CHAPTER 2

The Text in the Printing House: Printer’s Copy

Very few archival documents reveal the internal organisation of early printing houses, and mostly they are accounts recording payments for materials and income from the books they produced.¹ Even more scarce are contracts, such as those surviving for the editions of the Nuremberg Chronicle.² Any such documents which supported the business aspect of early printing do not inform us how intellectual and commercial concerns as well as technical requirements might have affected transmission of the texts that were reproduced in print. Although the number of manuscripts and printed books which are recognised as having served as exemplars in printing houses in the fifteenth century is very small when compared with the recorded output of incunable printing, investigations of some of these instances have highlighted the value of such documents as unique resources for insight into printing-house practices. It is therefore fortunate that at present as many as 40 of these documents, listed below, are recognised with certainty.³ Following the marks made by the hands of those who were engaged in producing books allows us direct insight into the procedures of the workshop, and hence into developments of technique which took place before the late fifteenth century, well before methods of bookproduction began to be described in the sixteenth century. Behind the often hastily scribbled annotation, made by people in the middle of a process, we can perceive minds at work, measuring and calculating in order to convert their exemplar, whether a manuscript or a printed book, into a new form. In the later phase of production, printer’s copy is what compositors had under their eyes, the exemplar.

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¹ The most extensive document recording the daily practice of an early printing house is the Diario, or daybook, of the Dominican monastery of San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence, where a printing press was active from 1476 to 1484. The document is in the National Library in Florence, bnc, Magl. x 143. The text was published with a commentary by Melissa Conway, The Diario of the Printing Press of San Jacopo di Ripoli 1476–1484 (Florence, 1999). For a discussion between Neil Harris, Melissa Conway, and the Editor (Nicolas Barker) about this edition, see The Book Collector, 50 (2001), pp. 10–50. For accounts documenting the publication of three works in Italian in 1476 supported by the firm of the Strozzi in Florence, see the study on the Historia fiorentina and its printer’s copy in the present collection, pp. 201–203.

² For literature, see below, List of printer’s copy, pp. 87–89 (from here on referred to as ‘List’), nos. 28 and 29.

plar from which they created the new text in type. Each exemplar for a book supported its production process over a finite period of time; within that time span, the notes made in copy preparation and the marks made by compositors bring us as close as possible to the continuous mental and manual processes which together make up the genesis of a book.

When viewed in conjunction with the finished book, the markings in printer's copy are witnesses to how the production of a book was planned, and how it grew under the compositors' hands until they handed over the typeset matter to be readied for the press. They may lead the investigator across a range of aspects, from appreciating the mechanical restrictions imposed by the available resources—a limited supply of type and the state of development of the printing press—to the question of how the text was affected by the successive procedures in the printing house. Deliberate interference with the text would often occur through correction and editing before typesetting, variants introduced during typesetting, and possibly further variants resulting from the proofreading of typeset pages. No less significant for tracing textual transmission are the variants introduced by accident during typesetting, either by misreading or as typographical errors. And then, it turns out, there are also textual variants which were introduced when a compositor was confronted with an immediate problem when trying to conform to the limits for his pages set out in advance—for example, shortening or lengthening a text in order to fit the predetermined size of a page. For the full invention of the art of printing books was not only the invention of movable type for multiplying texts in print, but also applying it to full advantage for producing books in the form of codices, that marvellous development of the early centuries of Christianity. A codex consists of sheets folded together, which necessitates a continuous text to be broken up into pages. It took several decades of ingenuity to perfect the methods for efficient production of codices in print. Once satisfactory methods were found, they remained largely established for centuries—albeit with some minor adaptations and regional differences—until the nineteenth century, when book production met its own industrial revolution.

All marked-up printer's copy has features in common. They also all show differences in the practices of workshops, but it may be useful to discuss the common features first. Printer's copy almost always shows more than one phase of the production of a book. Each phase left a layer of marks in the exemplar. In order to understand the successive processes the exemplar documents, it is necessary to establish which marks were made in the different phases of production, usually by different people.