

PRINTING TYPES

THEIR HISTORY, FORMS, AND USE

A STUDY IN SURVIVALS

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

*"Nunca han tenido, ni tienen las artes otros
enemigos que los ignorantes"*

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son, *Esq.*, in four quarto volumes, printed by Baskerville for J. and R. Tonson in 1761, we have a different kind of performance. The third volume I have chosen to discuss because it is devoted to *The Spectator*, a book so often reprinted that its editions form a sort of conspectus of English typography for a hundred and fifty years. To my mind, Baskerville's treatment of *The Spectator* was most unsuccessful. Running head-lines are set in italic capitals, much spaced, so that "The" which precedes the word "Spectator" has to be huddled to one side in upper and lower-case italic. The number of the issue and its date are set between two lines of very light type-ornament, which is trivial and teasing. The text of the work is set in English roman of a monotonous roundness; for the height of the body of the letter calls for more leading and longer ascenders and descenders. On pages 432 and 433, observe the masses of italic—gray in colour, feeble and wiry in line, and annoyingly condensed in shape. The occasional lines of Greek are crabbed and disagreeable—to other Greek fonts what the italic is to "suaver" italics. The volumes may be vastly superior in brilliancy and clearness of effect to other books of the time, but for the text a Caslon, or even "Fell" letter, would have been better if the same attention had been given to presswork.

A much finer book—a really very fine book—is the Latin Juvenal and Persius, printed the same year (1761) in quarto. This is very simply arranged. The argument to each Satire is set in a large size of Baskerville's italic, and the text in roman is more leaded than in the Virgil and accordingly much improved. Running-titles are set in spaced italic capitals. The imposition is elegant, the margins ample, the type clear. And some of Baskerville's editions of the classical in 16mo are charming little books.

Baskerville's specimen-sheet of about 1762,¹ entitled *A Specimen by John Baskerville of Birmingham, Letter-Founder and Printer*, shows eight varieties of roman—from double pica to brevier—and six sizes of italic. On this specimen the roman types appear better than in the Addison. But as Latin is employed for the paragraph which displays them, this may be due to the many m's, n's, and u's which Latin affords. The italic is better, though it is a very thin, starved sort of character. The italic capital K's, and capital Q's and Z's, both in roman and italic, are interesting (fig. 270). As our illustration of the broadside specimen is reduced, the reader is referred to the reproduction of Baskerville's double pica roman and italic (a portion of another broadside specimen issued about the same time), which gives a somewhat more accurate idea of his type-design (fig. 271).

Baskerville no doubt was eccentric, vain, and unattractive as a man; but publishers and printers were jealous of him as a printer. They abused his type, they poked fun at his smooth paper, and in spite of his artistic success, financially he found it by no means easy sailing. Franklin, who loved a practical joke, in a letter written to Baskerville in 1760, tells him that hearing a friend say that Baskerville's types would be "the means of blinding all the Readers in the Nation owing to the thin and narrow strokes of the letters," he produced a specimen of Caslon's types with Caslon's name torn from it, saying it was Baskerville's, and asking for specific criticism. He was at once favoured with a long discourse on faults so plainly apparent in the type that

¹ This sheet is a rare one. My copy formerly belonged to A. A. Renouard, the French publisher and bibliophile. There is also an example in the Birmingham Free Libraries. Baskerville issued specimens in 1757, c. 1762 (2, one of which is bordered), and in 1775 (2).

before the critic had finished, he complained that his eyes were even then suffering from "Baskerville" pains!¹

But Baskerville was tenacious, and persisted in printing and publishing, though his books did not pay. Several times during his latter years he tried to sell his types,—to the Imprimerie Royale (through Franklin in 1767), to the Académie des Sciences at Paris, to the Court of Russia, to Denmark, to the English Government,—without success; indeed, it is doubtful if he wished to succeed. For a time he placed his establishment in the hands of his foreman, Robert Martin, but later resumed its charge, and continued to print and to publish until his death in 1775. After Baskerville's decease, his types were hawked about; some of them were sold in England, and the remainder bought by Beaumarchais for his great edition of Voltaire. The chief part of his equipment, therefore, went to France. In the upheaval consequent to the Revolution the history of his types becomes obscure. An advertisement of their sale in Paris, certainly after 1789, is reproduced from the only copy known (*fig.* 272). Later, Baskerville's fonts were used to print the *Gazette Nationale*, ou *Le Moniteur Universel*, the official journal of the French Republic during "the terrible years,"² Whittingham, early in the nineteenth century, used some of them.³ And of late his fonts have turned up in certain French foundries and printing-houses.³ Baskerville's types and matrices, which should have been preserved to furnish typography, through indifference were lost to it.

¹ Franklin's amusing letter, which has been so often quoted, may be found in Straus and Dent's *John Baskerville*, Cambridge, 1907, p. 17.

² In 1827, Pickering published *The Treatise of Rhyssingge with an English* (attributed to Dame Juliana Berners), printed with the types of John Baskerville.

³ See notice of Baskerville type in Marius Audin's *Le Livre, ou l'Imprimerie*, *son Architecture*, Lyon, 1921, pp. 42 *et seq.*

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The only ornaments Baskerville possessed were, apparently, fourteen forms of "flowers," which, rather thin in design, accorded very well with his types (*figs.* 273 and 274). But he seldom used them, and his best books have no ornaments at all.

As we look at Baskerville's specimen-sheets, the fonts appear very perfect, and yet somehow they have none of the homely charm of Caslon's letter. It is true that the types try the eye. Baskerville's contemporaries, who also thought so, attributed this to his glossy paper and dense black ink. Was this the real fault? The difficulty was, I fancy, that in his type-designs the hand of the writing-master betrayed itself, in making them too even, too perfect, too "genteel," and so they charmed too apparently and artfully—with a kind of finical, sterile refinement. The excellent Johann Gottlob Immanuel Breitkopf remarked that these types resembled copper-plate engraving; and the Leipsic gentleman was partly right.

Nor was Baskerville's type-setting as original as is nowadays supposed. Tonson had printed title-pages without rubrication or surrounding rules many years before, and he and William Bowyer,¹ too, had used spaced roman and italic capitals in what we consider Baskerville's peculiar manner. Hanmer's edition of Shakespeare, which antedated Baskerville's first book, shows a method of employing "flowers" to which Baskerville was singularly addicted; and he was no doubt greatly influenced by the Foulis editions in the openness of his title-pages.

The more we think of Baskerville, the more he appears to be an eclectic, whose types were the result of fashions in calligraphy and whose presswork was an attempt to emulate on paper the finish of japanning. He put his books to-

¹ As in Bowyer's edition of Pope's *Works*, printed for Lintot in 1717.

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1710 (revised)

gether ingeniously; but they were in the nature of a *passiche*, and not a simple, healthy growth—or so it seems to me. Thus his editions, however ambitious, are not quite the “real thing.” If in most English printing of Baskerville’s day, the presswork had not been strong and masculine, and much of the paper so rough in texture, perhaps the note of delicacy in his work would not have given it the reputation it enjoyed. Nevertheless, Baskerville was a great printer, because he had something individual to say—even though he perhaps “quoted” his more ornamental phrases—and he had the courage to say it, and say it persistently, and so he made himself heard. He was not among the world’s greatest printers, because what he had to say was not in itself great. When we look at his books we think of Baskerville; while to look at the work of Jenson is to think but of its beauty, and almost to forget that it was made with hands!

IV

THERE is no denying that Baskerville had great influence on English type-forms. To know *how much* he had, look at the specimen-sheets of Wilson of Glasgow, of Moore and the Frys of Bristol and London, and indeed of the later Caslons, and see how his types were imitated. Types somewhat like these Baskerville types still exist, a letter transitional between the early Caslon fonts and those of the later period of Wilson; and some of them are better than Baskerville’s and more useful for modern work than the more irregular types of Caslon.

Wilson and Fry are important names in English type-founding. Alexander Wilson, a Scotchman, born in 1714, was educated as a physician. A chance visit to a type-foundry interested him so much that, with a friend named