How were the anonymous Castle Ashby play manuscripts created, and why?


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Abstract

In 1977, a long-lost collection of manuscripts of plays, poems, and non-fiction texts from the 17th century was re-discovered in the library of Castle Ashby, Northamptonshire. Most of the items are not signed by an author, and have no known record of publication or performance.

These technically anonymous items have received minimal scholarly attention in the three-plus decades since their recovery, and what comment there has been has not entirely agreed upon the collection's authorship, purpose, or even era of composition. This thesis takes a confident position on those debates by investigating the unsigned manuscripts and their contents through a variety of techniques.

This study reviews the collection's known history, past commentators' findings and conclusions, and the physical and textual properties, and comes to an authorial conclusion based on a fresh palaeographic investigation; it then offers a biography of the proposed writer. It statistically analyses the collection's material, palaeographic, and metrical traits, in search of trends that might show a development over time. It applies modern electronic resources to investigate the collection's textual interrelationships and plausible literary sources, and uses contemporary history and the proposed author's biography to suggest conjectural allusions in the writing. Together, those avenues of analysis allow for a best-guess ordering and dating to be proposed for the collection's contents. Turning specifically to the dramatic texts, the thesis then considers the proposed author's potential theatrical resources, searches the manuscripts for evidence of possible professional theatrical use, and gathers dramaturgical information from the texts themselves to form an opinion about how plausible contemporary performances would have been; this is supplemented with the findings from the first modern stagings of all of the dramatic texts, which establish what minimum physical needs the plays would demand in performance, and identify where there are dramaturgical issues that could limit the plays' theatrical practicality. The study's findings up to that point then allow for the collection to be positioned within their period's larger context of authorial and theatrical activity, conclude whether the writer achieved anything unique, and, identifying the collection's major recurring thematic elements, propose a rationale for the writer's authorial activity.

In summary, this thesis sets out to determine the conditions that brought the unsigned Castle Ashby texts into existence, and to suggest why they were written at all.
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