Some notes on setting by formes

Setting by formes is a way of composing type in which the order in which the work is done is determined by the forme: first one sets the pages that will make up one forme so that it can be printed off before the pages of the next forme are set (in the case of quarto, in other words, one sets first pp. 1, 4, 5 and 8 and then pp. 2, 3, 6, and 7). This method of working alleviates the problem of type shortage and makes simultaneous setting by different compositors possible. To make the system work properly it was necessary to make an accurate calculation of the copy, marks being placed in the text wherever the compositor had to start a new page. In the case of printed copy and a page-for-page reprint this 'casting off' of copy was unnecessary and nothing stood in the way of setting by formes.

Gaskell's assertion\(^1\) that setting by formes was a common practice in English and some continental printing (though not in the Low Countries) up to the mid-seventeenth century has been contested more than once. The first time was by Bowers in his spectacular review article on Gaskell's handbook.\(^2\) The counter-arguments were more extensive in Lotte Hellinga's doctoral thesis, in which she discussed the entire corpus of the preceding literature on setting by formes and the concomitant casting off of copy—both the printer's manuals and the results of analytical bibliographical research—by reference to a Dutch incunabulum which was set by formes, albeit not consistently.\(^3\) Though she is not without reservations, she allies herself with McKenzie, who in his sensational article 'Printers of the mind' had warned against generalization on this point to.\(^4\) There is no doubt that the method was used during the incunabular period. In later periods—which are what I am concerned with here—it is assumed, as far as England is concerned, that setting by formes was practised until the end of the seven-

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Querendo XVI, 3 (1986)
teenth century; as far as France, the German-speaking countries and the Low Countries are concerned, we know next to nothing. Recent publications may alter this conclusion, but first they deserve closer study. Where copy has survived it is very important to identify the correct function of the marks occurring in it: apart from casting off with a view to setting by formes they may also have to do with calculating the total amount of copy for purposes of estimating the size of the printed work (important, for example, in planning and budgeting for wages and purchases of paper); then again there are the compositor's marks—marks which the compositor sometimes made on the copy in order to know where to start again after a break and to correlate copy and printed page for the corrector.

It is conspicuous that of all the printer's manuals there is only one that has anything to say on the subject of setting by formes—and that is the oldest of them all, Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* of 1683-4. And the single sentence to which I refer is so unclear that it has attracted comment from eight bibliographers:

But no wise Compositor, except he work on Printed Copy that runs Sheet for Sheet, will be willing to Compose more Sheets to a Quire than he shall have a Fount of Letter large enough to set out, unless he will take upon him the trouble of Counting off his Copy: because he cannot Impose till he has Set to the last Page of that Quire; all the other Sheets being Quired within the first Sheet, and the last Page of the Quire comes in the first Sheet.

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6 Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683-4), 2nd edn., ed. by Herbert Davis & Harry Carter (London 1962; repr. New York 1978), pp. 210-11. The commentaries by McKerrow, Bond, Davis & Carter, McKenzie and Gaskell have been discussed by Dr Hellinga in her *Methode en praktijk*, pp. 32, 35, 40, 43 and 53; she adds her own comments; the commentaries by Dunkin and Tanselle are to be found in the publications by them referred to in note 5 above, on pp. 43-5, 103 and 32-3 respectively. McKerrow, Davis &