Introduction

In this book a selection of studies and essays are brought together, most of which were published in earlier forms in the course of the last forty years. They have been expanded, revised, and rewritten, and a few are new. Their common theme is following the transformation of texts during the time they spent in printing houses of the fifteenth century.

Returning to work done many years ago, I have become aware that my interest in the subject has evolved. It had started with the question, ‘What can marked-up printer’s copy tell us about the production processes of early printing houses?’, but it has become modified to ‘What could happen to texts in early printing houses?’ Initially my investigations of printer’s copy were directed towards distinguishing methods of processing a text, calculations by the printers, division of copy between compositors, the order of typesetting. The studies in which I first pursued this—on the Dutch The history of Jason (printed in 1485) and Rufinus, Expositio in symbolum apostolorum, the first book printed in Oxford (in 1478)—resulted in understanding some of the practices of two very different printing houses as they were working on two very different texts. It also led me to begin to perceive that in the six years between the printing of these two books there had been a drastic change in production methods, and that this might be connected with the improvement of the functioning of the printing press. But despite all of their differences, the two books I studied in relation to their exemplar had one thing in common: the fairly extensive textual changes that had been made in order to accommodate technical requirements. When faced with problems of fitting text in a predetermined space, compositors had solved them by making changes in the text. Such changes proved to be a key to identifying the actual order of typesetting—how marks on the printer’s exemplar showed that text had been divided before being put back together again after typesetting—and they caused me to pay particular attention to textual comparison between source and printed result when other instances of printer’s copy came my way. This began to reveal another aspect of textual transmission in early printing. Textual variants between copy and print cannot always be explained by sleights of hand in typesetting or by printing-house accidents. Even when remaining unmarked in the exemplar, they can be recognised as deliberate corrections or adaptations of the text.

Having caught glimpses of what looked like deliberate modification of texts in print that had taken place during the production process, it became clear that caution was called for in any generalisation. Experience and experiment with a wider range of texts confirmed that there were requirements other than
technical that brought about changes in texts transmitted in early print, and that they must have been introduced in response to any of the great variety of circumstances in which texts were published.

The nature of a text, how it was valued, its language, the age and quality of the printer’s exemplar, and the requirements and tolerance of the readership expected by the printer all determined the level of expertise and the intensity of care that was bestowed on it in the printing house. There is infinite scope for variation in practice. Interventions introduced in the printing house can only be brought to light by observing the moment of transition, which can be caught when comparing in detail the printed product with its source, manuscript copy to print, proof to print, or print to print. That is why this book is full of textual collations; they demonstrate what in my view is a dominating feature of early print culture: the response to the fact that when printers multiplied a text in print, either for the first time or in an early stage of its dissemination, they did not know its future readers or users. The continuous process of adaptation of the actual language forms and presentation, which can be observed in successive editions of many early printed books, took place with the purpose of making them accessible to hundreds of readers who were unknown to the printer as individuals. ‘Impressores librorum multiplicantur in terra’, wrote Werner Rolewinck in 1474, and readers multiplied in much greater numbers. Concerns about accuracy, adaptation, and renewal remained a large aspect of publishing, of course, but it is as if with the abrupt expansion of the readership of a text produced in hundreds of copies—which was what the invention of printing brought about—the need to make texts acceptable to unknown readers was felt more keenly in the early years, when this phenomenon was still a novelty.

The incentives to produce texts that met the expectations of manifold readers—in so far as those expectations were perceived—were surely partly commercial; the considerable investment was also a novelty, and returns on it would depend on satisfying buyers. Yet when textual accuracy mattered, as it did for the scriptures, liturgy, or law, it cannot be denied that publishers and printers felt a sense of responsibility for the quality of the text. Reser-

---

1 In transcribing texts I have followed the rules established in the *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century now in the British Museum*, vol. 1 ('BMC') (1908), p. xviii, and followed in the subsequent volumes. Each single character is represented by a single standardised character; the two forms of r and s are ignored except when used sequentially in a collation formula. Where appropriate, line ends are indicated by ||. In printed books, recto pages are indicated by superscript a and verso pages by superscript b, and in manuscripts by superscript r and v, respectively.