TYPE DESIGNS

THEIR HISTORY

AND DEVELOPMENT

A. F. JOHNSON

SECOND EDITION

GRAFTON & CO
COPTIC HOUSE · LONDON WC1
1959

First edition, 1934

Made and Printed in Great Britain
by Jarrold and Sons Limited Norwich

Contents

Preface

IN PREPARING A NEW EDITION of this book I have made no attempt to enlarge the work by the addition of further chapters, but have tried merely to bring it up to date. As in the first edition I have to thank the editors of *The Library* for the loan of blocks originally made for my articles in that periodical. I have also to thank Messrs. Faber & Faber for allowing me to use some illustrations which first appeared in their new edition of T. B. Reed's *Old English Letter Foundries*, 1952. The illustrations taken from Reed are nos. 2, 6, 13, 38, 40, 42 and 43.

A. F. J.

List of Illustrations

Introduction

AS AN INTRODUCTION to the history of type forms, something may be said in outline of the story of the invention of printing. Printing from movable type was known in China long before the invention in Europe, but there seems no reason to suppose that any specimens of Chinese printing can have reached the West and we may feel confident that the European invention was new and entirely independent.[1] Works of reference frequently assert that printing was invented by Johann Gutenberg of Mainz about 1450, as though this were a definite fact, but the whole story is wrapped in obscurity, and is built up from a small number of scraps of evidence. There is no single printed book or printed fragment which bears Gutenberg's name, but there have survived several legal documents bearing on the question, and there are, moreover, the statements of contemporaries attributing the invention to Gutenberg. For example, Ulrich Gering and his partners, who brought the new art to Paris, in one of their colophons distinctly refer to Gutenberg as the inventor. The only substantial book produced by this first Mainz press was a Latin Bible, variously known as the Gutenberg Bible, the 42-line Bible, from the number of lines to a page, and the Mazarine Bible. The last name is derived from a copy which belonged to Cardinal Mazarin. Another copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale bears the signature of a rubricator from which we know that he finished his task in August 1456. In November 1455, Johann Fust of Mainz brought an action against Gutenberg for the recovery of money lent for the printing of this

[1] See T. F. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China*, New York, 1931.

Bible and other works. We do not know whether the Bible was finished by that date, although it must have been finished soon afterwards, nor do we know the result of the action. Apparently Gutenberg lost the case, because the type of the Bible remained in the possession of Fust and Peter Schöffer, the third man in the partnership. One school argues that the Bible is Schöffer's work, basing their argument on evidence which exists that the work was rapidly printed and was probably produced after the split with Gutenberg. The case for Schöffer is not widely accepted, but the claim is another illustration of the obscurity surrounding Gutenberg's career. However, this Bible is not only the first printed book but is one of the finest books ever produced, a fact which is hardly flattering to the efforts of the typographers of five subsequent centuries.[1]

The only serious rival claimant to Gutenberg is one Laurents Coster of Haarlem. In the book known as the *Cologne Chronicle*, printed in 1499, there appears an account of the invention derived from Ulrich Zell, the first printer at Cologne, who came from Mainz. Zell states that Gutenberg was the inventor, but that he was acquainted with a "Vorbildung" in the Donatuses produced in Holland. The exact meaning of "Vorbildung" in this passage is doubtful. English textbooks have translated it as "Prefiguration", an equally vague term. There are in existence a number of fragments of early Dutch printing of a primitive appearance, which include Donatuses, that is, the school Latin grammars of the Middle Ages. The legend which attributes these fragments to Coster dates from a century later, and is full of impossibilities. Whether Coster was their printer or not is comparatively unimportant. They may be conveniently labelled "Costeriana". They exist and have to be accounted for. The controversy about these Costeriana has been long, voluminous, unnecessarily bitter through nationalist rivalry, and is still unsettled. The latest scholar to tackle the problem is Dr. G. Zedler.[2] In a massive volume, highly technical and very difficult reading, Zedler accepts the

[1] See A. Ruppel, *Johannes Gutenberg*, Berlin, 1939.
[2] *Von Coster zu Gutenberg*, Leipzig, 1921.

Costeriana as the Vorbildung of Ulrich Zell, and attempts to show how they were produced and to date them. He considers that the type was made by a process of casting in sand. No layman can really pronounce a verdict on this very technical subject. Zedler's thesis may be right, or it may not, but at least we can accept the general conclusion that the types of the Costeriana were produced by a method which proved in the end to be impracticable. They did not solve the problem of casting satisfactory type in large quantities as a commercial proposition. As to their dates Zedler's case is weak. His reconstruction of the time-table of Coster's press, in which he carries back the earliest fragments to a date before the appearance of anything at Mainz, is forced. We do not know yet as a fact that the Costeriana are earlier than Gutenberg. We have not the material to settle the question, and unless fresh documents are discovered the controversy will remain unsettled.

On the other hand, types were produced at Mainz by a method which proved to be practicable, and this method continued to be followed with very little change down to the nineteenth century. The first step is the preparation of punches; letters are engraved on the ends of punches of hard metal, a very difficult and lengthy task. The punch is struck into a piece of copper, known as a matrix or strike; the matrix, after justification, is then placed in an adjustable hand-casting machine or mould. When this machine is closed or adjusted the matrix is at the bottom of a crevice and into this crevice molten lead, or some alloy containing lead, is poured. This lead, when taken from the mould, is the type, having in relief on one end the letter derived from the impression in the matrix. This hand-casting machine was the essence of Gutenberg's invention and the discovery which made possible the book printed from movable types.

Gutenberg did not discover the means of taking an impression, he was not the first man to construct a press nor the first to engrave letters on steel, to be used as a punch. All these mechanical arts and also the art of casting were known long before his day. Still less did he or any other early printer introduce any innovation

in the design of letters. On the contrary, he copied the contemporary letter formation as known in the manuscript book, and in fact gave himself endless trouble in order to make his copy as exact as possible. Dr. Paul Schwenke's[1] examination of the type of the Gutenberg Bible has revealed the number of extra sorts which were cut in order that a page of his book might be mistaken for a page written by a calligrapher. The incunable period in the history of the book, which we arbitrarily close with the year 1500, may be defined as the period in which traces of the hand-written book are still to be found. The models which the first typographers had before them were manuscripts and the dignity of the work they produced is due to the high standard of beauty maintained by the models they were following. The handsome and imposing pages of the best incunables approach the even finer pages of the best manuscripts.

[1] *Johann Gutenberg's Zweiundvierzigzeilige Bibel*, Leipzig, 1923.