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Preface

Reprints '71 issue of this

No editor of Donne's poems can be confident that he is printing just what Donne wrote. With a few possible exceptions Donne's own drafts of his poems never reached the press, and only one copy of an English poem in his own hand has survived. Indeed the evidence is that even the best of the early manuscript collections and printed editions we have stand at several removes from the original copies, and multiply copying errors or select by accident from the several versions of a poem that Donne himself had put about.

None the less these seventeenth-century documents are our one means to an accurate knowledge of Donne's poems. We now have the verse letter to the Lady Carey and Mistress Essex Rich as Donne sent it. Some forty-five manuscripts which bring together poems by Donne survive from Donne's own day. Seven of his poems and a bit of another were published singly in his lifetime. And there were seven printed editions of the body of his verse from 1633 to 1669. The early collections fall into definite groups, according to the sources they drew on, and they are not equally important. Of the seventeenth-century editions in particular only one has the authority of the best manuscript collections. The 1633 edition is a valuable text because it was printed from manuscripts fairly near to Donne's original copies, while the subsequent editors, including Donne's son in 1650, drew on sources further from the originals than some versions we already have or on material already in print. But the only known text of Donne's verse which has paramount authority is that of the autograph verse letter; and in general a student often needs to have in front of him all the readings of a line which the early versions offer.

My aim in the present edition is to provide a text which is closely faithful to the early versions without being archaic. I have mod-