This is a revisionist history of press censorship in the rapidly expanding print culture of the sixteenth century. Professor Clegg establishes the nature and source of the controls, and evaluates their means and effectiveness. The state wanted to control the burgeoning press, but there were difficulties in practice because of the competing and often contradictory interests of the Crown, the Church, and the printing trade. By considering the literary and bibliographical evidence of books actually censored and placing them in the literary, religious, economic, and political culture of the time, Clegg concludes that press control was not a routine nor a consistent mechanism but an individual response to particular texts that the state perceived as dangerous. This will be the standard reference work on Elizabethan press censorship, and is also a history of the Elizabethan state's principal crises.
PRESS CENSORSHIP IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND
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To
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Preface

Renaissance literary studies have been engaged of late in a lively reappraisal of the interrelationships of literature, politics, and culture in early modern England. At the same time that this enterprise has embraced the new by grounding its rereading of early modern texts in postmodern theory, it has been remarkably remiss in failing to reconsider those “old” assumptions that shaped political and historical studies—particularly with regard to print culture. This methodological dichotomy has yielded an interesting conundrum. We have come to accept literature as highly political and the political system governing press control as highly repressive. This would hardly be problematic except for the widely accepted premise that the principal end of press control in early modern England was to rout out discourse that did not uphold the state’s religio-political hegemony.

In *Censorship and Interpretation*, Annabel Patterson has proposed an appealing way out of this contradiction—functional ambiguity, that is, a code of discourse accepted by both authors and the state that allowed religio-political discourse to be contained by linguistic indeterminacy. Ironically, Patterson’s work has served as fundamental to new historicist and cultural materialist studies at the same time that these studies have collapsed the notion of literature that enables Patterson’s hermeneutics of censorship. Functional ambiguity works best for what Renaissance writers called “poesy,” but historicist/cultural studies have exploded our concepts of literature to include a vast array of texts. This expanded notion of text and intertextuality, confronting us as it does with so many more of those puzzling incidents of noncensorship” noted by Patterson than poesy, springs the lock of prevailing assumptions about press control.

This study, which rehistoricizes the study of press censorship, began by casting aside the dearly held assumptions about press controls and replacing them with questions. What were the mechan-
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isms of press control in early modern England? How were they instituted? What kind of legal theory governed the controls? How were controls enforced? For answers I turned to historical archives – Star Chamber records, State Papers, records and manuscripts in the library of the Church of England at Lambeth Palace Library, historical manuscripts in collections of the British Library and the Huntington Library, records of the printing trade, and early modern printed books – particularly censored texts. Approaching the historical record with the first three questions took me in the same path that Frederick Siebert had followed in his history of censorship, Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776, but the fourth led me in an entirely different direction. The first three enabled a description of how censorship should work – a theory of censorship. Looking at how controls were enforced moved me from a consideration of theory to one of practice. The historical record makes those incidents of noncensorship far less puzzling by revealing the distance between enacting mechanisms for control and regularly and systematically employing those mechanisms. Indeed, actual practices in government and the printing trade reveal multiple religious, political, economic, and social interests competing for expression and control. Book production and controls were not a whole cloth of state authority. Despite these often contradictory and competing practices, however, censorship did occur. If the motive for this censorship could not be located in the efficient practice of government censorship, what then? My study turned to censored texts themselves to consider what protocols, what ideologies, what kinds of language invoked censorship. Over and over again, the highly allusive language of censored texts demanded that the texts themselves be historicized, that is, read as fully as possible within the political, religious, economic, and literary contexts that produced them. This book, then, is principally a history of press censorship. The texts and contexts of censorship, however, have determined that it should be more than an “acts and monuments” of censorship (a book of martyrs?). Since each censorship “event” is actually a complex locus in which multiple issues and interests are represented, this is a book about books (the material objects and the authors, patrons, printers, and authorizers), and the political, religious, and literary culture that produced them. It is a book that bears testimony to the degree to which print culture became a compelling force in England in the late sixteenth-century – compelling enough that the central religious, political, literary, and
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Aesthetic issues of the day received consideration in print. It also bears testimony to the anxieties that the growth in printed texts produced—certainly in the Church and state, but also in the printing trade and among writers. Church, state, and individuals were anxious about how they were represented in print and how these representations might destabilize their authority. Printers and publishers were anxious about adequate employment and their rights to copy. Writers were anxious about how print would affect their reception. Efforts to control the press were measures taken to alleviate anxieties.

Lest we judge these early modern efforts to quell anxiety too harshly, we should be reminded that print culture was as new to people in the sixteenth century as electronic media is to us today. The United States Congress in February 1996 passed the Communications Decency Act to outlaw “indecent” communications on the Internet as part of the Telecommunications Reform Act. Those economic forces—including publishers, film studios, recording companies, and software developers—which would reap economic benefits by extending copyright to electronic media have repeatedly pressed for congressional support to make it a felony to distribute any licensed material beyond its initial authorized use. The language in these matters—“authorized use,” “license,” “copyright,” “decency”—echoes the language present throughout this book used in the late sixteenth century in relationship to controlling print. It is perplexing that efforts to control the press in early modern England have produced more indignation in recent years than V-chips, digital rights, and internet censorship—or commercial control of American television programming. Indignation, however, has too often been the point of studying censorship. We can gain far more by recognizing that by studying censorship in any culture at a given time we can locate not only where power resides but what instabilities exist in the grounding of that authority.

The shape this book has taken follows in part the structure that emerged from my questions, in part the objects and methods of my consideration. The first three chapters focus on the mechanisms of control; the last seven on censorship practices. What began as a study of early modern press censorship, however, has become a book about England during the reign of Elizabeth I. This limitation does not mean that Elizabethan censorship is representative of early modern censorship practices—it quite the contrary. Censorship
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resulted from (and responded to) particular and local events and personalities, and it (theory and practice) altered with changes in state affairs. Since the death of a monarch was one of the most significant events in early modern national histories, the deaths of Mary and Elizabeth offer convenient margins for a book that easily could have doubled or tripled in size had it considered all of early modern England. The book’s organization, besides growing out of the kinds of questions I asked, emerged from the dichotomy in my sources. Several years ago in a seminar at the Huntington Library, Patrick Collinson remarked that the difference between historians and people who work in literature is that historians study documents and literature people study texts. Since earlier studies of press censorship considering either texts or documents have proven insufficient, I have considered both. I have tried to employ the methodology of both a literary scholar and a historian, but without a distinct divide. Though the first three chapters may appear to be traditionally historical and the last seven traditionally literary, I have throughout subjected historical evidence to the kind of subtle textual reading literary scholars employ. Likewise, books, their texts, and their production, have formed a very important part of my historical evidence.

Fairly representing historical and textual evidence has been my principal concern. Since most of the early printed books and manuscripts exist only in archives and rare book libraries, I often quote rather than merely cite. I perhaps err in the direction of over quotation and citation but do so because so many former assumptions about censorship have grown out of misquotation, inference, and misinformation. Early printed texts are represented here without spelling modernization, though early modern printing house conventions of using “u” and “v” and “i” and “j” interchangeably are abandoned, as are “vv” for “w,” the long s, ligatures, accents on doubled letters, contractions using “‘,” and “y” for thorn (for which modern “th” is employed). Obvious typographical errors such as inverted letters or arbitrary font substitutions have been corrected.

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