satirical writings, bad handwriting was associated especially with the upper classes"; they quote Vives's *Linguae latinae exercitatio*, in which a character states, "the crowd of our nobility do not follow the precept (as to the value of writing), for they think it is a fine and becoming thing not to know how to form their letters. You would say their writing was the scratching of hens."⁸¹ Shrewsbury's clearly

79. Goldberg, *Writing Matter*, 271. Such education in handwriting is for the most part lacking today; however, as Peter Leo of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* recalls of his own exposure to the Palmer Method of writing in Cold War America, the "result was handwriting of florid conformity, character-free but clear." See "Tracing the Roots of Illegible Handwriting," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 13, 2006, <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/portfolio/2006/04/13/tracing-the-roots-of-illegible-handwriting/200604130314>.

80. Goldberg, *Writing Matter*, 52.

81. Stewart and Wolfe, *Letterwriting*, 36.

afflicted handwriting, then, would have had double resonance in that uglygraphy was associated with members of the aristocracy and "gout" was considered a noble disease; this disease in turn became readable in the handwriting itself and via the theme of illness found throughout his correspondence. Whether writing to others in positions of power or those of lower social station, the graphic trace left by Shrewsbury and the scribes who served him would have evoked these associations, sometimes simultaneously if a scribe wrote a letter and Shrewsbury signed it with his cryptic, unforgeable signature and flourish.

Of course this would have made letters written and/or signed by Shrewsbury stand out among the immense corpus of writing circulating in Elizabethan epistolary networks and would have also guarded against the very real threat of forgery. The objective in producing handwriting that falls within the bounds of a prescribed practice (e.g., the generic secretary scripts used by Shrewsbury's scribes) is precisely that it should be able to be copied; however, duplicating the idiosyncrasies of a hand dictated by pain is a much more difficult task:

The most valuable idiographic items for the purpose of identification of the writer are those that are not entirely under his or her conscious control; this makes them difficult to forge, and difficult to disguise.⁸²

Such irreproducibility is particularly evident in the distinctive idiographic symbol or flourish Shrewsbury invariably added to his letters, even those otherwise completed by a scribe (see figs. 2 and 3).⁸³

Conclusion

In addition to providing a more nuanced understanding of the earl himself and the correspondence of his second wife, Bess of Hardwick, consideration of the letter writing of George, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, greatly enriches a picture of the Elizabethan aristocracy and how handwriting and disease were inscribed in their sociopolitical relations (literally and figuratively). For the most part, any serious study of Shrewsbury has hitherto been obscured by the uneasy "graphic trace" he left. By taking this infamous uglygraphy as its point of departure and then considering what manual infirmity meant in terms of Shrewsbury's management of epistolary networks, this essay has made headway toward more concrete, embodied characterizations of Shrewsbury, his letters, and (especially) his handwriting.

Although a diagnosis of Shrewsbury's specific rheumatoid condition is not possible, this analysis of Shrewsbury's handwriting offers evidence of how the prescribed handwriting of early modern letter writing and the actual letterforms that fit within this practice were in fact subject not only to sociocultural factors (for example, instruc-

82. Davis, "The Practice," 255.

83. At first it appears that Shrewsbury's holograph flourish may be his initials, "G. S." (i.e., George Shrewsbury); however, the same flourish is also used in LPL Talbot, MS 3196, fol. 49 (discussed above), written when his father was alive and he was therefore still Lord Talbot.

tion) but to physical impediments of the hand itself. In this sense, hands and handwriting may not be fully understood in the sense of the detached hand (i.e., as an abstract ideological construction). In conjunction with this embodiment, by reading Shrewsbury's letters qualitatively with reference to his marriage to Bess, his duty as custodian of Mary Queen of Scots, and the manifestation of themes of illness in his epistolary connections with Burghley and Elizabeth, this study has shown the way in which the state of hands and handwriting had implications for managing information and communicating with powerful contemporaries at court. Furthermore, sixteenth-century cultural interpretations of "gout" (and the conditions with which gout as we understand it today was conflated) as a "noble disease" intersected with perceptions of bad handwriting as characteristic of the ruling classes, something which would have only exaggerated the power expressed in Shrewsbury's use of scribes.

In sum, the handwritten letter is one of the most significant textual artifacts for the fields of history, literature, and historical linguistics, and an understanding of the significance of handwriting must remain central to the study of the English Renaissance. Equally, any "theory of the hand" or cultural graphology (as suggested by Goldberg) must include socio-medical history and the biography of illnesses. In many ways, the analysis of handwriting is best accomplished on a case-by-case basis. However, as I hope to have shown in this essay, an interest in hands need not and should not be limited to paleographic profiling of individuals. If, as Porter and Rousseau write, "a life [may] be read through a diagnosis of its morbidic humours,"⁸⁴ so the hand may be read in relation to its embodiment and the multiple dimensions of its employment.

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84. Porter and Rousseau, *Gout*, 2.