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An Unpublished Commonplace Book of Scottish Interest in the Folger Shakespeare Library

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An Unpublished Commonplace Book of Scottish Interest in the Folger Shakespeare Library

In 1924 the Folger Shakespeare Library acquired from Maggs Brothers Manuscript Va. 255, a commonplace book inscribed on the first leaf by Gideon Rutherford and, directly under his name, by Jean Rutherford. It is thought to date from the period ca. 1690-1725, and contains 32 f.; there is a leaf lacking between f. 29 and f. 30. Two distinct hands are visible in the body of the manuscript, but it is impossible to say, given just the evidence of these inscriptions, precisely which of the entries are by Gideon and Jean Rutherford. All that can be said is that the writing is clear, and that there is no difficulty, because of the changes in the ink, in distinguishing between earlier and later entries, some of which actually appear in the margins. The manuscript contains mainly poems, some of which are attributed in the manuscript itself to Alexander Cunningham, John Pringle, John Shaw, Sir Kenelm Digby, and Sir Francis Bacon. Miscellaneous aphorisms, philosophical maxims, and general reflections are also interspersed. In this short bibliographical note, I shall concentrate specifically on materials of Scottish interest.

The first item of such interest pertains to Lord Napier. It is a poem in quatrains addressed to him, elaborating skillfully a metaphysical conceit involving Napier’s personal betrayal or rejection of the writer of the verses, and concluding: “O Heavens how wold you use a hart/ that wold rebellious be/ When you did peirc that wt a dart/ that gave itself to thee.” (f. 1,b) More significant references involving the Rutherfords themselves begin to appear with f. 7,b and extending to f. 8,a. They concern John Rutherford, minister of Yarrow, Selkirkshire, the father of the distinguished pioneering physician and chemist, John Rutherford (1695-1779). The first entry is a long, laudatory Latin tribute to Rutherford, Senior’s pastoral integrity and decisiveness, composed on the occasion of his death on 8 May 1720, and contains valuable material about the complexities of his relations with his parishioners. Rutherford is temporarily abandoned beginning with f. 8,b, which contains an oddly ambiguous, seemingly bawdy but actually quite censorious account, dedicated to a certain Mr. Ritchis, about the doings of Sir William and Lady Renniburn. The mood changes again, beginning with f. 9,a, and persisting through f. 11,b, when several longer...
poems, in cunningly wrougth closed iambic pentameter couplets treat political events and episodes of border lawlessness, beginning with "The Theeves Triumph." Neither names nor attendant moral indignation are spared: "& thus yow'll steal ye how like honest men/ & how you gett your geir there none shall ken/c/ yow neede nor fieare Commissioners of ye border/ nor Justice Courts, fer now there is noe order/ . . . So ye's be rich & all your Sons make Lairds/ when yee so prettily have played your cards."

Further poems which return to the character and accomplishments of John Rutherford, Senior, inject contrasting notes of stability and aversion to fanaticism; these appear beginning with the end of f. 11,b, and continue through f. 13,a. Other poetical memorials follow, the most outstanding being the fragmentary and quite moving tribute of John Shaw, Minister of Selkirk, to Robert Cunningham, Minister of Hawick: "No bitter, bussy, biting, byest brother/ not looking high not highling an other/ . . . Tremble poor Church of Scotland, stand agast/ to see thy Glorious lamps goe out so fast." (f. 15,b) The remaining leaves contain little poetry, but many anecdotes, some known, others seemingly new. The level of Scottish interest among these is perhaps not as high as among the earlier leaves; a typical anecdote reads: "When it was told ye King at Oxford yt Lord Didupp a Scots Lord was killed on ye parliats side, [he] said, he had forgot there was such Lord in Scotland, to which one replied yt his maj: might well doe so, for yt Lord had forgot he had such a King in England."

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1I am grateful to the Folger Shakespeare Library for permission to quote from this manuscript. According to the Library's records, no such permission has been requested since the manuscript entered its collections.