TRANSMISSION OF TEXTS BY Scribes AND COPYISTS: UNCONSCIOUS AND CRITICAL INTERFERENCES

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As a result of the accessibility of manuscript collections, cheaper and faster travel, the improvement of microfilming techniques, and the formation of microfilmed manuscript collections, as well as the development of philological schools, direct reliance on the manuscripts has established itself as a dominant research procedure in many fields of classical and medieval Jewish studies. While the replacement of printed books by handwritten codices as more accurate sources of the texts is fully justified, there is a tendency to overvalue the trustworthiness of manuscripts as witnesses to the original texts.

Undermining the reliability of the medieval manuscripts may sound contrary to my vocation as a palaeographer and codicologist. To be sure, my concern in this paper is not the handwritten Hebrew book as an artefact which reflects individual and collective reality, which testifies to intellectual and artistic activity, which demonstrates diversified technological and aesthetic traditions, and which represents the social values of its time and region. The prestige of medieval manuscripts as artefacts, almost the only physical Jewish objects to have survived from the Middle Ages, is indisputable. Nor is it my intention to deprive Hebrew manuscripts of their glorious role in preserving, transmitting and disseminating classical and medieval texts and sustaining cultural continuity. What I intend to challenge is our overestimation of the textual evidence of the medieval manuscripts and our concept of the nature of the scribal reproduction of texts. My main arguments will be drawn from the authors’, scribes’, and copyists’ own explicit or implicit testimonies.

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In dealing with the transmission of Hebrew texts in the high Middle Ages we should first bear in mind two essential circumstances relating to the creation of medieval texts and their reproduction and dissemination, which had an immense impact on the nature of the transmission.

The first factor concerns medieval authorship, or 'copyright', and relates to the way in which medieval authors viewed their ownership of their works. Publication of texts in the 'chirographic' era, as W. Ong called it, differed considerably from publication in the typographic era, and one of the gravest dangers facing the modern editor is to ignore the special circumstances under which texts were published in the Middle Ages and to attribute, unconsciously, the procedure of printed publication to the process of scribal publishing.

A medieval scholar most probably composed his work as a modern scholar does. While a modern scholar makes extensive use of libraries, including his own, a medieval scholar had only a small number of books at his disposal, and had to rely substantially on his memory. But otherwise the process of composing must have been very similar, as can be inferred from the surviving medieval autographs and author-copies, which contain notes, drafts, rewrites, modifications, insertions of new material, omissions, substitutions of words, and so forth. Indeed, Isaac ben Moses of Vienna (c.1180–c.1250), in his Or zarua', testified to seeing commentaries by Rashi written in his own hand in which texts were cancelled and replaced by different ones, written between the lines and in the margins.1 The process of composing lasted a long time, during which the author would probably be introduced to new or previously unknown texts or teachings, which might influence, be related to, or be partly incorporated in his own work.

This dynamic state of the text and its transformational character comes to an end once it is published in print. The printed publication guarantees the standardization of the disseminated text at a certain stage. If an author continues to reshape his work, modify and update it, a second edition will standardize the new version, and the two versions will never be confused. But when texts were transmitted by manual copying, works of scholars may have been copied at different stages of their creation and consequently disseminated in various original

versions, while the author had no control over his text. Copies representing different stages of the text were in circulation. Some of these have survived and are at our disposal; they present a confusing variety of irreconcilable original readings, in addition to variants caused by the physiological and psychological mechanics of copying and the deliberate, critical interference of scribes.

Moreover, we have explicit evidence that important texts were copied and circulated as each section was finished, before the completion of the entire work. In a study to which I shall repeatedly refer, Shraga Abramson presents many quotations from medieval authors who, in later parts of their works, propose modifications to earlier passages of the same work, a phenomenon which cannot be understood unless those passages were copied and circulated before the completion of the entire work. Illuminating evidence concerning the process of publication is explicitly provided by Jonah ibn Janah (Spain, first half of the eleventh century) in his Kitab al-usul (Sefer ha-shorashim). In a note to the entry כר the author apologizes for his mistake in placing the root after כר instead of integrating it in the entry כר. He explains that it was impossible to insert it there, since that part of the dictionary had already been carried out by the riders and disseminated: כר והלכות הרובים והמשתמשים המaho הארכות מלאת כיון הוהزادן ברך והלכות הרובים והמשתמשים המדהים.

Even when a work was completed and released by its author for circulation, he could still revise it. Maimonides, for example, was constantly revising his commentary on the Mishnah, from its initiation in North Africa until the end of his life in Egypt. This is evident not only from the drafts preserved in the Genizah and from the many cancellations, alterations and additions in his own fair copy of the work, but also from the fact that Maimonides

2 With regard to the Christian world, see the illuminating presentation by E. Ph. Goldschmidt, Medieval texts and their first appearance in print (London: Oxford University Press for the Bibliographical Society, 1943), particularly 89–93.


4 Ibid., 7–8; The book of the Hebrew roots, ed. A. Neubauer (Oxford, 1875), col. 266; Sefer Haschoraschim, ed. W. Bacher (Berlin, 1896), 182 (the passage is not included in Judah ibn Tibbon’s translation, based on the first version, and was translated by Bacher from the Arabic manuscripts; cf. his introduction, XXV); see also Y. Yahalom and A. Saenz-Badillos, Leshonenu, 48–49 (1983–84), 254.

5 MSS Oxford, Bodleian Library Poc. 295 and Hunt. 117; Jerusalem, Jewish National and University Library Heb. 4° 5703/1–2. The first two of the four surviving sedarim, MSS Hunt. 117 and 4° 5703/1, are written on laid paper with single and even chain lines, reflecting early Occidental Arabic papermaking techniques, while the other two sedarim are written on typical oriental paper (note 44 in my Hebrew codicology [Paris: CNRS, 1977 and Jerusalem: Israel Academy, 1981], 29–30, should be corrected accordingly).
himself explicitly corrected and changed in his responsa his own already circulated text. Maimonides was indeed aware of the problem of authorized versions, as is attested by his inscription and signature at the end of a copy of part of his Mishneh Torah, copied in his lifetime, and now preserved in the Bodleian Library: מנה מספריה ויד נא השם וברך המונע דבריו. Maimonides confirms that the manuscript was corrected according to his own personal copy. This is the only surviving example in a Hebrew manuscript of the practice known in Arabic transmission as ijaza, the validation by the author of a final version, which was then recopied by later scribes.

However, there were authors who, aware of the difficulty of updating texts disseminated by copying, endeavoured to publish a new authoritative version or versions of their work and to distinguish clearly between the different versions. Probably the most striking example of this phenomenon is furnished by Isaiah di Trani (Italy, first half of the thirteenth century), who revised and published his Pesaqim several times (some tractates appeared in five editions), but who tried to differentiate the versions by numbering them. It seems, however, that the usual way of publishing works in the Middle Ages was to grant free access to the author’s copy and let it be copied during its various stages, even without the author being informed about the copies being made. I know of no better illustration of the problems caused by disseminating texts still in the process of being written and of the helplessness of authors in controlling their works, than Levi ben Abraham’s colophon to his philosophical book Livyat hen, completed in Arles in 1295. In this colophon, to be found in MS Vatican ebr. 192, he writes that in the course of the creation of his work he made textual and structural changes, and from time to time corrected it and added new material. He has been informed, however, that while this process was still going on, people copied most of the work, and he therefore pleads with those who have copies of one of the earlier versions to correct the text according to the latest version, or replace it with the final version.

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7 MS Oxford, Hunt. 80 (Neubauer Catalogue no. 577).
9 Cf. Abramson, ibid., 12-14, for other examples as well.

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Another illuminating source which testifies directly to the peculiar realities of medieval text dissemination is found two centuries later. It is a manuscript of a commentary on the SeMaG by Isaac Stein, compiled and copied by his son in Germany in 1506. Having copied twenty-three folios, the scribe remarks that he has found only that part of his father's work actually edited. However, he discovered in his father's copy of the work many interpolated notes which contained, in effect, his commentary on each paragraph of the SeMaG. The son made great efforts to edit and incorporate all those notes into a coherent commentary. Furthermore, the son tells us that (as was the case with the work of Levi ben Abraham) there were people who had copied his father's notes many years before his father edited his commentary, while the notes were not yet revised and edited but presented only as drafts to be used during his teaching in the Yeshivah and changed following discussions with the scholars. The son asserts that his father was not aware of the copies made from his interpolated notes, as he 'has not hidden his copy of the SeMaG from those people'.

These special conditions of publishing works, or of letting them be reproduced and circulated, interrupted the linear transmission of many texts and instead imposed multi-linear reproduction. This situation may explain the amazing attitude of medieval authors to their own works. Abramson assembled many examples of authors and translators, starting from Saadya Gaon, who appeal to the users of their works to correct any mistake they may find in them. Their appeals do not relate to linguistic mistakes and omissions only, but also to contents. Some authors even encouraged the users to add material, as did Rav Nathan Av Ha-Yeshivah in his introduction to a commentary on the Mishnah: ותנ ותסונ והמחבר והמחבר על הפסוק אחד שאמר במכותיו, ואמר פנוי:B11

Such encouragement may also reflect a medieval concept of intellectual ownership altogether different from the modern one, namely a concept of collective ownership. This...
attitude may also explain the editorial freedom exercised by scribes in reproducing texts, which is the main theme of the present volume. To be sure, not all authors encouraged users to correct and improve their works. In a colophon to one part of *Midrash ha-hokhmah,* the philosopher Judah ben Solomon Ha-Kohen of Toledo (first half of the thirteenth century) forbids future copyists to copy only a part of his work, and adjures them to be careful in copying it faithfully letter by letter.14

Besides appealing to the copyists to correct and add relevant material, authors granted them an additional role in the recreation of their texts by leaving it to them to complete citations from other works incorporated in their books. Explicit evidence of this practice has been preserved in the text of *Me'ah she'arim* by Isaac ben Abba Mari, the author of *Ha-'ittur.* In this work the author cites *Rif.* In two cases he does not cite the relevant passages but only begins, and then writes, ‘*עיוני המעיונים魰ו ... עני עני עני,** ‘the copyist should copy from ... to ...’. These instructions, apparently normally followed by the copyists, luckily survived the chain of copying in two cases,15 adding to our elusive knowledge of the ways texts were created and disseminated during the Middle Ages.

The second essential preliminary aspect of Hebrew textual transmission involves the individual nature of Jewish book production, and the differentiation between scribes and copyists. Unlike Latin texts which, until the mid-thirteenth century, were mainly produced in, and disseminated by, the institutional copying centres of monastic multi-copyist *scriptoria,* then by university stationers employing the *pecia* system, and in the late Middle Ages to a large extent by commercial urban and lay ateliers,16 medieval Hebrew books were not produced by the intellectual establishments, or upon their initiative, whether in religious, academic or secular institutional copying centers, but privately and individually. A medieval Jew who wished to obtain a copy of a certain book would either purchase it from a private owner or book dealer, or hire a professional or semi-professional scribe to produce a copy for him, or he would copy the book himself. While the institutional and centralized nature of Latin book

14 MSS Oxford Mich. 551 (Neubauer Catalogue no. 1321) fol. 124r and Poc. 343 (Neubauer Catalogue no. 1223), fol. 89r. See also the colophon of *Safenat pa'aneah* by the qabbalist Joseph ben Moses Alashkar (Tlemcen, 1529), in which he adjured any future copyist to proof-read every quire upon its completion before proceeding to copy the following one, ‘as I saw some scribes err and miss the author's intention’ (see the facsimile edition of MS Jerusalem, JNUL Heb. 4° 154, *Sefer safenat pa'aneah,* with introduction by M. Idel, [Jerusalem, 1991] fol. 228v).


production involved control and standardization of the texts produced, no authoritative supervision was involved in the transmission of Hebrew texts.

Yet, within this individual mode of Hebrew text reproduction there is a fundamental difference between texts reproduced by professional or hired scribes, and owner-produced texts. The common phenomenon of manuscripts being copied by their owners is indeed a unique and striking characteristic of Hebrew book production. Our knowledge of this practice, and its extent, is drawn from colophons. The recording and analysis of almost all the extant manuscripts with dated colophons, some 3,200 copies in all, indicate that at least half the medieval Hebrew manuscripts were personal, user-produced books, copied by educated persons or scholars for their own use, and only half, or most probably less than half, were produced by hired scribes, whether professional or occasional. Such a high rate of non-professional, personal copying, prevailing in all the Jewish geo-cultural areas except for the Yemen, certainly reflects the extent of Jewish literacy and education, but it must also have affected the transmission of texts and their versions. In general, there must have been a fundamental difference between the reproduction of texts by a hired scribe and reproduction by a talmid hakham who was copying texts for his own use, though this difference is sometimes blurred in the case of scholars, like Abraham Farissol, who made their living from copying books. I suggest calling the former a scribe, and the latter a copyist. One is entitled to assume that the average hired scribe would have been consciously more loyal to his model, probably would have avoided critical and deliberate intervention in the transmission, yet would have been more fallible and vulnerable to the involuntary changes and mistakes conditioned by the mechanics of copying, while the scholar-copyist might intentionally interfere in the transmission, revise his exemplar, emend and reconstruct the text, add to it and modify it according to his knowledge, memory, conjecture or other exemplars, and indeed regard copying as a critical editing and not merely as duplicating.  

17 See, for instance, the controlled process of producing books in the scriptorium of Frankenthal presented by A. Cohen-Mushlin, A medieval scriptorium: Sancta Maria Magdalena de Frankendal, I-II (Wolfenbüttler Mittelalter-Studien, 3), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990).

Moreover, logic suggests that scribes would tend to repeat obvious mistakes in their models, while copyists would correct the corrupted text. Indeed, these assumptions can be substantiated and verified by the scribes' and copyists' own statements in their colophons.

The low position of hired scribes, and their inferior intellectual status in the social hierarchy, are attested both in the Orient and in Ashkenaz. In the Orient these are reflected in their meagre wages, which were much lower than those earned by skilled labourers, while according to Sefer hasidim copying was the profession of those who were not capable of studying even the Bible or Aggada. The fact that in fifteenth century Italy about half the dated extant manuscripts were written in non-Italian scripts, mainly Sephardi and to a lesser extent Ashkenazi, mostly for Italian owners who were not accustomed to those scripts, can also be explained by the inferior status of the profession, which resulted in immigrants dominating it almost entirely.

Both scribes and copyists were subject to the unconscious mechanics of copying, which inevitably laid many snares and induced unwitting errors. The physiological, psychological and mental process of copying is complex, and has not yet been sufficiently studied and clarified. This complicated process puts many pitfalls in the way of exact reproduction and frustrates the best intentions of a scribe to adhere to his model, involving, as it does, repeated movement of the copyist's eyes from model to copy and back, which may cause unnoticed omissions, repetitions and transpositions; the memorization of the visually perceived series of words; the impact of transferring a text in one format and layout to a different one, or of transferring a text in one type of script to another; the linguistic decoding of the visual signs and their combinations and the filtering of them through the copyist's own linguistic system before they are transcribed, resulting in a blended, intermediary system by which the transcription is produced as a mixture of the text's and the copyist's linguistic systems; the significant consequences of the apparent phonetic or oral medium involved in copying, whether it be vocal, as in the

19 On the intervention of scribes in the transmission of the Prose Lancelot and the freedom they felt to make any alternations that they felt would improve the text, see E. Kennedy, 'The scribes as editors', Mélanges de langue et de littérature du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance offerts à Jean Frappier, I (Publications romanes et françaises, 112), (Geneva: Droz, 1970), 523–31.
20 See the references in Beit-Arié (above, note 18), 179, note 13.
21 Ibid., 171–2.
medieval custom of reading aloud\textsuperscript{24} (attested in Jewish sources by \textit{Sefer hasidim}),\textsuperscript{25} or silent, as in the phenomenon which Havet calls 'internal dictation',\textsuperscript{26} and to which A. Dain attributes most copying errors, claiming that the visual aspect of the text and incorrect reading affects copying much less than the oral aspect involved in the process;\textsuperscript{27} the undefined psychological factors which produce errors of haplography, dittography and association;\textsuperscript{28} and so on.\textsuperscript{29}

The presumed impact of the psychosomatic mechanics of copying on transmission can be verified by comparing the readings of those surviving manuscripts which were clearly copied from each other. Incontestable evidence of this situation is provided when a colophon of the model is copied by a scribe who then adds to it his own colophon. This is the case, for example, in MS Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana Plut. II. 41, which contains \textit{Sha'arei 'ora} by Joseph Gikatilla and a compilation of various other short qabbalistic works, copied in Lerida (Spain) in 1325-1327/28, for the copyist's own use. The Florence manuscript served as a model for MS New York, Columbia

\textsuperscript{24} W. Wattenbach, \textit{Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter} (Leipzig, 1896), 495-6 cites a colophon formula from an eighth-century Latin manuscript, with elements that appear in many later colophons, which indicates reading aloud as part of the copying practice: 'Qui scribere nescit nullum putat esse laborem. Tres digiti scribunt, duo oculi vident. Una lingua loquitur, totum corpus laborat...'. The common assumption of reading aloud in the Middle Ages was recently revised by P. Saenger, who argues that the separation of words in Latin manuscripts, starting from the seventh century onwards, enabled silent reading and copying, which were well suited to the monastic conditions. Cf. 'Manières de lires médiévales', \textit{Histoire de l'édition française}, I (Paris: Promodis, 1982), 131-41; 'Silent reading: its impact on late medieval script and society', \textit{Viator}, 13 (1983), 367-414.

\textsuperscript{25} »oip n»n anis n>nv no bai a*i»i voa i>aa 'one who used to copy from the Bible and the commentaries ... and would first read aloud anything he was writing' (\textit{Das Buch der Frommen}, ed. J. Wistinetzki [Berlin, 1891], page 187, par. 733 = page 420, par. 1363).

\textsuperscript{26} L. Havet, \textit{Manuel de critique verbale appliquée aux textes latins} (Paris: Hachette, 1911), 44-6.


\textsuperscript{28} For psychological explanations of copying errors see J. Andrieu, 'Pour l'explication psychologique des fautes de copist', \textit{Revue des Etudes Latines}, 28 (1950), 279-92; S. Timpanaro, \textit{The Freudian slip: psychoanalysis and textual criticism} (London: NLB, 1976) (though rejecting Freud's analysis of spoken slips, Timpanaro claims that copying slips and other errors derive psychologically from the same causes as speech slips. The phonetic aspect of the copying process supports his argument).

University X893 G363, which was written in Rimini (Italy) in 1405 by a copyist, who reproduced his exemplar's colophon. The same Florence manuscript served as a model for another copy made by a hired Provencal scribe a few months earlier in Italy, MS Vatican Urb. ebr. 31, as is evident from the complex contents of this manuscript. Both copies incorporated the marginal glosses written by the copyist of MS Florence within the text. The scribe of MS Vatican was earlier commissioned to copy the first part of MS Florence in MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary Micr. 5449, which he wrote at the end of 1404.30

But the most rewarding comparison is provided when the same text is copied twice by the same hand from the same model within a short time. Such a comparison demonstrates that deviation from the exemplar is not rigidly conditioned by certain psychological, linguistic and mental structures, or by the copyist's spelling habits, pronunciation and associations, but it is rather flexible and open. Both professional, uncritical and critical scribes show that their copying is subject to unstable determinants which may result in them producing two different versions while copying from the same model! An illuminating example of this phenomenon can be found in MS London, British Library Harley 150 (Margoliouth Catalogue no. 189). In the course of time additional commentaries were appended to, or bound into, the original manuscript, which was copied in 1257, probably in France, and contained Rashi's commentary to the Prophets. Rashi's commentary to the Megillot is bound into the beginning of the volume (fos. 1r–27r). The scribe of this addition in fact completed an early Ashkenazi fragment of the commentary, written probably at the time of the original manuscript (two bifolia, fos. 13–14, 17–18). The scribe who completed the fragment in a semi-cursive Ashkenazi script is Moses ben Joshua Merkis (or Merkish), who finished his copy in 1503/04, and was commissioned by a certain Moses ben Mordecai. He was a professional or hired scribe who was active in Northern Italy, and is known to us from four other manuscripts written between 1473/74 and 1491/92.31 When the scribe reached fol. 10v, while he was copying the commentary to Qohelet, he started to recopy the text which he had already written at the head of the previous leaf.

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30 However, one cannot rule out the possibility that both the scribe and the copyist used a later exemplar which preserved the colophon of MS Florence.

He realized his mistake when he reached the beginning of the twelfth line in the first column, stopped the overlapping copying and noted in a small script:

The scribe justified his mistake by his lack of permanent lodgings, and despite his exaggerated expressions, he surely echoes the fate of hired scribes who were forced to move from town to town in order to make a living, as is attested indeed by colophons of manuscripts written by the same scribe. A comparison of the two copies of this same short text shows no less than twenty discrepancies in eleven lines! They represent not only minor punctuation and spelling changes, but also omissions or additions and differences in the conjugation of verbs and the declension of nouns (see figs 1 and 2).

But the unstable and variable results of transcribing texts, which defies theories of text criticism, do not characterize only non-scholarly, hired scribes, but also learned scribes, as the famous Leiden manuscript of the Jerusalem Talmud clearly demonstrates. This important manuscript, copied in Italy in 1289, was commissioned from Yehiel ben Yequtiel Ha-Rofe, who was undoubtedly a scholar, and should be identified with the author of the halakhic compendium Tanya and other works. As he testifies in his colophons, his copying was a critical one, and he endeavoured to emend his corrupted model:

For codicological reasons Yehiel copied twice the text of an entire folio, in large format, from the tractate Mo'ed Qatan, once on fol. 362, and again on the preceding fol. 361. I.Z. Feintuch, who compared the text of the two parallel leaves and analysed the differences between them, found at least fifty disagreements within the seventy six duplicated lines! In addition to discrepancies in spelling, grammar and the use of abbreviations, changes of names,
Figure 1: London, British Library, MS Harley 150, fol. 9r
Figure 2: London, British Library, MS Harley 150, fol. 10r
omissions and additions, there were differences in wording, and some critical interventions which occur in one copy but not in the other. We should, therefore, acknowledge the vulnerability of texts transmitted both by medieval scribes and by learned copyists. Not only were they involuntarily affected by many elusive psychosomatic factors and by deliberate critical intervention, but the influence of these factors varied and fluctuated within a short space of time.

Let us examine now some references by scribes and copyists to their copying in colophons. Both professional scribes and learned copyists were well aware of their fallibility, and the unnoticed mistakes that they must have made while transcribing their models. Perhaps the commonest scribal formula in colophons is that of apologizing for having committed errors and begging God’s, or the user’s, forgiveness, e.g.:

Some scribes are more specific. Saadya ben David Adani, a Yemenite scribe, copyist and author, who wrote some fifteen surviving manuscripts in Syria and Palestine between 1463 and 1485, used to employ the formula

This copyist specifies the various errors committed in copying, namely, mistakes in transcribing, additions and omissions, and indicates that these errors are imposed unwillingly on the copyist. Having apologized for their mistakes, many scribes appeal, as the authors themselves did, to future readers to make corrections, thereby acknowledging the mutable nature of the transmission.

Quite often such apologies are followed by a statement specifying the causes which provoked and generated the errors, and some of these statements contribute to our knowledge of the medieval transmission of texts. The most frequent cause to which scribes attribute their mistakes is their erroneous model. This is the case with the scribe of the Leiden Yerushalmi. Many scribes and copyists who complain about their mistaken exemplars indicate that they tried to emend their errors as much as they were able to, or admit that they corrected only a portion of them. However, information about emendation of a corrupted model is usually found in the colophons of manuscripts produced by private copyists, or by scholar-scribes, and only rarely in the colophons of manuscripts written by regular, hired scribes. The latter would sometimes admit their incompetence to correct the

36 Feintuch, op. cit., 51-63 (esp. 55-9). A brilliant new codicological explanation for the recopying was recently suggested by B. Elizur, Qiryat Sefer, 63 (1990-91), 661-8 (in Hebrew). On changes in duplicate copyings by the same scribe (or two scribes working together) in Latin manuscripts, see W.M. Lindsay, ‘Scribes and their ways’, Palaeographia Latina, 2 (1923), 21-2.
copied text, as when Moses ben Isaac Hillel, commissioned to copy *Hovot ha-levavot* in Geraci (Sicily) in 1371, states: לכו המודא ויבא אותם יlijahוlek וגו וקנוהי על חזירי מקינ את אנוהי ('he who finds mistakes in the copy should judge me favourably, since I was copying the text without understanding it properly').

Some scribes and copyists blame lack of time, or speed of copying, for their errors, or for not being able to correct the model's errors. One scribe, hired to copy a book in Padua in 1400, excuses his mistakes by the fact that he copied the book while tending his sick son: אייא תלהמא אמא ימואא ע"ש שוחיאו שויכאויי יכ באודים משקה. Indeed, in their colophons hired scribes reflect their harsh conditions and like Moses Merkis attribute their errors to them. A scribe of Spanish origin who was hired in Aleppo in 1488 excuses his copying errors by saying that wandering and poverty have deprived him of the power of thought: אפ יא לא מיא תדכק ... העתקתא במחוזית זיוו ... יאו גוס היב יא לא מיא תר מתיוד ק"ה חזר חזור ... שואט רימס. Even much later, in a manuscript copied in Vienna in 1716, the private scribe of David Oppenheim, who started his career at the age of thirteen years, blames detrimental environmental conditions, in addition to the speed of copying, for his inaccuracies: וניאיינ יא ניא יא תכרות ייווי יוש ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו. And as late as the eighteenth century, a scribe who recopied MS Oxford Opp. 487, including the beginning of its colophon, having reached the formula UNO aitab יאלאש יא משה אט יאMALN, changed his mind, inserted the word ול between the first and the second word (i.e. יהא אלآי) and specified his reason for not wishing to copy more books, namely, inadequate wages: וניאיינ יא יא ניאינ יא תכרות ייווי יוש ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו: יהא יא יא יא תכרות דע ספרס יאלא משה יאMALN ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו. And as late as the eighteenth century, a scribe who recopied MS Oxford Opp. 487, including the beginning of its colophon, having reached the formula UNO aitab יאלאש יא משה אט יאMALN, changed his mind, inserted the word ול between the first and the second word (i.e. יהא אלآי) and specified his reason for not wishing to copy more books, namely, inadequate wages: וניאיינ יא יא ניאינ יא תכרות ייווי יוש ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו. And as late as the eighteenth century, a scribe who recopied MS Oxford Opp. 487, including the beginning of its colophon, having reached the formula UNO aitab יאלאש יא Moses אט יאMALN, changed his mind, inserted the word ול between the first and the second word (i.e. יהא אלآי) and specified his reason for not wishing to copy more books, namely, inadequate wages: וניאיינ יא יא ניאינ יא תכרות ייווי יוש ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו. And as late as the eighteenth century, a scribe who recopied MS Oxford Opp. 487, including the beginning of its colophon, having reached the formula UNO aitab יאלאש יא Moses אט יאMALN, changed his mind, inserted the word ول between the first and the second word (i.e. יהא אלآי) and specified his reason for not wishing to copy more books, namely, inadequate wages: וניאיינ יא יא ניאינ יא תכרות ייווי יוש ויט יא בוד אושעש ילא השמבליא: העתקתו.
since I copied it from an erroneous exemplar. Furthermore, I was forced <to copy it>, for I sold this prayer book, and, having been hired, I was not able to pay attention to the essence'. What this scribe actually says is that copying by hired scribes cannot be critical, and what he implies is that copying should be a critical transcribing of the text.

On the other hand, the fact that learned, hired scribes, or those who copied texts for their own use, did copy critically, is reflected in a number of colophons. These copyists conceived it as their duty to improve their exemplars and to produce a better edition of the copied text. In fact, they regarded themselves as critical editors, sometimes even as redactors, so much so that when a copyist refrained from improving his model, he would apologize, as did the copyist of MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina 2743 (De Rossi Catalogue no.505), who transcribed Shibbolei ha-leqet at Governolo (Italy) in 1508 from an erroneous exemplar, but admitted that he did not dare to correct it unless the mistakes were obvious: לא מלאני על שלחנו מנהי בהמה זא לא היה השעון. It seems that the usual practice of copyists was not only to correct obvious copying mistakes but to edit their model. Judah ben Abraham, for example, who copied Tahkemoni by Al-Harizi in Belogorod (Crimea) in 1511, informs us that his exemplar was an old and worn copy whose text was muddled and mistaken, the poems and their meters being particulary corrupted by omissions and interpolations, but he discerned the distortions and with the aid of conjecture and knowledge emended the text.44

The editorial nature of copying is clearly demonstrated by scribes who indicate in their colophons that they used more than one exemplar in producing their copies. Thus Vidal ben Solomon ben Qatorzi produced in 1445, probably in Provence, a copy of Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the Pentateuch while using two glossed copies and selecting from each the version he considered to be superior: 록חתי יהוהנה יהודית קלימוט.45 The sermons of Joshua ibn Shuaib in MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale hébr. 238, written in 1461 in Béjar (Spain), were copied by Moses ben Solomon Gabay for himself from ‘two erroneous books’.46 The text of the Arukh in MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cod. hebr. 428, was copied in Ashkenaz in 1444, partly from a long version and partly from a short one, both of which were inaccurate.

One of the best demonstrations of the editorial role of copyists is provided by the scholar Abraham ben Ephraim ibn Sancho, who copied Ein ha-gore by Joseph ibn Shem Tov in 1537

45 MS Oxford, Poc. 393 (Neubauer Catalogue no. 217), fol. 179r.
46 Cf. Sirat and Beit-Arié (note 31), I, 118.
for himself, probably in Constantinople. In his colophon the
抄ist informs us that he established an optimal text after having
collated five copies of the work found in his town, all representing
different versions. He deliberately corrected the grammatical errors
of the author, who, despite his great erudition, lacked, according
to the copyist, proficiency in the Hebrew language. Furthermore,
he also completed the indexes which the author had started but
did not finish.47

These and other colophons show that many medieval copies,
particularly those produced for private use, were actually eclectic
ditions, in which different versions and readings were
intermingled and merged by a critical process which included not
only selecting readings but also emending and completing, usually
without providing an apparatus criticus. Such copies involved, in
effect, recreating the text. However, there were a few medieval
editor-copyists who did exercise some principles of modern textual
criticism in their editions of texts. Joseph ben Eliezer of Spain,
who copied, in 1375, a supercommentary to Ibn Ezra’s
commentary on the Pentateuch in Canea (Crete), on his way to
Jerusalem, wrote a colophon which he entitled ‘the scribe’s
apology’. He tells us that he copied the text from an extremely
erroneous exemplar and was able to emend part of the mistakes by
conjecture and part by acquired knowledge (מדרש הכהן). In
addition there were many cases where the author’s explanations
seemed to him unreasonable, and there he integrated his own
opinion into the text. However, in order that his interpolations
should not be regarded as the author’s text, he took care to
indicate his authorship. His awareness of the vulnerability of the
scribal transmission and the changeability of the copied text is
demonstrated by his adjuration of all future copyists to follow all
his interpolations and not to change them even if they disagree
with his comments, though he grants them permission to add their
own opinions. He further adjured future copyists to copy his
‘apology’ at the end of the book.48

Similarly in a considerable number of manuscripts we find
抄ist’s interpolations clearly labelled by the scribe himself,

47 MS London, British Library Or. 10550 (Gaster collection no. 760), fol. 69r. See the
Hebrew text in M. Beit-Arie, ‘Palaeographical identification of Hebrew manuscripts:
methodology and practice’, Jewish Art, 12–13 (1986–87), 18, note 11 [=The makings of the
Hebrew medieval book (note 18), 14]. The same copyist apologizes in the colophon to MS
Jerusalem, JNUL Heb. 8° 931, fos. 61–79, dated 1530 (cf. Sirat and Beit-Arie, III, 86), for
not being able to contemplate and emend the text due to lack of time.

48 MS Oxford, Hunt. 293, fol. 62r. The present manuscript is not the original copy of
Joseph ben Eliezer, but rather a later copy, which preserved the original colophon and
indeed the copyist’s ‘apology’. Cf. M. Beit-Arie, ‘Hebrew manuscripts copied in Jerusalem
before the Ottoman conquest’ (Heb.), Jerusalem in the Middle Ages: selected papers (Heb.),
(Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1979), 258, note 46.
introduced by a phrase like ‘אָם הַמַּעֲשֵׂהַי or ‘מַעֲשֵׂהיָנִי’. Manuscripts which record different readings copied in the margins in the scribe’s own hand, under the rubric מְשֻׁר (‘other book/books’), or מְשֻׁר (‘other version/versions’), or לַטּוּ (‘it seems to me’), or which offer alternative vocalizations in liturgical manuscripts, also reflect a more ‘modern’ critical approach, in which copyists adhered to one model while noting different readings from other exemplars in the margins and indicated the lemma by the use of signs such as one would find in a modern apparatus criticus. Those marginal or interlinear glosses and collations of different readings were frequently interpolated within the text by successive scribes, causing double readings and contamination by relevant but inauthentic material. This phenomenon was very well known to and deplored by the geonim and the Rishonim in their dealings with Talmudic text criticism.

To sum up, owing to the circumstances of medieval publication, texts were disseminated at various stages of their creation and revision, and their authors were usually prevented from controlling what happend to them. Reproduction and distribution of texts were never institutionalized in Jewish societies, but were carried out by individual private initiative, to a large extent by learned people or scholars who themselves copied the books they wished to study or use. Encouraged by authors to correct their own mistakes, and being aware of the unavoidable corruption of texts by the unconscious mechanics of copying, copyists certainly did not view copying as mechanical reproduction, but as a critical editorial operation involving emendation, diagnostic conjecture, collation of different exemplars and even the incorporation of external relevant material and the copyist’s own opinion. It seems that the copyist’s main goal was to establish what Kantorowicz defines as a ‘richtige’, right, version, as opposed an ‘echte’, authentic, one. Consequently, most of our Hebrew manuscripts present texts not only corrupted by the accumulation of involuntary copying errors, but also distorted by editorial or even

49 It is of course possible that the alternative readings were copied from the model, to which they may have been added by different users in the course of time.
50 Marginal notes and additions by the copyist of MS Florence (see above) were indeed integrated in the later copies of MSS New York and Vatican.
redactional reconstruction, by contamination from different exemplars and versions, and by the deliberate integration of related texts. What medieval copyists performed while copying was indeed what in modern theories of criticism is known as deconstructing the text and then reconstructing it. Therefore, many principles and practices of classical textual criticism, such as the establishing of genetic relationships between manuscripts, stemmatic classification, the reconstructing of archetypes and the restoration of the original, are not applicable to Hebrew manuscripts, not only because many of these represent horizontal rather than vertical transmission and so provide us with open recensions, but also because their texts may have been affected by the intervention of learned copyists. What is the implication of this iconoclastic presentation of medieval transmission? Should we abandon the medieval manuscripts because they offer inauthentic, unstable texts, and have been corrupted by the free critical editing of learned copyist and the whimsical copying errors of preoccupied poor scribes? Of course not. These are the only sources we have. But we must use them with great caution, suspicion and scepticism, and above all refrain from establishing authentic texts, or even critical editions, and rather resort to the safe synoptic presentation of the transmitted texts, while proposing our critical analysis and reconstruction in the form of notes.

53 According to the terminology of G. Pasquali (Storia della tradizione e critica del testo, second edition [Florence: Le Monnier, 1952]), referred to by West (note 29), 14.