

Filiating Scribal Manuscripts: The Example of Donne's Elegies

Gary A. Stringer

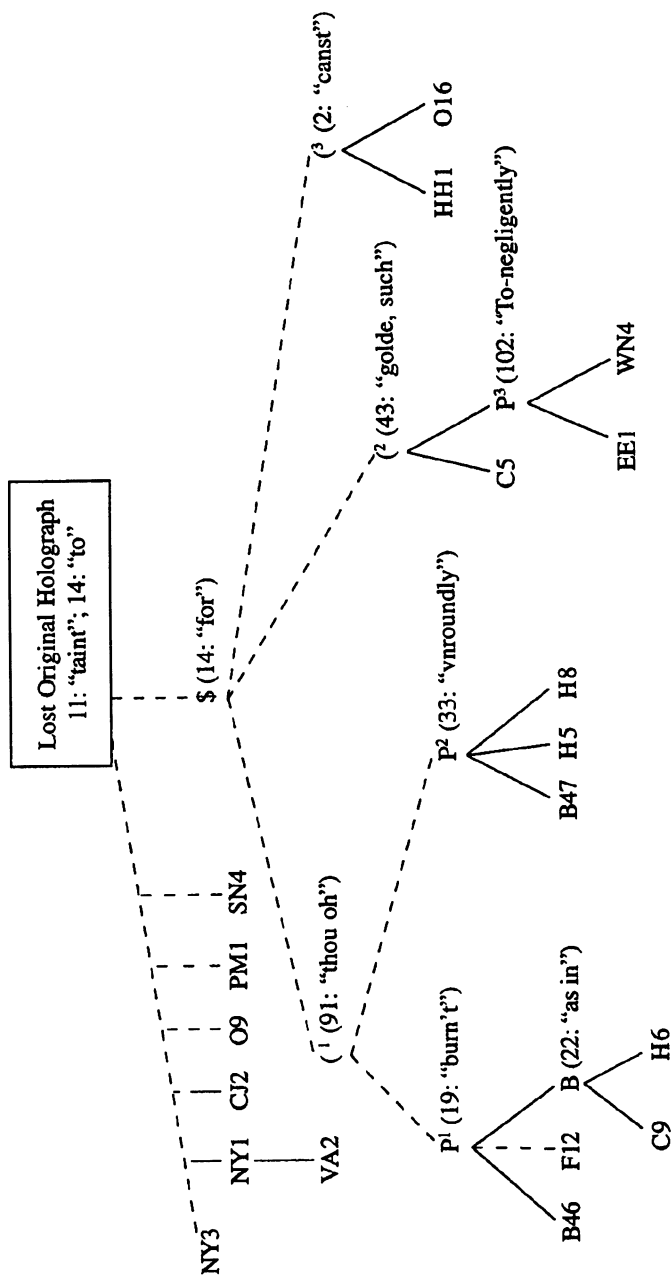
Before proceeding to the specific topic of this paper, I should like briefly to review the textual circumstances that a Donne scholar faces. With the exceptions of the Anniversaries—the long commendatory poems on the death of Elizabeth Drury—and a scattering of shorter pieces, Donne “published” his poems only in manuscript, circulating copies (sometimes of single poems, sometimes of groups) among members of a coterie of friends, patrons, and prospective patrons, who in turn circulated them to others. The first collected edition of Donne’s poetry, the 1633 *POEMS*, was not published until two years after the author’s death, and virtually none of Donne’s holographs survive: of poetic materials in the poet’s own hand, we have only four brief inscriptions, a Latin epitaph on his wife, and a single, 63-line verse epistle. The remaining scribal copies of Donne’s poems, however, total over 5,000 exempla in about 240 different manuscripts, and many poems survive in over 50 separate copies. Before reaching the relative stability of print, of course, these texts were vulnerable to virtually infinite alteration, not only by Donne himself, but also by inattentive, officious, or censorious copyists, some of whom mangled poems that came into their hands almost beyond recognition. Filiation—my topic here—really consists in the process of trying to unravel the tangled threads of transmission extant in these numerous and diverse transcriptions so as to retreat as far as possible upstream toward the head—which, as Donne reminds us in the Holy Sonnet “Since she whom I lovd,” “streames do shew.” Only when this has been done can we have a safe and pollution-free site upon which to construct an interpretive edifice.

Among the seventeenth-century artifacts, texts of Donne's elegies are emphatically as plentiful and as variegated in form as those of any of his other poems. Containing 982 lines of Donne poetry—roughly one-tenth of the canon—the 18 authentic poems (including "Sapho to Philaenis") plus two dubious items that will appear in the forthcoming *Variorum* volume on the elegies exist in 823 individual copies totalling 48,656 lines of raw material. Among these poems, "The Bracelet," which appears as the first elegy in the most authoritative arrangements, exhibits perhaps the single most complicated history of transmission; and in the following remarks I shall briefly sketch in that history, with particular reference to the technical and evaluative procedures employed in bringing it to light.

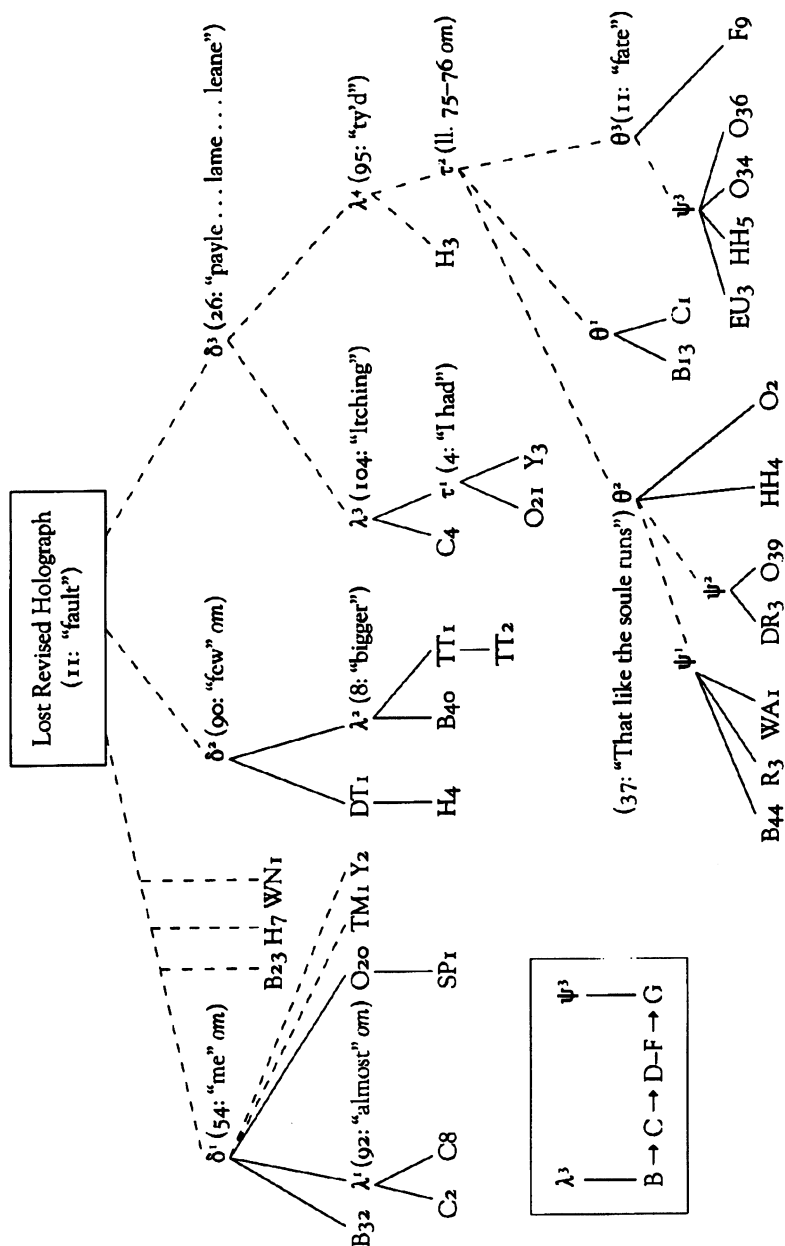
Appearing in some 62 manuscript and 7 seventeenth-century print sources, "The Bracelet" is one of the Donne poems most widely circulated amongst the poet's contemporaries. Fifty-two of the manuscripts and 6 of the collected editions record full transcriptions of this 114-line poem. Interestingly, the poem was one of 5 elegies officially excepted from the 1633 edition (siglum A), and when John Marriot incorporated it as the twelfth of 17 numbered elegies in the edition of 1635 (siglum B), government authorization had not yet been obtained. Further, as is shown in the small box at the bottom left of Figure 1, when the poem entered print in 1635 (B on the stemma), it was set from a manuscript far down the family tree from the Group-I text that had been disallowed two years previously; and this corrupt redaction became the basis for all subsequent editions of the poem, from the 1639 resetting of the 1635 text up to the OUP issue of Donne's *Selected Poetry* in 1996. If we do not have a full bill of the licenser's particular objections to the version he originally rejected, the text as printed in 1635 points clearly to his general concern that the poem trafficked in politico-theological contraband, and the omission of certain blocks of lines in, especially, some of the later, more derivative texts suggests that even in the relatively private sphere of scribal transmission some copyists recognized troublesome material in the poem and practiced a self-imposed censorship. Indeed, identification of this ideologically sensitive material is one of

Figure 1: Stemmata

Stemma of Original Text



STEMMA OF REVISED TEXT



the major benefits to be derived from the study of the poem's transmissional history and the development of a comprehensive stemma.

After one prepares accurate transcriptions of all seventeenth-century copies of the elegy and gathers them together as a set of uniform computer files, the beginning step in analyzing the textual data is to run a collation in order to see how the artifacts begin to sort themselves out into families. In the Donne Variorum project we do this by means of the Donne Variorum Textual Collation Program, a sample page of output from which is shown in Figure 2. The entire collation of "The Bracelet," of course, contains such a page for each of the poem's 114 lines plus heading and subscription, but I have selected the collation of line 11 because, as it happens, this is the single most important line in the poem for dividing the manuscript texts into the two discrete lines of textual transmission shown on the stemma.

The elements of the collation are as follows: (1) in the leftmost column appears an ordered series of 11-character IDentification tags, each of which lists the work siglum for "The Bracelet" (008), the source siglum for a given artifact (from NY3 at the top to AF1 at the bottom), and the line number (011)—items which are assigned at a prior stage of the editorial process and which, along with the periods inserted for ease of reading, are entered when the transcription is turned into a computer file. This ID tag stays with the line throughout the entire analysis and will be stripped off only during construction of the textual apparatus of the edited poem. (2) Following the leftmost column is a succession of other columns, each of which shows at the top of the page a word in the base text (in this case NY3) against which the other copies have been collated and, under each base word, any differences that may exist between the base text and other copies.² In the column under the base word "Nor," for instance, one notices that a dozen or so transcriptions give "nor"—with a lower-case "n"—as a variant to the capitalized "N" in NY3, and the column under "yet" shows that several copies spell the word with two "t's," that O34 spells it "yit," and that in WN4 a comma follows the word. A blank space at any line-column coordinate indicates that the word appearing in that

Figure 2: collation of line 11 of "The Bracelet"

ws	lss	l1n	by	any	taint	have	stray'd or	gone
008.NY3.011	Nor	yett	by	any	taint	have	stray'd or	gone
008.B13.011		yett			fault		strayed,	
008.B23.011		yett			faulte		strayde,	
008.B32.011		yett			falt		strayd,	
008.B40.011		yett			fault,	have	straid	gon
008.B44.011					fault		straid,	
008.B46.011					tainte		strayde,	
008.B47.011					taynt		strayd	gonne
008.C01.011					fault		strayd,	
008.C02.011		yett			fault		strayde and	
008.C04.011					fault		strayd,	
008.C05.011		yett			taynte		strayde	
008.C08.011		yett		anie	falt	hau*e [Mvar:>haue<]	strayed and	gon.
008.C09.011	nor						strayd	gon
008.CJ2.011	nor				taynte		straid	gone,
008.DR3.011	nor				faulte		straid, &	
008.DT1.011	nor				fault		strayde,	
008.EE1.011							strayde	gon,
008.EU3.011					fate		strayd,	gon
008.F09.011					fate	have	staynd	
008.F12.011					taynt			
008.H03.011				anie	faute			
008.H04.011	nor			anic	fault		straied, and	
008.H05.011	nor							
008.H06.011						haue	strayd	gon
008.H07.011					fault		straid	

position in the artifact in question exactly matches the base text and has been automatically omitted from the report generated by the collation program.

The crucial column of words for our purposes here is the fifth, headed by the word “taint” in NY3. Including the recognizable permutation “constraint” in PM1, as the collation shows, some 17 manuscripts match the base-text reading, while the remaining 32 manuscripts here give the alternative “fault,” which in a handful of sources (the θ^3 family on the Stemma of the Revised Text in Figure 1) has degenerated to “fate.” One artifact—O34—originally read “fate,” but replaced that with “tainte,” no doubt after the scribe had compared his text with another manuscript; and H8, the only source not otherwise accounted for, omits the line and must be filiated on the basis of other readings. The artifacts included at the very bottom of Figure 2—B (1635), G (1669), and AF1 (copied from G)—represent the print tradition, and include the variant reading “way” for the “taint” or “fault” found in all the surviving manuscripts. I will come back to these later.

Since filiation is essentially a matter of elaborating a hierarchical model of multiple, interlinked parts, at every structural level one is looking for discriminators that exert their force not only horizontally—separating one parallel thread or strand of transmission from another—but vertically, downward, explaining—or at least being consistent with—changes in the text that occur further down the chain. (At the beginning of the process, of course, one doesn’t necessarily know what constitutes a distinct parallel strand and what is overlapping or which way is up and which way is down on the family tree.) Upon analysis, these turn out to be features of this “taint”/“fault” variant: located at the very top of the hierarchy, it divides the sources into two parallel and non-overlapping trains of transmission, and in both lines of transmission all subsidiary texts from the head downward exhibit the defining reading—or a recognizable corruption thereof. And all parenthetically included variants on each stemma exhibit a similar bidirectional force. WN4, for instance, at the bottom right on the Stemma of the Original Text in Figure 1, reads “taint”

Figure 3: lines present/absent in EE1 and WN4

arabic numerals = lines present; *om* = lines omitted

EE1: 1-----36 *om* 43-----68 *om* 79-----114
 WN4: 1-----74 *om* 77-----96 *om* 99-----114

Figure 4: partial collation of C5, EE1, and WN4

008.NY3.0HE Elegia .1.%5a%6%K
 008.C05.HE1 Elegye .7.
 008.EE1.HE1 M%5r%6 {Donne}{his}{Elegy,}{/Vpon}{his}{Mistress}{Chayne.}
 008.WN4.HE1 D%5r%6: Down's {Elegy}{on}{/%Xhis}{Mistresses}{chaine.}

008.NY3.005 Nor for y%5t%6 sely old moralitee
 008.C05.005 that sillye olde mortallitye,
 008.EE1.005 that silly Morality,
 008.WN4.005 nor that silly ould morality

008.NY3.059 Or let me creepe to some dradd Coniurer
 008.C05.059 lett Creepe ~~dradd~~ Coniurer,
 008.EE1.059 mee creep dread Coniurer,
 008.WN4.059 or lett mee dread coniuorer

Figure 5: the descendants of τ^2 arabic numerals = lines present; *om* = omissions θ^1 family

B13: 1-----74 *om* 77-----114
 C1: 1-----74 *om* 77-----114

 θ^2 family ψ^1 subfamily

B44: 1-----68 *om* 79-----114
 R3: 1-----68 *om* 79-----114
 WA1: 1-----68 *om* 79-----114

 ψ^2 subfamily

DR3: 1-----74 *om* 77-----114
 O39: 1-----72 *om* 79-----114

HH4 and O2 subfamilies

HH4: 1-----36 *om* 38-----74 *om* 77-----114
 O2: 1-----74 *om* 77-----114

 θ^3 family ψ^3 subfamily

EU3: 1-12 *om* 17-----36 *om* 43-----74 *om* 79-82 *om* 85-96 *om* 99-----114
 HH5: 1-12 *om* 17-----36 *om* 43-----74 *om* 79-82 *om* 85-96 *om* 99-----114
 O34: 1-12 *om* 17-----36 *om* 43-----74 *om* 79-82 *om* 85-----114
 O36: 1-12 *om* 17-----36 *om* 43-----74 *om* 79-82 *om* 85-96 *om* 99-----114

F9 subfamily

F9: 1-14 *om* 17-----36 *om* 43-----74 *om* 89-96 *om* 99-100 *om* 103-----114

(instead of “fault”) in line 11, “for me” (instead of “to me”) in line 14, “golde, such” (instead of “such gold”) in line 43, and “To-negligently” (instead of “Which negligently”) in line 102.³

Postulation of the texts labeled with Greek letters on both stemmata is necessitated because, in all cases where they appear, no artifact that has survived exhibits the configuration of readings requisite to explain the textual permutations further down the tree. To return to the WN4 family to demonstrate this point, a series of interrelated considerations point to the quondam existence of γ^2 and χ^3 . It is easiest to explain this by starting at the bottom: (1) though EE1 and WN4 share the distinctive “To-negligently” in line 102 (as well as the family’s “gold, such”), each contains certain lines that the other does not have; they thus cannot be copied one from the other (see Figure 3). We are thus led to postulate the lost χ^3 as a parent from which these siblings derived “To-negligently.” (2) We are prompted to postulate χ^3 rather than to suppose that EE1 and WN4 stem from C5 because of the extreme unlikelihood that both the EE1 and the WN4 scribes would independently misread C5’s “Which negligently” as “To-negligently.” And these artifacts contain other variants that point to the same conclusion. (3) We are led to see χ^3 as the sibling of C5 rather than as its offspring by certain corrupt readings present in C5 that are absent from EE1 and WN4 (see Figure 4). In line 59, for instance, C5 records “some deade Coniurer,” but the authorial reading—“some dread Coniurer”—appears in EE1 and WN4 and must therefore have been the reading in χ^3 . To think that χ^3 derived from C5, we would have to imagine that the χ^3 scribe, who made so many other errors, had independently restored C5’s “deade” to “dread”—not impossible, but not very likely—as well as correcting other errors. The only credible inference is that χ^3 is the sibling, not the child, of C5, a fact that further implies the existence of γ^2 as a lost urtext from which C5 and χ^3 derive independently.

As is implied by Figure 3 above, gaps in the texts of various copies are often extremely useful in filiation. Especially when the subject matter of a given passage is politically or morally inflammatory, of course, it is possible that different scribes might independently delete

the same or similar sections of text—thus one always seeks corroborative evidence for any genealogical linkages based on omissions—but missing lines often provide the earliest and clearest clue to genealogical relationships. For example, the omission of lines 75-76—“And they are still bad Angels, myne are none / For forme giues beeing, and their forme is gone”—is the single most conspicuous feature of the 14 extant descendants of τ^2 , which appears at three removes from the Lost Revised Holograph on the δ^3 branch of the Stemma of the Revised Text (see Figure 1). And some families and subfamilies descending from τ^2 omit even more lines than that (see Figure 5).

Among the artifacts listed in Figure 5, O34, in the ψ^3 subfamily, appears to exhibit an anomalous pattern of omission. Whereas the other 3 members of the subfamily omit lines 97-98, O34 has these lines, and their presence might at first suggest that O34 is not correctly placed on the stemma as a sibling in the ψ^3 subfamily. There is, however, an explanation for O34's inclusion of these lines that is consistent with the filiation exhibited on the stemma in Figure 1, and it arises from proper attention to the “bibliographical code” that must be interpreted along with the lexical substance embodied in the manuscript. Let us redirect our attention to Figure 2 for a moment, and specifically to the line recording the collation of O34, about two-thirds of the way down the page. In the “taint”-“fault” column at the O34 line, as I mentioned above, we see that O34 originally read “fate,” but that the scribe canceled this word and substituted “tainte” for it (all this information was encoded in the original transcription and is signaled here by the %Y...%Z that surround the word “fate” and by the single inverted angle brackets that surround “tainte”). This alteration tells us that the O34 scribe at some point compared his text with a manuscript containing the original version—an artifact belonging on the Stemma of the Original Text (Figure 1). And another bit of the bibliographical code—also noted in the original transcription—supplies the last piece of the puzzle: in the artifact, the anomalous lines 97-98 do not follow line 96 directly, but instead appear in the margin. We thus conclude that, while collating his corrupt θ^3 text with a descendant of the

original lost holograph, the scribe of O34 also discovered this couplet that was missing from his copy and decided to include it. The ideological implications of Θ^3 's omissions of material are the subject for another paper—perhaps by some user of the Variorum volume on the elegies—but I will observe that no other lines in the poem carry a stronger theological and political content than those omitted in these artifacts.

I am confident that the transmissional history of "The Bracelet" reflected on Figure 1 is essentially accurate. Implicitly throughout this discussion and explicitly in Figure 1, moreover, I have called the alteration of "taint" to "fault" in line 11 an authorial revision. This label represents an interpretive judgment on my part, and I should like to explain the reasoning that lies behind it: (1) while "taint" and "fault" have—or at least can have—the same number of letters and while their second and fifth letters are the same, I have never seen any seventeenth-century hand in which the two words would likely be confused; so I do not think the variant likely to have arisen from a scribal misreading. (2) This word appears buried in the middle of the eleventh line of a long poem, a place not particularly likely to have called scribal attention to itself; anyone wanting to alter this word would have had to know it was there and to think it needed changing. (3) Though one could elaborate a list of markedly different theological implications for each of these words, the distinction between angels that have "stray'd or gone / From the first State of their Creation" because of a "fault" as opposed to a "taint" strikes me as more subtle than any scribe, working in the relatively private sphere of manuscript transmission, would have been likely to make. In context, both words work well, and nothing about either cries out for alteration. I cannot imagine an amanuensis copying along from his source text until he came to the word "taint" and then thinking, "Oh, my goodness! This will never do. I better change this to 'fault.'" The person who changed this word, it seems to me, would have had to be someone with a proprietary interest in the poem—someone who knew "taint" was there, who appreciated the fine distinction between "taint" and "fault,"

and who felt an owner's freedom to make the switch. I think it had to be Donne.

When a text goes public, however, it becomes subject to a different set of pressures, and this is my final example of the kinds of information that can emerge from a carefully developed filiation. As noted above, the prints—cited at the very bottom of Figure 2, below the solid line—read “way” in column five, providing a third alternative to the “taint” and “fault” found throughout the corpus of manuscripts. This would appear to be a much less tendentious word than either of the other two, and—since it appears in no manuscript—it must be compositorial. As such, it provides a tantalizing hint as to what the licenser originally found wrong with the poem and perhaps also as to what had previously led Donne to revise “taint” to “fault.” From details of the 13 September 1632 entry in the Stationer's Register that records Marriott's effort to license his book of Donne verses, we can ascertain that he showed the licenser an exemplum from the traditional Group- I manuscripts, which include “The Bracelet” as the first elegy and which read the line-11 crux as “fault.”⁴ This was the form of “The Bracelet” that did not pass muster for the 1633 edition. As noted above, however, when Marriott illegally printed the poem in 1635 (siglum B on the collation), he did not merely rustle up his former copy and sneak it into print; he changed copy-texts altogether, using a member of the λ^3 family, which is an offshoot from the δ^3 branch of the revised-text line of transmission shown in Figure 1. A score of distinctive readings corroborate this point, but I shall cite only two: (1) in line 24, all manuscripts except O21 and Y3 give the normative reading “naturall cuntry rott”; O21 and Y3, however, trivialize this to “Countryes naturall rott”—as does B. (2) The second example is that listed on the stemma: in line 104 the λ^3 family reads “Itching,” which normatively appears as “Itchy” in the speaker's virulent wish that his rival may experience “Itchy desyre, and no abilitee.” “Itching” is also the lection in B.

Since it is clear that a manuscript very like O21 and Y3 was used to set “The Bracelet” into type in 1635, and since there is no

manuscript support for the reading “way” in line 11, and since Marriot never subsequently applied for permission to print the excepted elegies, I think we may infer that he came away from his encounter with Sir Henry Herbert and the licensing Wardens in 1632 with a fairly clear notion of what they found objectionable in “The Bracelet”—and Donne’s handling of the angels must have been at least one of the controversial topics. Whether Marriott thought the objections were too great ever to be answered or too trivial to bother with, he apparently decided to finesse the problem (a) by using a different—and less easily recognizable—copy-text for the poem, (b) by altering a significantly offensive word in line 11 of the poem, and (c) by hiding the poem as the twelfth of a newly expanded numbered sequence of elegies, placing it far down the list from the number-one position it had occupied in his Group-I manuscript.

University of Southern Mississippi

Notes

¹An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1997 MLA convention in Toronto.

²NY3, the Westmoreland ms. now in the New York Public Library, is used as base text here because our analysis showed its text of "The Bracelet" to be best suited as copy-text for the Variorum; for purposes of this illustrative collation, any other text might as easily have been used.

³I should stress that the variants cited on the stemma have been chosen for their succinct illustrative power and do not by any means exhaust the substantive evidence that could be adduced to support this analysis.

⁴See Edward Arbor, *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London: 1554-1640 A. D.* (London, 1877), vol. 4, p. 249.