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Wiggins, Alison, Alan Bryson, Daniel Starza Smith, Anke Timmermann, and Graham Williams, eds.; Katherine Rogers, web developer. Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608. Edition

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Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques

Wiggins, Alison, Alan Bryson, Daniel Starza Smith, Anke Timmermann, and Graham Williams, eds.; Katherine Rogers, web developer.

Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608. Edition.

Glasgow: University of Glasgow / Sheffield: University of Sheffield Humanities Research Institute, 2013. Accessed 7 May 2020.

bessofhardwick.org.

Several years ago, when seeking models for a scholarly digital edition presenting multiple versions of an early modern manuscript, I returned repeatedly to one site that stood out among all others owing to its quality, clarity, and functionality: Bess of Hardwick's Letters. What makes it all the more remarkable is the site's relatively early completion date of 2013. Online resources can age rapidly, yet the interface for this project looks as fresh and remains as effective as any I have encountered. Moreover, at least one related early modern project appears to have learned from and extended this site's approach to offering multiple versions of a manuscript, while enhancing that presentation through the side-by-side display of transcriptions and images (one of the few features the earlier project could be said to lack); the fact that the interface has been emulated elsewhere is a sign of its considerable potential to contribute, even after its completion, in a formative way to further digital editions of manuscripts, including those from other periods and places than early modern England.¹

Famed for constructing the stately homes of Hardwick Hall and Chatsworth, the fascinating figure of Elizabeth Hardwick (ca. 1521/2 or 1527–1608) is here imbricated in a richer than usual array of personal and cultural contexts as we hear her voice in conversation with a broad swath of Elizabethan society, from servants to queens. This site provides the first comprehensive edition of her correspondence in its assemblage of nearly 250 letters either composed or received by her. These are presented both in transcriptions and, for about 80 percent of the corpus, high-resolution colour images that drive

1. See Early Modern Manuscripts Online, Folger Shakespeare Library, emmo.folger.edu, launched in beta in 2017.

home—as neither a printed nor a digital transcript ever can—the unique and period-specific materiality of letter-writing.

The hardworking home page offers immediate access to the letters through a menu where letters may be sorted by decade (1550s through 1600s) and month; alternately, they may be browsed by sender, recipient, or place of composition. One may also conduct a simple keyword search on the home page, while avid users can select a particular letter from a drop-down menu by identification number. These basic access points are enriched exponentially by thoughtfully-designed “Custom Search” and “Browse & Filter” options. Flexible searching of words and phrases, including Boolean operators and wildcards, allows complex queries that navigate the irregular spelling of early modern texts. Users may specify, moreover, that searches should take place only within well-defined tranches of the material: for instance, in the normalized or the diplomatic transcriptions; in letters to or from Bess; in all letters by particular senders, from particular origins, to particular recipients or destinations, written on a particular date or within a range of dates, as well as by the archive in which they are held. One can browse a list of all letters, or only those with images. Those designing the interface evidently worked hard to anticipate the many ways in which the site’s contents might be made useful to different users and designed a plethora of entry points to suit. The site thus also filters content in innovative ways that are apt to stimulate a variety of research and pedagogical projects. Types of filter include letter features (such as letters that mention the bearer, those with contemporary additions, and those that are sewn); handwriting (with over a dozen scribes identified by name, as well as several distinct anonymous ones); joint senders and recipients (such as Hardwick and her husband writing together); and life events (like “Bess as builder” or “Bess as marriage broker”). The last filter, in particular, could help scholars, instructors, or students quickly parse the epistolary content of a lifetime in order to shape viable teaching units or even research projects.

Transcriptions appear in four versions: diplomatic, normalized, print-friendly, and XML. XML and PDF batch files are available for downloading. The diplomatic transcription folds in dynamic links to brief notes, such as transcriptions of address leaves or textual notes on features not transcribed (like foliation and other notes by later librarians or owners and archivists). The printable versions present a clear summary of pertinent metadata (the letter’s identification number, unique URL, sender, date, archive and call number,

delivery status, letter features, and hands, as well as a summary of the content); brief biographies of the sender(s) and recipient(s); and both the normalized and diplomatic versions of the letter itself. The PDFs would make ideal teaching texts, even for those who prefer non-digital resources.

The manuscript images, which open in a separate box, can be magnified, but the box itself remains small enough that one cannot read much of a page at once; this is one of the only notable limitations in the site's functionality. The images can also be consulted within a tool that pairs a letter, above, with an interactive textbox beneath it, along with instructions on how to create a transcription featuring a small selection of editorial encoding tags (such as "<deletion>" and "<illegible>"). One can then check one's work against the transcription that appears on the site, with any differences highlighted for ease of comparison. This is a valuable teaching tool, since it rapidly conveys the challenges associated with simply *reading* early modern handwriting, given its many palaeographic and orthographic variations, let alone undertaking even the simplified tagging demonstrated here.

A section of well-documented background material offers in-depth, engaging, and practical supplements on topics that blaze different trails into the letters themselves, as well as outward into the surrounding scholarship, which is selectively and helpfully annotated. Conceptually, my favourite of these background essays is "Bess of Hardwick's Life in 12 Letters" (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=142), in which the site's principal investigator, Alison Wiggins, offers core samples of the correspondence in order to open up key biographical contexts for Hardwick, ranging from the earliest item composed by her (instructing a servant on the running of Chatsworth), to letters from her several husbands and two queens, to materials illustrative of her extensive and complex social, geographical, and information networks. A background essay by Daniel Starza Smith, "The Material Features of Early Modern Letters" (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=143), offers a reader's guide to historically-specific tools, folds, postage, bearers, seals, locking mechanisms, paper, handwriting, and epistolary layout, while a third, by Graham Williams, addresses the language of period correspondence, with sub-sections on matters ranging from letter parts to spelling and politeness (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=168). Taken together, in this order, these three essays would make excellent assigned readings for an undergraduate or graduate course focused on this resource or on early modern epistolary

culture more broadly. Also included in this section is an excellent tutorial (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=231) by Wiggins and Williams on early modern handwriting, and an archive of half a dozen brief podcast episodes (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=237), with scripts by Anke Timmermann, derived from a related exhibition (*Unsealed: The Letters of Bess of Hardwick*, presented at Hardwick Hall in 2012). The spare production quality of these episodes, while certainly clear enough, and with content that is often imaginatively conceived—with excerpts from letters, for instance, performed by voice actors—is not quite commensurate with the rest of the site.

One essay offered alongside this material as background, “Editing Bess of Hardwick’s Letters” (bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=169), could stand to be foregrounded instead, since it offers a valuable overview of the site’s technical basis and an amazingly detailed study of the project’s editorial policies and practices. While full technical documentation is recorded as an internal report, this essay indicates that the letters are marked up in XML (following the TEI P5 guidelines where possible) such that a single file for each letter may be output, via transformations, as either a diplomatic or a normalized version, with cross-references to associated image files. The site offers a practical copyright and citation guide, offering all material freely (when cited) for individual, non-commercial use, but vesting copyright and other intellectual property rights in the transcribed letter texts, metadata, and site design in the University of Glasgow and University of Sheffield.

The only somewhat disappointing aspect of the site lies in the fact that promised annual additions and revisions to it stopped, or at least stopped being documented, in 2014—though it is also true that the site already appears impressively complete as it stands. In the printable versions of each letter, however, there remains the tantalizing line: “Version 1.0.” One can only hope that this designation suggests that future updates will arrive in order to keep this site as fresh and functional in years to come as it is today.

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