

INTO PRINT



*Selected Writings on
Printing History, Typography
and Book Production*

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THE BASKERVILLE PUNCHES 1750-1950



Two firms of typesetters in France today claim ownership of . Baskerville's original punches. It was through making an investigation into these rival claims that the following paper came to be written; and I am indebted to Brooke Crutchley, the University Printer at Cambridge, for permission to reprint some passages from my essay *The Survival of Baskerville's Punches* which was privately printed at Cambridge in a very small (and now exhausted) edition for Christmas 1949. I am also indebted to Theodore Besterman for permission to print several hitherto unpublished documents from the Beaumarchais papers in his possession.¹

John Baskerville began his experiments in punch-cutting two hundred years ago. His punches were short lengths of steel on which letters were cut in relief at one end. They were struck into bars of copper which were trimmed to form matrices for attachment to a mould. His types were manufactured by pouring metal into the mould, but before the types were ready for composition into words, they were made perfectly smooth and square by careful rubbing, an operation known as dressing.

An interest in both engraved and written letters had been shown by Baskerville early in his career. Born at Wolverley in Worcestershire on 28 January 1706, he settled in Birmingham when twenty, and first joined his living there as a writing-master and by cutting inscriptions in stone. Although he became accomplished and versatile in these arts, he was attracted to the japanning trade recently introduced into Birmingham by John Taylor, who had thereby made a considerable and rapid fortune. Baskerville repeated Taylor's success, and by 1750 had so firmly established himself that he had the capital necessary to start his experiments as a letter-founder. Although this art had been described

¹This paper was read at a meeting of the Bibliographical Society on 17 January 1950 and published in *The Library* 3rd Series, vol. v no. 1 (June 1950).

in some detail as early as 1683 by Joseph Moxon in his *Mechanick Exercises*, it is curious to find that in 1750 the June issue of the *Universal Magazine* printed a detailed article on 'The Art of Cutting, Casting, and Preparing of Letter for Printing, with a neat Representation of a Letter-founder's Work-house'. The neat representation was a handsome folding plate showing the interior of the Caslon foundry. Samuel Caslon, who had been a mould-maker in this foundry with his famous brother William, had come to live (and work at his trade) with George Anderton, a Birmingham engraver who turned to letter-founding at about the same time as Baskerville. Anderton was the first to produce a specimen.² In 1753 he issued a showing of his great primer roman and italic; this was the size in which Baskerville first cut the design shown in his earliest specimen printed in 1754.

Baskerville employed several assistants in his foundry. The foundry foreman appears to have been John Handy, who, according to his obituary notices,³ was a 'letter founder, etc.', and also 'the artist who executed the admired types of the celebrated Mr. Baskerville.' The Birmingham steel-engravers of that time were famous for their skill on locks; from this body of craftsmen Baskerville, with his teaching experience as a writing-master and his practice as an engraver of letters in stone, could easily have recruited his labour. Moreover, it is clear from his correspondence that Baskerville himself took an active part in the punch-cutting.⁴

The models he chose for his letters were those of Caslon, who he believed had left the fairest copy for his emulation. Although Caslon was frequently in the company of writing-masters and engravers of writing-books (to whom he showed his intended specimens of new types),⁵ his types conformed in general to the accepted Dutch form of letter to which English readers and printers were then accustomed. Baskerville's printing types in fact emulated more closely the

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Comparison of Baskerville's handwriting with the design of his types and those of Caslon.

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patterns which had been taught for several decades by the English writing-masters.⁶ In printing, his letters were nevertheless of great consequence in their influence on type design; for others were profoundly affected by his ideas on proportion and design, by his methods of thickening or thinning the parts of a letter, and by his sharper and more horizontal treatment of serifs. His types excited the praise of a French contemporary, Pierre Simon Fournier, a Parisian type-designer and type-founder who wrote in the second volume of his *Manuel typographique*, published in 1766:

He has spared neither trouble nor expense to bring them to the highest state of perfection: the types are cut with great boldness, the italics are the best that exist in all the foundries of England; but the roman founts are a little too broad. He has already published a few editions printed with these types, they are real masterpieces of sharpness. Some are on smooth paper; although they are a little tiring to the eye, there is no denying that these are the most beautiful things of their kind that have been seen up to now.

Baskerville's printing attempted to achieve a sharpness and gloss which would rival his jappanned ware in finish. He used a special ink of his own manufacture, introduced wove paper and a glazing apparatus, and with the greatest precision built his own presses. This equipment he intended to use only for important works. His first book, published in 1757 by Dodsley, was a royal quarto edition of Virgil, printed in the great primer type. It was well subscribed by members of both universities before it went forth, as Macaulay wrote, 'to astonish all the librarians of Europe'. In the preface to his second book, an edition of *Paradise Lost* published in 1758, Baskerville expressed his hope that 'persons of judgment and penetration' would appreciate the excellence of the paper, types, ink and workmanship of his fine editions of important works; and he hoped that their support would help him to realize the extent of his ambition, 'a power to print an Octavo *Common-Prayer Book*, and Folio Bible'.

His ambition was realized surprisingly quickly, for in 1758 he secured a patent as University Printer at Cambridge and in the same year entered into an agreement to make a Greek type for Oxford (where the punches and matrices still survive). These engagements led to the publication at Cambridge of two octavo Prayer Books in 1760; and in 1763 of a splendid folio Bible at Cambridge and a New Testament set in his Greek types at Oxford.⁷

Yet in realizing his ambitions, Baskerville lost a great deal of money. His editions did not sell well in England, and his contract at Cambridge brought him little reward. The majority of English printers and

booksellers disliked his types, partly because they differed from Caslon's and largely because they regarded him as an eccentric amateur and not as a professional. He was nevertheless widely admired on the Continent both by men of letters and by printers. It was his admiration for Baskerville that attracted Bodoni to visit England; although sickness ended his journey before he left Italy, Bodoni later told the Italian dramatist, Vittorio Alfieri, that the finest printing-houses in Europe were at Birmingham and in Madrid, where Ibarra was producing splendid work. At Paris young Pierre Didot, in his *Essai sur le Progrès de l'imprimerie*, 1784, was lavish in his praise for the Birmingham printer. Bodoni, Ibarra and the Didots all showed Baskerville's influence in their work. Voltaire sent him complimentary letters, and allowed him to set up specimen pages for a projected edition of one of his works. The number of Baskerville editions found in continental bindings is further proof of their wide popularity abroad.

It is therefore not surprising that when losses, and lack of support from the London booksellers, decided Baskerville to sell his whole apparatus of letter-founding and printing, he approached the Court of France. The first offer was made through the Duc de Nivernais, a diplomat and writer who came to London as ambassador in September 1762. Baskerville asked for £ 8000, but the offer 'was politely refused as being too large a sum'. Ill-health caused the Duc to return to France in May 1763, and the next offer was made to the Duc's secretary, the notorious Chevalier D'Éon, who was Minister Plenipotentiary for France until the arrival on 12 October 1763 of the new ambassador, the Comte de Guerchy. Baskerville made a third offer to de Guerchy, but then gave up the attempt until 12 September 1767. This time the offer was made through Benjamin Franklin, who like a good friend and a good printer had subscribed for six copies of Baskerville's first book, and who was now in Paris. Although the price was lowered to £ 6000, the offer was still refused.

Baskerville had taken Robert Martin to be his journeyman in 1758. This man is believed to have been a master printer before he joined Baskerville,⁸ and from 1767 to 1769 he was left in charge of the printing-house; so, despite the owner's flagging enthusiasm, editions still continued to appear from his press. Baskerville soon regained interest and produced from 1770 to 1773 a series of quarto classics which are the equal of his Virgil. The Molini brothers, then the leading continental booksellers, commissioned Baskerville to print an edition of *Orlando Furioso*, which appeared in 1773⁹ and was greatly admired; but in the same year Baskerville addressed a letter through Molini to the

President of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris, in which he made his final unsuccessful attempt at a sale. Two years later, on 8 January 1775, he died.

In the latter half of the same year, his widow received a visitor from Germany: Dr Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, professor of physics at Göttingen University, was also a witty satirist who once said of a girl's chin that it was 'as smooth as the finest page of Baskerville's Milton'. During a visit to the English royal family in 1774, Lichtenberg presented a copy of the works of Mayer published by his friend Hans Dieterich. Immediately after opening it the King said: 'This is excellent printing, worthy, indeed, of the man's writing, as good as Baskerville.' The incident was related to Dieterich, at whose suggestion Lichtenberg set out to visit Baskerville at Birmingham; but as he wrote 'to Dieterich on 13 October 1775:

... Only on my arrival there did I learn that he was buried more than six months ago. I waited on his widow, an excellent woman, who is continuing the type-foundry but has almost entirely given up the printing-press... She gave me six samples of her specimens of type and quoted the prices per pound... If I or any one else in Germany wish to purchase type, she is always willing to send it post free to London as soon as I communicate with her, which is no trifle in this expensive country. Although she was dressed very nicely in black silk, she accompanied me herself into all the most dirty nooks of the type-foundry. I saw the punches and matrices for all the elegant letters which we have so often admired...

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Since she herself takes no pleasure in such a life and is rich enough, she is willing to sell her whole printing equipment, with all punches, matrices, and everything appertaining to the type-foundry, besides the glazing machine and the receipt for printer's ink, for £ 4000, her husband formerly having been offered £ 500 for all this; she will either give 5 per cent. discount on this £ 4000 for immediate payment, or six months' credit, and make free delivery to London. She has not yet advertised her intentions in black and white and not a soul is aware of them beyond her own relations and friends in Birmingham.

But almost a year after her bereavement, an auction sale was held at her house at which all her husband's printing-presses and several large founts of type were offered for sale. Only a few of these founts seem to have been sold; and although Dr Harwood had pleaded in the preface to his *View of the editions of the Classics*, 1775, for the purchase of Baskerville's types and Wilson's famous Greek as the nucleus of a Royal Typography in England, even Baskerville's death did not cause a sufficient revival of interest in the types for his plea to find support.

The types cut in imitation of Baskerville's were also selling badly: a copy produced in 1764 did not, according to Dr Edmund Fry, 'meet

with the encouraging approbation of the Printers' and his firm soon copied Caslon's types instead. Nevertheless Mrs Baskerville continued in business. In 1777 she issued a handsome revised type-specimen and advertised on 3 February in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* that she was determined to attend to the type-founding business 'with all possible Care and Diligence' and would continue to sell her husband's types at the usual trade prices. But after two more years in her husband's trade she was ready to accept an offer made by an acquaintance of the Duc de Nivernais to buy the foundry.

Early in August 1779, after several weeks of bargaining, the figure of £3700 was agreed upon.¹¹ By a deed of sale signed on 11 December 1779,¹² the purchaser wrote that he became possessed 'not only of Baskerville's letter-foundry, but also his methods of glazing paper, compounding ink; and all his other improvements, as well in the founding as in the printing branches'. The purchase was made in the name of the Literary and Typographical Society, but a prospectus issued in 1782¹³ stated categorically that its 'only ostensible member' was Caron de Beaumarchais, who purposed to print 'A Complete Edition of the works of Voltaire with the types of Baskerville.' For the next forty years the fate of the Baskerville printing equipment is tied to that of the Beaumarchais family, so some account must now be given of the remarkable man who made the purchase.

In his youth, Beaumarchais had secured the appointment of music-master to the princesses; at court he became a master of intrigue, and by gaining the confidence of the court banker acquired a useful knowledge of finance. He went to Madrid in 1764, and while there wrote to his father¹⁴ that Voltaire had sent him a very kind letter – 'he compliments me, playfully, on my thirty-two teeth, my lively philosophy, and my age'. In 1767 he made his debut in French literary and theatrical life as the author of *Eugénie*, which being his first play he had previously submitted for criticism to the courteous and experienced writer and diplomat, the Duc de Nivernais.

Unfortunately, there followed a series of lawsuits which culminated in 1774, when Beaumarchais received a sentence amounting to civic degradation, at the same time gaining wide popularity and a considerable reputation for his conduct of the cases. Voltaire was notably generous in his praise of Beaumarchais for his part in these lawsuits. Louis XV, having decided that he could use the talents which Beaumarchais had displayed, promised to enable him to regain his civic rights if he successfully fulfilled a secret mission.

From March 1774 until October 1775, Beaumarchais was involved in

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a series of sordid secret missions to England under the orders of Louis XV and Louis XVI. During this period he was frequently in London, and became familiar with English society of all political opinions. In 1775 he frequented the house of John Wilkes, who had been a friend of Baskerville's. Wilkes had had a presentation copy of the latter's *Virgil*, but used to temper his praise of the printer by adding 'but he was a terrible infidel, he used to shock me'. At Wilkes's house Beaumarchais also met some Americans who had come to England to plead the cause of the colonists. Amongst these was Arthur Lee, afterwards a member of the deputation from the United States to Paris. Beaumarchais spoke to him of his private plans and grandiose hopes for French aid to the colonies, and thenceforth the two men kept up a correspondence in cypher between London and Paris. It was also at Wilkes's house that Beaumarchais met the Chevalier D'Éon, the quarry of his last mission. Beaumarchais finally settled this curious case in October 1775, after a visit to Leicestershire where D'Éon was staying. On his return journey to London, it is known that Beaumarchais visited Birmingham.

Louis XVI had been afraid that D'Éon might sell some French state documents, including a plan for the invasion of England. He therefore read with particular interest Beaumarchais's reports on the case. Into these reports Beaumarchais cunningly introduced references to his schemes for aid to the colonies. His success in settling the D'Éon case enabled him to place before Louis XVI two memorials devoted to these schemes; and resulted in his obtaining on 10 June 1776 a grant of one million francs with which to start his immense American aid programme. Three months later his civic rights were restored.

The value of Beaumarchais's services to America can be judged from a report made to Congress by Silas Deane, in which he referred to the 'indefatigable, generous and intelligent efforts of M. de Beaumarchais, to whom the United States owe more in every respect than to any other person on this side of the ocean.'¹⁵ Yet, for relaxation, Beaumarchais still turned to the theatre: and it will be seen that his preoccupation with playwriting, which first interfered with his political activities, later distracted him from the proper supervision of his printing-house. Early in 1777, after he had been to Le Havre to arrange the embarkation of some French officers for the United States, one of the officers complained to Silas Deane that Beaumarchais's presence had done more harm than good. 'He was already known to many people, and he has made himself known to the whole town by hearing the actors rehearse their parts so as to play them better.' All this, complained the officer, rendered Beaumarchais's precaution of concealing

himself under the name of Durand perfectly useless. A second complaint came from the pen of Edward Gibbon, who had been commissioned to write a denunciation of the conduct of the French leading up to the declaration of war between the two countries in 1778. Gibbon singled out Beaumarchais for special ridicule, mentioning him by name for his participation in the incident at Le Havre.

In December 1779, whilst the English agent of the Literary and Typographical Society was buying Baskerville's equipment, Beaumarchais published in London a reply to Gibbon's attack.¹⁶ There is a closer connexion between these two incidents than at first appears: for henceforth Beaumarchais was able to make use of business correspondence concerning the types as a blind to cover the exchange of secret messages of political importance. It is particularly instructive to trace his dealings with Lord Shelburne, then a prominent but mistrusted politician. He first wrote to Shelburne (whom he had never met) in June 1779, asking for his opinion on the selection of a typeface for the proposed edition of Voltaire. At Shelburne's suggestion, William Caslon, the type-founder, and James Woodmason, a stationer, called on Beaumarchais in Paris. Beaumarchais afterwards wrote to Shelburne that he had considered the types of Caslon, Baskerville and Glasgow (presumably those of Wilson were implied), but that French opinion was in favour of Baskerville: would Shelburne give his opinion? Nearly three years later, Woodmason made another trip to Paris to see Beaumarchais, and soon after his return wrote him a four-page letter,¹⁷ of which the following is an extract:

SIR,
I returned to London yesterday...Mr. Caslon accompanied me the next day to wait on the Rt. Honble. Earl of Shelburne with yours and other Letters we had entrusted to us for his Lordship, who was so obliging as to communicate to us the contents of yours relative to the Types and Paper: and expressed great satisfaction at the prospect we had of success.

The Types of Mr. Caslon are no doubt the best in the World: allowed so universally by all the printers of London;...Baskerville's types having the best appearance in the Specimen only; owing to the Glazed Paper. I have procured Mr. Caslon some of the same, on which he proposes to print as soon as possible Specimens, which, when done will forward to you...I shall have a particular pride in engaging in this very noble Undertaking; being promised the Patronage of Lord Shelburne on this Occasion, who is ever ready and happy to encourage and promote the Arts...

The letter is addressed on the fourth page in the writer's hand 'A Monsieur Beaumarchais a Paris', but half of the third and the whole of the fourth page are covered with writing in French, added by a differ-