INTRODUCTION

This is an edition of early Stuart political poetry, drawn from manuscript sources. Roughly half the poems have never before been published, and many others have been available only in relatively obscure and dated sources. The fact that these texts have remained difficult for modern readers to access, however, should not be taken as any indication of their significance. For, at a time when restrictions of censorship prevented openly critical discussion of political identities and issues, manuscript verse, which could be disseminated anonymously and passed from hand to hand with relatively little risk, assumed a special value. These poems were known as libels: a term derived from the law, but which came to define a range of unauthorized and controversial texts, on individuals or topical issues (McRae, *Literature* 27-28. Cf. Bellany, *Politics* 98; Croft, "Libels" 266). While the libel was indebted at once to popular traditions of invective and elite literary traditions of satire, it emerged in the early seventeenth century as a distinct textual mode. In this edition, we are adopting a consciously inclusive approach to libels and political poetry, in an effort to represent the breadth of exchange in early Stuart manuscript culture. Here, therefore, are straightforward libellous assaults on men and women of state, more abstract representations of political processes, and even some eminently conservative poems written in response to libels.

The edition is borne out of an awareness of widespread interdisciplinary interest in this field, which is being stifled for lack of easy access to sources. The editors have respectively confronted this challenge, having begun research projects which required access to libels, and subsequently having devoted years to the search for texts. Those searches encompassed a range of sources—including verse miscellanies, commonplace books, diaries and letters—which may be found in archives across the world. As a result, the edition performs the function of an early Stuart verse miscellany. Many miscellanies-manuscript volumes of poems, collected by individual readers-document an intense interest in libels. Bodleian MS Malone 23, to take the most stunning example, contains one of the richest contemporary collections of early Stuart political poetry, including many pieces which were over twenty years old when the volume's owner deemed them worthy of transcription (McRae, *Literature* 42-43). The present edition

builds upon such sources, in order to gather the most comprehensive ever collection of early Stuart political poetry. Its purpose is twofold: to bring this material into the public domain in the most effective possible manner, and to provide a framework for further research. With these ends in mind, it provides one reliable text of each poem that has been identified in manuscript sources, along with explanatory annotation and a list of other known sources.

The purpose of this introduction is neither to present new arguments about early Stuart political poetry, nor to rehearse arguments that the editors have made elsewhere, but rather to contextualize the material and explain the editorial methods. Like the edition as a whole, it is prepared with an interdisciplinary audience in mind, and attempts to situate these poems in relation to scholarly concerns in both historical and literary studies. The first section considers the cultural and political conditions of early Stuart England, and outlines the principal characteristics and functions of libels. The second section describes in detail the editorial decisions on which the edition is based, and summarizes the practices that have been employed throughout.

1. The conditions and practices of libelling

The early Stuart period was not the first time that poetry had been employed in politics, nor would it be the last. Nonetheless, this edition aims to demonstrate that the political poems of these years form a body of interconnected work, which is lent coherence by virtue of the activities of both writers and readers. These people were without doubt aware of what their culture was producing, and were keen to participate in a vital cultural and political practice. Consequently, when surveying the literary and political culture of the period it is possible to identify a number of converging factors which might explain not only the proliferation of libels, but also the principal characteristics of early Stuart political poetry. As becomes apparent from any consideration of the poems and their contexts, early Stuart libels participated in an increasingly contestatory culture, and in turn helped to refine the central conflicts and struggles of that culture.

One of the most popular poems contained in this edition may seem, with the questionable benefit of temporal distance, a peculiar and quirky achievement. "The Parliament

Fart" ("Downe came grave auntient Sir John Croke") records a fart emitted in the House of Commons in 1607. More significantly, however, it commemorates both an institution and a community, as it accumulates couplet after witty couplet attributing reactions to the fart to individual members of parliament. Though it seems innocuous enough politically, readers appear to have responded not merely to the display of wit, but also to the focus on an institution which became increasingly problematic in the course of the reigns of James and Charles. Indeed none of the early Stuart parliaments was an easy experience for the monarch, and by the late 1620s the evident tensions placed acute strains on traditional ideals of a politics of consensus and counsel. It was perhaps partly for this reason that collectors continued to transcribe "The Parliament Fart" into miscellanies in the 1620s and 1630s, making it one of the most popular poems in manuscript circulation during the early seventeenth century. The poem offered, simply, an unauthorized history of the Commons. It was perhaps also for this reason that the final lines (in our chosen version) seek to identify the poem as a libel: "Come come quoth the King libelling is not safe / Bury you the fart, I'le make the Epitaph".

Although authorship of "The Parliament Fart" appears to have been in part a group activity, and although the poem changes considerably from one version to another, some readers may also have been attracted to it because it was most commonly linked to John Hoskyns. In the early years of James's reign, Hoskyns typified a political milieu characterized by transgressive acts of wit. Associated equally with the interlinked legal and literary communities of London, he established a reputation for outspokenness and dissent. Moreover, after he was imprisoned by the Crown for his contributions to the Addled Parliament of 1614, he continued to write satirical verse, and appears to have attained the status of "a martyr to the cause of free speech" (Colclough 373). Therefore, while it would risk exaggeration to identify Hoskyns as a figure of political "opposition", he assumes a central position within a culture which was increasingly prepared to question the structures of authority. There are demonstrable links between Hoskyns and the Spenserian poets of the 1610s and 1620s, who consistently agitated for political reform (O'Callaghan). More importantly, in the current context, his work is increasingly associated in manuscript culture with the waves of libels that shaped political discourse. As will become apparent, in the decades following the emission of Croke's fart these poems became freshly strident in tone and forthright in analysis.

The evident transformation of "The Parliament Fart", from a coterie production into a text of national renown, also typifies the way in which networks of political comment were stretching across the nation (Cust; Raymond). Although the discussion of domestic politics in print was heavily proscribed, contemporaries exhibited new levels of sophistication in their production and dissemination of news. The aisles of St. Paul's Cathedral, long recognized as a central meeting place in the city, became the heart of the news business: "the great Exchange of all discourse", according to one commentator, where men might "turn merchants...and traffick for news" (Earle I11v; Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution* 20-53). Beyond Paul's Walk, news was circulated into the provinces either informally, or through the expanding commercial production of newsletters and manuscript "separates" reporting events and debates. Letters and diaries from the period document the spread and intensity of interest in politics, and equally underline the importance of libels. The Suffolk clergyman John Rous, for example, appears to have found libels both unsettling and compelling. Though generally scornful of "light scoffing wittes" who "rime upon any the most vulgar surmises", Rous nonetheless recorded a significant number of libels (30). Transcribing a poem about the Isle of Rhé expedition, for instance, Rous commented that, "whether any more be sette downe then vulgar rumor, which is often lying, I knowe not" (22).[1]

These practices of textual circulation coalesced with established methods for the dissemination of poetry. Many poets, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, acknowledged what has become known as the "stigma of print", and consequently eschewed the relatively new technology of the printing press in favour of scribal distribution (Saunders). John Donne is the most notable example of a poet whose work circulated only in manuscript form in this lifetime; by contrast, Michael Drayton draws attention to this phenomenon by presenting a contrary argument, lamenting that "nothing [is] esteem'd in this lunatique Age, but what is kept in Cabinets, and must only passe by Transcription" (4.v*). Moreover, despite Drayton's biased representation, manuscript culture was by no means a private and controlled mode of textual circulation. Though most prevalent within certain sites-the universities, the court, and the inns of court-surviving evidence reveals authors and collectors alike seeking and exchanging poetry, thereby constructing miscellanies which reflect personal tastes and interests. Moreover, while literary history has tended to focus on identifiable canonical authors, scores of surviving

miscellanies also include anonymous libels. These poems were appreciated as products of wit, and therefore transcribed, often without comment, alongside the works of authors such as Donne, Ben Jonson and Robert Herrick.

Some scholars have argued that the vogue for libels within this context was influenced by the "Bishops' Ban" of 1599, which outlawed the works of certain prominent satirists. According to this argument, the banning of printed satires drove this vital literary mode "underground", where it metamorphosed into more virulent strains of libel (esp. Cogswell, "Underground"). This narrative is in many respects simplistic, and overlooks the many important distinctions between the neoclassical verse satire that flourished in the 1590s and the libels of the early Stuart decades (Bellany, *Politics* 99-100; McRae, *Literature* 27-29). Crucially, the libel was not merely a debased offshoot of an acknowledged genre, but an independent mode with its own traditions and conventions. Nevertheless, it remains unquestionable that in the early seventeenth century formal verse satire slipped from the prominent status it had held in the preceding decade, while the related mode of the libel was increasingly embraced as a preeminent product of wit. The vogue for the libel, in other words, is attributable to developments in literary culture as well as those in politics. Under the conditions of censorship which prevailed in the early seventeenth century, as contemporaries became anxious about the state of their nation and sought new ways to engage in political discourse, the libel emerged simply as the most pertinent form of satire.

In the course of the early Stuart period, it is also evident that the libel assumed its own loose set of generic expectations. Though perforce an anonymous mode, writers consistently turn their anonymity into a fundamental, and in many respects empowering characteristic. In numerous poems, especially from the latter half of our period, the speaker is positioned as a representative of the people, and looks critically at the actions and motivations of those in positions of great power. One, for example, begins by invoking the poet's muse to "Goe to the Court let those above us knowe / they have theire faults as well as we belowe" ("Bridewell I come be valient muse and strip"). In others, accounts of the sufferings of a politicized "we" assume a tone of menace, embracing suggestions of popular revolt (Norbrook 50-57). Formally, libels lack the consistency of satire, which was generally written in iambic pentameter couplets. By comparison, libels inhabit a range of forms, from the epigram to the ballad, and often deploy

a rough-hewn populism to underscore a political point. In their stances towards politics, the poems range from confrontational assault to ironic commentary. Yet all participate in a distinctive poetics of engagement, and this edition attempts to represent the breadth of this phenomenon by also including examples of the period's anti-libels: poems concerned to rebut the claims of libellers, written not only by court poets but also by James I himself.

Much scholarship, particularly in the field of political history, has tended to diminish the significance of libels because of their recurrent prioritization of morality over ideology. Libellers are undeniably drawn to instances of sexual depravity and corporeal corruption; to take the most notable example, poems on the death of Robert Cecil in 1612 seem to be fuelled almost as much by a fascination at his grotesque process of bodily decay, as by any concerted opposition to his policies and achievements (Croft, "Reputation"). But this objection to libels runs the risk of imposing upon the early Stuart period anachronistic perceptions of politics. For contemporary commentators, corporeal corruption was inextricably connected with moral corruption, while discourses of politics were effectively inseparable from those of morality. Consequently, representations of courtly immorality were at once a powerful form of political critique, and also created a forum within which a writer might think his or her way towards more abstract ideas of politics. For instance, suggestions of sodomy at court swerve from mere titillation, through moral outrage, to intimations of a discourse of opposition (P. Hammond 128-150; Knowles; Perry). One of the most important libels of the 1620s, "The Five Senses" ("From such a face whose Excellence"), focuses on the relationship between King James and his powerful court favourite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. The poem is striking in its suggestions of regal fallibility, as it suggests that the "whoreish breath" of "a Ganimede" has the "power to lead / His excellence which way it list". It concludes with a menacing prayer that God should give the king himself "a Taste.../ Of what his Subjects undergoe", and "a Feelinge of there woes". Only then might he truly appreciate the problems of his realm.

While this poem is rare in its explicit attention to the king, an analysis of the politics of libels reveals a remarkable range of political positions. Traditionally, libelling had been accepted, especially in London, as a form of crisis communication between the people and their rulers (Croft, "Libels" 270). Like many early modern riots, such libels were essentially conservative, begging for the restoration of an order perceived to be lost. Others served as

weapons in factional disputes at court, at a time when struggles for power could effectively centre on contests over the reputations of prominent statesmen. (This, indeed, is perhaps the principal explanation for the plethora of poems on the death of Cecil.) And others still used conventional discourses of denigration in order to touch upon issues of wider concern, including some of the nation's most fundamental values. At law, the doctrine of *scandalum magnatum*, under which numerous libel actions were brought to the Star Chamber, held that to libel a person in public office was also to libel the government, and hence the king himself (Bellany, "Poem" 156). As Francis Bacon recognized, counsellors and court favourites were placed in especially precarious positions; writing to Buckingham, he warned that "the King himself is above the reach of his people, but cannot be above their censures, and you are his shaddow" (*Letter* 2). This potential was exploited in the years immediately before and after Buckingham's assassination. When libels laud the assassin, John Felton, for liberating the country "from one mans thrall", they teeter uneasily between a celebration of order restored and a contrary suggestion that the very system within which Buckingham operated might itself be irreparably cankered ("You auntient Lawes of Right; Can you, for shame").

Such poems have prompted some to identify libels with the development of political opposition in the years preceding the Civil War (Cogswell, "Underground"; Holstun 143-191). But while particular poems unquestionably contain traces of radicalism, it would be misleading to approach either the politics or poetry of this period as in any way coherent. As recent historical scholarship has demonstrated, the development of opposition, from the 1620s to the 1640s, was a complex and uncertain process. In this context, much of the value of libels lies in the way that they document this process, revealing critical struggles over the meanings of political figures and events. In some cases, the satiric strategies of the poems seek simply to strip away myths of power. As Harold Love comments about Restoration satires, they function by "neutralising or evacuating the dominant fictions of state" (175). In other cases, their practices of stigmatization and discrimination create the potential for new discourses of confrontation. Ultimately, although libels may not be aligned with an identifiable and coherent oppositionist movement, and although their politics are at times provocative and evasive rather than rational and purposeful, they decisively contribute to political change. They help to make opposition conceivable: and speakable.

2. The edition: aims and methods

After centuries of historical and literary scholarship throughout which libels received relatively little attention, over the past twenty years they have finally begun to gain the attention they deserve. In the field of political history, post-revisionist scholars have focused valuably on the role of public opinion, while others have reassessed the significance of individual reputations and particular court scandals. Moreover, some historians have accepted a need to adopt different interpretative strategies when reading pamphlets and ballads, compared to those required for more direct or explicit documents (e.g. Sharpe 5). In literary studies, meanwhile, there are signs that the enthusiasm for history that propelled the new historicism and cultural materialism is increasingly now being married to a heightened appreciation of archival research and historical method. Significantly, a number of new "historical" editions of early Stuart poetry have highlighted the complex politics of manuscript culture, while important critical studies have properly situated libels within narratives of cultural and political upheaval (e.g. Ralegh, *Poems*; G. Hammond 41-66; McRae, *Literature*; Marotti 75-133; Norbrook 50-58).

This edition is a product of these movements, since it brings into the public domain the findings of two parallel research projects: one in the field of political history, the other in that of literary studies. Its collection of approximately 350 poems surpasses all existing sources for the study of libels, and includes roughly 200 that have never before been published. Its breadth of coverage and its editorial apparatus are intended to establish a foundation for further research, in a field which raises so many problems and unanswered questions. The presentation of the poems, and the explanatory notes, are also intended to make this material accessible to a wider range of readers.

a) parameters

The edition encompasses poems directly relating to English political identities and issues, which were produced for and circulated within manuscript culture. This includes anything that contemporaries would have identified as a libel, while also incorporating a number of pieces

that directly respond to libels, and others that function more in the manner of satiric commentary. But it is unashamedly biased towards expressions of dissent, and hitherto unheard voices. While critics might argue that canonical poets such as Donne and Jonson wrote politically sensitive verse, there is little reason to include their work in an edition of libels; and while poets of print culture such as Drayton and George Wither unquestionably forged new models of political poetry, they consistently defined their work against that of anonymous libellers.[1] These parameters create a particular kind of miscellany-more than commonly focused and thorough in its selections-yet one which retains the basic experience of encountering a contemporary collection of manuscript poetry.

Some of the implications of these editorial decisions may require justification. Firstly, it will be apparent to those who are familiar with this material that a significant number of the poems here have been printed elsewhere. A couple of printed sources—F.W. Fairholt's edition of *Poems and Songs Relating to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham*, and Norman Farmer's edition of "Poems from a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript"—have provided the basis for much of the existing scholarship on libels. Other sources include published news-diaries and commonplace books (e.g. Rous; Whiteway; *Dr. Farmer Chetham Manuscript*; *First and Second Dalhousie Manuscripts*). But since some of these sources are not easy to access, and none aims for comprehensive coverage, a certain amount of duplication is necessary. Secondly, since libels were written by such a broad range of authors, a number have been published in editions of the works of major seventeenth-century poets. While our versions, which are unmodernized and taken from single manuscript sources, may lack the appearance of reliability and coherence projected by a scholarly edition, to have given such poems special treatment here would not only have been inconsistent, but would unduly have privileged the canonical over the anonymous and non-canonical. Therefore, while modern editions are cited where appropriate as alternative sources, it is important here that a modern reader, like his or her early Stuart counterpart, should encounter the occasional work of a well-known author in a miscellaneous context.

The edition's borderlines are inevitably shadowy in places, largely due to the subject-matter of the poetry. The modern category of "politics" did not exist in early Stuart England; far from being an independent sphere, the political was inextricably intertwined with matters of

religion and morality. Nonetheless, most cases are obvious enough. Libels proliferated especially around key figures in the business of state, such as Robert Cecil and the Duke of Buckingham, and around court controversies and scandals, such as that surrounding the divorce of Frances Howard and her subsequent involvement in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Many more, especially in the 1620s, isolated issues of concern in parliament, such as monopolies and foreign affairs, or represented tensions between the parliament and the court. But others are more problematic. Firstly, editorial decisions have been made about poems concerned with religion, to determine whether individual pieces have any content that might reasonably be described as political. This has meant the inclusion, for example, of some pieces that specifically aim to politicize the stigmatized identity of the Puritan, but the omission of others concerned more with perceived ecclesiastical or theological aberrations. Secondly, in determining "political" content, it was determined that the edition should focus principally on a national context, as opposed to international or local contexts. Consequently, poems on the Thirty Years' War are included only if they focus particularly on the debates concerning English involvement, while numerous elegies from the early 1630s on the Swedish military hero Gustavus Adolphus are omitted on similar grounds. While it might fairly be argued that such poems are concerned to *reflect* upon English politics, they lack the qualities of outspokenness and satire that characterize libel. Thirdly, although libels on local political matters inevitably reflect upon wider debates, this edition privileges poems that were principally concerned with national figures and issues, and that circulated beyond local contexts. Poems from the provinces that survive in records of Star Chamber libel actions typically did not also circulate in verse miscellanies, and as a result this edition excludes texts from these sources (cf. Fox 299-334; McRae, "Verse Libel").

The edition's canon is determined further by a decision to privilege poems that originated in manuscript culture. Some pieces were subsequently printed, most notably after the effective collapse of censorship in the 1640s; and in such cases details of publication are provided, though manuscript sources are preferred. But a handful of other poems (not included here) moved in the other direction, originally surfacing in fugitive printed texts, but surviving in manuscript sources once the printed source was no longer available. *The Interpreter* (1622), probably written by Alexander Leighton, is a signal example of this phenomenon.[1] Other poems

that are clearly libellous managed to scrape past the censors, often when packaged in a volume of otherwise relatively innocuous material, or when presented in a sufficiently veiled manner. William Goddard managed this risky feat in 1615, when he published two epigrams on the controversial marriage of Frances Howard and Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, in which the latter is identified pointedly as “the dunghill Carr” (F4r). In the present context, however, it is entirely justifiable to treat poems which were presumably written for manuscript circulation as a relatively discrete body of writing. Manuscript poetry had its own codes and conventions, and the libel was without question a product of this particular culture.

The temporal parameters, though relatively clear, also require some notes of justification. At the beginning of our period, the only significant questions concern poems on Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, who was executed after his failed uprising against Elizabeth I in 1601. Strictly speaking, these should not belong in an edition of early Stuart poetry; however, they are included partly because they do much to establish the conventions of libelling, and partly because the factional conflicts they describe continue to influence politics over the following decades. Most notably, many of the vitriolic libels on the death of Cecil in 1612 explicitly invoke this context, and the study of such poems can only benefit from being read alongside the earlier works (Croft, “Libels” 275-76; Croft, “Reputation” 46-47). The main body of material, as will become apparent, dates unproblematically from the middle decades of the early Stuart period, with the activity of libelling reaching a high-point in the 1620s. The edition’s range ends in the early 1640s, with the collapse of the early Stuart censorship regime and the subsequent outbreak of the Civil War. As has been demonstrated in numerous studies of the 1640s and 1650s, these two events mark a relatively distinct cultural watershed (esp. Hill; Loxley; Potter; Smith; Zwicker). Although is hoped that this edition will demonstrate some of the ways in which libels of the preceding decades informed the better-known writing of the revolutionary era, it is nonetheless sensible in the present context to keep the two periods distinct.

Throughout the period, libels did not stand alone, but rather functioned within a highly contentious culture. Numerous poems directly respond to others, while all pieces contribute regardless to often bitter debates over the significance of individual lives and events. In recognition of this context, the present edition includes a range of laudatory poems, which could

not strictly be defined as libels. Instead, many might be described as anti-libels: poems directly responding to the charges of libels, and “offering rival interpretations of controversial events or attacking those whom the libellers criticised” (Bellany, “Poisoning” 115). Others simply try to maintain principles of orthodoxy and decorum: lamenting the death of Buckingham in a conventionally elegiac voice, for instance, despite the plethora of libels presenting contrary images. Given that poetry of praise accounts for a significant proportion of seventeenth-century literature, however, editorial decisions have necessarily produced a limited selection of such works. These decisions have been determined by the extent to which particular poems demonstrably participated in conflicts conducted in manuscript culture. Hence most of the poems included are concerned with individuals who were attacked in libels, while those on relatively uncontroversial figures are generally not included. In particular, the edition does not represent the wealth of poems marking royal deaths and births, even though some of these may contain critical political content.

Another way in which the parameters of the edition have been determined by the culture of the manuscript miscellany is apparent in the inclusion of anagrams and chronograms. Each form typically scrutinizes the name of its target: either by teasing meaning out of the name’s rearranged letters, or by assigning numerical values to letters (“usually employing Roman numerals, so that V signified 5, C 100 and so on”) (Bellany, *Politics* 105). Anagrams and chronograms appear to have had an ambiguous function, appreciated widely as entertaining products of wit, but also offering themselves as “keys to deeper...meaning”, or unauthorized truths (Bellany, *Politics* 107). A popular chronogram on Buckingham, for example, derived the year of his assassination, 1628, from the letters of his name. Noting this curious fact, one couplet commented darkly: “Thy numerous name great George, expresseth thee / But XXIX I hope, thou ne’re shalt see” (“Thy numerous name great George, expresseth thee”). For the purposes of this edition, anagrams and chronograms assume significance principally because of their obvious connections with libels. In many instances, such as that of the Buckingham chronogram, they are followed by explanatory epigrams. More fundamentally, they were commonly composed and collected by those involved in the culture of political libelling, and valued as products of wit. As Sir Simonds D’Ewes recalled in his *Autobiography*, when relating the murder of Thomas Overbury: two anagrams “came ... to my hands, not unworthy to be

owned by the rarest wits of this age" (1.87).

Ultimately, it is fair to conclude that the edition provides an extensive, though not exhaustive, collection of libels and related material. The texts are drawn from research in over twenty major research libraries and records offices, mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Within these archives, research was guided partly by available catalogues and first-line indices, and partly by the previous research of other scholars. No known source of any significance has been overlooked, and many new sources have been identified. Nonetheless, while there is good reason to believe that the edition has identified and collected the majority of libels extant in manuscript collections, there is also reason to believe that other poems remain to be identified. Since the cataloguing in some archives is far from complete, it is likely that further discoveries will be made as more resources become available.

b) conventional editorial practice

The editorial practice does not conform to what are generally accepted as the requirements of a "scholarly" edition of poetry. Typically, the editors of such volumes will seek all available sources for individual poems, and will produce a text by comparing these sources and identifying that which best represents the final intention of the author. Further, a scholarly edition will collate extant texts, and identify variations. By comparison, this edition reproduces one sound version of every known libel, and does not depart in any way from the selected version unless there is a special reason for doing so. In most cases, more than one version has been consulted, and a choice of a copy-text has been made on grounds of clarity and (if it is possible to judge) quality. In all cases, the text of a poem is accompanied by a list of other known sources, so that readers with particular interests may independently pursue further research into variants.

This practice combines practical and scholarly demands. For an edition of libels, it is by no means clear that the benefits of a "scholarly" edition would outweigh the extraordinary costs it would demand. Since many libels may be identified in over twenty different sources, the task of transcribing and comparing all these sources for all the poems identified for this edition would

be immense. More importantly, since libels were typically circulated anonymously, and since there is very little evidence of readers concerning themselves with variant texts and questions of authorship, the argument that one version of a poem will necessarily be "better" than another is tenuous. Distinctions between "good" and "bad" versions would inevitably become subjective, while an editorial project that produced conflated texts from different versions would have the dubious consequence of creating poems that nobody in early modern England actually read. Instead, in its presentation of each poem this edition mirrors the activity of contemporary readers, by intervening in manuscript culture at one particular and identifiable moment. The edition follows those readers in not trying to differentiate between an original and an altered version, and seeks only to identify one legible, clear and coherent source.

The physical presentation of texts similarly balances demands of textual scholarship and legibility. Consequently, the selected manuscript source for any one poem is reproduced exactly—including original spelling, punctuation, and even apparent scribal errors—except for two concessions to the modern reader. Firstly, while the seventeenth-century writer tended to follow the Roman alphabet, using interchangeably "i" and "j" and also "u" and "v", here these letters have been regularized in accordance with modern usage. Since there are no instances in which the process of regularization produces ambiguities, or asserts an editor's interpretation of a text in the face of uncertainty, there can be few arguments against this practice, especially when one considers the enhanced clarity of the regularized text. Secondly, standard scribal abbreviations and contractions are routinely expanded. Hence, while readers of early modern manuscripts are familiar with annotations that indicate, for example, an extra letter or syllable, this edition simply adds those letters and syllables without comment. Scribes are almost always clear and consistent in their practice, which is designed merely to save on labour. Given the aims of this edition, there is no good reason either to replicate their practice, or to alert readers every time an obvious abbreviation is used.

Some readers might reasonably ask why spelling and punctuation have not also been modernized. Given that the texts were considered relatively flexible at the time, there might appear to be little cause to be so careful now, especially when that care may in fact reproduce clear scribal errors. This may appear at times nonsensical, or even perverse. But the counterargument, which seems too strong to ignore, is that the process of "correction" involves

too many subjective, and possibly unsignalled, editorial decisions. In short, it becomes almost impossible, for editors and readers alike, to determine where this process should stop, and there is a risk that the experience of encountering these texts in their manuscript sources would irrevocably be altered. Instead, the best and clearest course, in this particular edition of these poems, is for the editors to perform the role of diligent and faithful (albeit at times somewhat mechanical and uncritical) scribes. Those who use the edition, either for research or teaching purposes, may of course wish to be more intrusive. One unquestionable benefit of the practice adopted here is that such users will be able to do so, while those wanting an accurate representation of the manuscript sources will equally be able to rely on the texts provided.

The edition is structured into sections, which are organized partly by topics and partly by chronology. Some of these are self-explanatory. The libels on the death of Cecil, for example, or those a generation later on the death of Buckingham, form discrete bodies of poetry. Indeed it is evident that such libellers were reading other libels, and had a sense of their participation in a distinct cultural movement. Others, due to the nature of the issues with which they engage, are not quite so clear. In the early 1620s, for instance, numerous poets, concerned by fraught relations between the court and parliament, tried to find new ways of representing such political struggles. For instance, the longest poem in the edition, "Fortunes wheele. or Rota fortunæ in gyro" ("Some would complaine of Fortune & blinde chance"), is unlike any other in its method and detail, but entirely typical of the period in its underlying motivation (McRae, "Political"). While some issues and individuals may be traced throughout more than one section, the structure is nonetheless intended to make the edition easier to navigate. As such, it follows the practice of a number of early Stuart miscellanies, which variously grouped, labelled and even indexed poems (McRae, *Literature* 36-44).

The editorial annotation attends principally to matters of historical detail. Given that they are so highly topical in character, most poems benefit from some explanation of references to individuals, events and political debates. While many will inevitably remain somewhat opaque, and while others will doubtless benefit from further contextual research, the annotation here aims simply to make the material more accessible with the benefit of information currently available to specialists in the field. The headnotes to poems provide contextual information, identify connections with other poems, and cite relevant critical material. Footnotes are usually

explanatory in nature: identifying individuals, expanding upon topical references, and glossing difficult words and phrases. Others are more strictly textual: perhaps drawing attention to variant readings, or identifying probable scribal errors.

c) electronic editorial practice

Electronic publication gives the edition a number of benefits. One central goal of the project has been to make libels as accessible as possible, thereby abolishing the monopolistic grip on their interpretation effectively claimed in the past by those with the skills and resources necessary to deal with manuscript sources. In this respect, a web-based resource, published in association with a respected free-access journal, provides an attractive alternative to conventional forms of publishing. Furthermore, when dealing with a large and disparate body of poems, electronic publication enables a high degree of navigability and flexibility. Relatively few readers will choose to read through the collection from beginning to end; others will come to the collection with particular interests, and will want tools to facilitate their research. In other words, they will want to compile their own miscellanies: and this edition encourages them to do so.

The edition's method is clear and uncomplicated. Each poem occupies a separate page, with its first-line used as a heading and a brief headnote providing some introductory information. Footnotes are marked conventionally on the text, and are accessible by following links to the bottom of the page. Between the text and the notes on a page are a number of buttons providing links to other sections, and other poems in the same section. Readers are also given access here, as on the site's home-page, to a range of search functions: by person (subject or author) and manuscript. These categories have been chosen to accommodate the most likely lines of enquiry. Most readers will be interested in individuals targeted by libels, and the search-engine will take them to whole poems, or parts of longer poems, that are relevant to those interests. Other searches will facilitate research on literary culture. While only a small number of poems can be ascribed to particular authors, the lists of all known sources of a poem, and also the searches by manuscript, should highlight practices of collecting and circulation. Within a matter of seconds a reader can identify all political poems in a particular manuscript, and then

use this as a point of comparison with other manuscripts. This might well provide a foundation for research with the actual manuscripts themselves. In particular, navigation is facilitated by indices of names, manuscripts, and first-lines. The index of names includes individuals mentioned in libels and authors of libels, as well as classical and biblical names to which the poems refer. The index of manuscripts lists all manuscripts cited in the edition, and contains links to poems contained in respective manuscripts.

At various points, the reader has an option to download poems in PDF format. Some may choose to download the entire text, to preserve in the manner of a printed book. Others will choose to compile their own miscellanies, gathering individualized collections for electronic storage and printing. In this way, the edition combines the manifold benefits of twenty-first century technologies with some of the basic reading practices of the seventeenth century. Though separated historically from the poetry's contexts, the user of "Early Stuart Libels" therefore has a breadth and ease of access that was no more than a dream for the poems' contemporary readers.

d) readers' comments and suggestions

The edition is not designed to be updated on a regular basis. It is intended rather to have the textual integrity of a conventional book, to be used and judged as it stands for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the editors are well aware that a project of this nature will inevitably be incomplete in various ways. Extra poems and sources will come to light, while new information could undoubtedly help to improve our explanatory notes. For this reason, we plan to gather information over the coming years, with a view to producing a second, and presumably final, edition. Consequently, we warmly invite comments and suggestions from researchers using this edition, all of which will be acknowledged in any future edition.Please email comments to stuart.libels@exeter.ac.uk.