

Early Printing

THERE is some probability that this art originated in China, where it was practised long before it was known in Europe. Some European traveller might have imported the hint. That the Romans did not practise the art of printing cannot but excite our astonishment, since they really possessed the art, and may be said to have enjoyed it, unconscious of their rich possession. I have seen Roman stereotypes, or printing immoveable types with which they stamped their pottery. How in daily practising the art, though confined to this object, it did not occur to so ingenious a people to print their literary works, is not easily to be accounted for. Did the wise and grave senate dread those inconveniences which attend its indiscriminate use? Or perhaps they did not care to deprive so large a body as their scribes of their business. Not a hint of the art itself appears in their writings.

When first the art of printing was discovered, they only made use of one side of a leaf; they had not yet found out the expedient of impressing the other. Specimens of these early printed books are in his Majesty's and Lord Spencer's libraries. Afterwards they thought of pasting the blank sides, which made them appear like one leaf. Their blocks were made of soft woods, and

their letters were carved; but frequently breaking, the expense and trouble of carving and gluing new letters suggested our moveable types, which have produced an almost miraculous celerity in this art. Our modern stereotype consists of entire pages in solid blocks of metal, and, not being liable to break like the soft wood at first used, is profitably employed for works which require to be perpetually reprinted. Printing in carved blocks of wood must have greatly retarded the progress of universal knowledge: for one set of types could only have produced one work, whereas it now serves for hundreds.

When their editions were intended to be curious, they omitted to print the first letter of a chapter, for which they left a blank space, that it might be painted or illuminated, to the fancy of the purchaser. Several ancient volumes of these early times have been found where these letters are wanting, as they neglected to have them painted.

The initial carved letter, which is generally a fine wood-cut, among our printed books, is evidently a remains or imitation of these ornaments. Among the very earliest books printed, which were religious, the Poor Man's Bible has wooden cuts in a coarse style,

without the least shadowing or crossing of strokes, and these they inelegantly daubed over with colours, which they termed illuminating, and sold at a cheap rate to those who could not afford to purchase costly missals, elegantly written and painted on vellum. Specimens of these rude efforts of illuminated prints may be seen in Strutt's Dictionary of Engravers. The Bodleian library possesses the originals.

In the productions of early printing may be distinguished the various splendid editions they made of *Primers*, or *Prayer-books*. They were embellished with cuts finished in a most elegant taste: many of them were ludicrous, and several were obscene. In one of them an angel is represented crowning the Virgin Mary, and God the Father himself assisting at the ceremony. Sometimes St. Michael is overcoming Satan; and sometimes St. Anthony is attacked by various devils of most clumsy forms—not of the grotesque and limber family of Callot!

Printing was gradually practised throughout Europe from the year 1440 to 1500. Caxton and his successor Wynkyn De Worde were our own earliest printers. Caxton was a wealthy merchant, who in 1464, being sent by Edward IV. to negotiate a commercial treaty with the Duke of Burgundy, returned to his country with this

invaluable art. Notwithstanding his mercantile habits he possessed a literary taste, and his first work was a translation from a French historical miscellany.

The tradition of the Devil and Dr. Faustus was derived from the odd circumstance in which the Bibles of the first printer, Fust, appeared to the world. When he had discovered this new art, and printed off a considerable number of copies of the Bible, to imitate those which were commonly sold as MSS., he undertook the sale of them at Paris. It was his interest to conceal this discovery, and to pass off his printed copies for MSS. But as he was enabled to sell his Bibles at sixty crowns, while the other scribes demanded five hundred, this raised universal astonishment; and still more when he produced copies as fast as they were wanted, and even lowered his price. The uniformity of the copies increased wonder. Informations were given in to the magistrates against him as a magician; and in searching his lodgings a great number of copies were found. The red ink, and Fust's red ink is peculiarly brilliant, which embellished his copies, was said to be his blood; and it was solemnly adjudged that he was in league with the devil. Fust was at length obliged, to save himself from a bonfire, to reveal his art to the Parliament of Paris, who discharged him from all prosecution in consideration

of this useful invention.

When the art of printing was established, it became the glory of the learned to be correctors of the press to eminent printers. Physicians, lawyers, and bishops themselves, occupied this department. The printers then added frequently to their names those of the correctors of the press; and editions were then valued according to the abilities of the corrector.

The *prices* of books in these times were considered as an object worthy of the animadversions of the highest powers. This anxiety in favour of the studious appears from a privilege of Pope Leo X. to Aldus Manutius for printing Varro, dated 1553, signed Cardinal Bembo. Aldus is exhorted to put a moderate price on the work, lest the Pope should withdraw the privilege, and accord it to others.

Robert Stephens, one of the early printers, surpassed in correctness those who exercised the same profession. It is said that to render his editions immaculate, he hung up the proofs in public places, and generously recompensed those who were so fortunate as to detect any errata.

Plantin, though a learned man, is more famous as a printer. His printing-office claims our admiration: it was one of the wonders of Europe. This grand building was

the chief ornament of the city of Antwerp. Magnificent in its structure, it presented to the spectator a countless number of presses, characters of all figures and all sizes, matrixes to cast letters, and all other printing materials; which Baillet assures us amounted to immense sums.

In Italy, the three Manutii were more solicitous of correctness and illustrations than of the beauty of their printing. It was the character of the scholar, not of the printer, of which they were ambitious.

It is much to be regretted that our publishers are not literary men. Among the learned printers formerly a book was valued because it came from the presses of an Aldus or a Stephens; and even in our time the names of Bowyer and Dodsley sanctioned a work. Pelisson, in his history of the French Academy, tells us that Camusat was selected as their bookseller, from his reputation for publishing only valuable works. "He was a man of some literature and good sense, and rarely printed an indifferent work; when we were young I recollect that we always made it a rule to purchase his publications. His name was a test of the goodness of the work." A publisher of this character would be of the greatest utility to the literary world: at home he would induce a number of ingenious men to become authors, for it

would be honourable to be inscribed in his catalogue; and it would be a direction for the continental reader.

So valuable a union of learning and printing did not, unfortunately, last. The printers of the seventeenth century became less charmed with glory than with gain. Their correctors and their letters evinced as little delicacy of choice.

The invention of what is now called the *Italic* letter in printing was made by Aldus Manutius, to whom learning owes much. He observed the many inconveniences resulting from the vast number of *abbreviations*, which were then so frequent among the printers, that a book was difficult to understand; a treatise was actually written on the art of reading a printed book, and this addressed to the learned! He contrived an expedient, by which these abbreviations might be entirely got rid of, and yet books suffer little increase in bulk. This he effected by introducing what is now called the *Italic* letter, though it formerly was distinguished by the name of the inventor, and called the *Aldine*.