The Book Trade in Ancient Rome.

It is the generally received opinion that before the introduction of movable type by Füst, publishing was hampered with almost insuperable difficulties. This is true so far as the middle ages were concerned, because during that benighted era very few people knew one letter from another. Learning in those days was almost entirely in the hands of the monks, and what few books were produced issued in all cases from some one or other of the numerous monasteries scattered throughout Europe. Books were rare because readers were few; had there been a greater demand, we doubt not but that the supply would have kept pace with it.

It is quite a mistake, however, to compare for any purpose the state of learning as it existed in Europe during the middle ages with the widespread knowledge which prevailed in ancient times, more especially in the palmy days of Rome, and any similarity that may appear between the two takes its origin from an imperfect acquaintance with the habits and customs of the Roman people.

There were, in truth, publishing houses in the time of Augustus which may almost be said to have rivaled the great firms of our own day; and not only was this the case in point of enterprise, but even of cheapness as well. We cannot, of course, venture to place copying on a level with printing, for the great advantage of the latter process is, that once clear the "proof" of mistakes, no error can well occur, no matter how many copies may be struck off from the type. With mere copying it is different; any one of the transcribers may make a mistake at any moment, and in the aggregate these may amount to a considerable number, and be, moreover, exceedingly difficult to detect. The defectiveness of ancient texts has given constant employment and cause of quarrel to modern commentators; hence the great disadvantage of manuscript lies in the fact that the text is just as likely as not to be corrupt.

Apart from this, however, and putting the question of legibility on one side, copying has many advantages in its favour. In the first place, it is quicker, for no compositor can possibly keep pace with a transcriber; and it is also, under certain conditions, much cheaper.

Labour is in these days a somewhat expensive commodity; but in Rome, where the existence of slavery was expressly recognized as an integral portion of the *Jus Gentium*, the case was widely different. Although slavery under the various modifications of that law was quite a different institution from that, for example, which existed in the United States before the war of 1863; still its existence enabled a person possessed of means to accomplish any particular work he had on hand very much more quickly and cheaply than he could possibly hope to do at the present day.

Suppose, for instance, a London publisher were asked how soon he would undertake to turn out a thousand copies of the second book of Martial's "Epigrams," consisting of 540 lines of verse, he would reply that, assuming he stopped the work of his establishment to do it, and also assuming that he could induce his printers to put on every available compositor in their service, he might get the matter completed in six hours. We much doubt whether the work could be finished in a much shorter time than this; but, to be on the safe side, we will say that he replies that, by the expenditure of money in profusion, it could be done at a pinch in three hours.

We can imagine what a hurrying here and there, what a rush of extra compositors, machine hands, and other workmen there would be; what a number of binders ready to receive the printed sheets directly they came from the press; what a waste of money, what turmoil and confusion! And when at last the printed book made its appearance, full of mistakes in all probability, and doubtless blurred and smeared with the undried ink, the modern Lucullus, who had ordered this feat to be accomplished, would doubtless exclaim: "Wonderful, most wonderful! even in this age of perfecting machines and printers' devils."

Let us now turn to Rome, and step into the warehouse of Atticus, or the Sosii, the great publishers of the Augustan era, and ask either of them a similar question. They, too, would have to put aside all other work; but assuming they agree to do this, the thousand copies of the second book of the "Epigrams," with its 540 lines of verse, would be in the customer's hands bound and endorsed in an hour, and at very little extra cost.

We cannot doubt this, for we have the authority of Martial himself. His words are explicit, and intended to be so, and are not merely used as a figure of speech. "Haece una peragit librarius hora." (Epig. ii. 1).

The great firm of the Sosii had over two thousand slaves, trained as transcribers, under their immediate control, and doubtless a large number of binders and readers as well. Immediately on this order being given, the latter would read through various portions of the text, and the edition would easily be copied and stitched in an hour. Thus it would have been possible to beat the London publisher by two hours out of three; or, to make everything absolutely certain, give the Roman two hours, and he would beat him by one. We venture to say also that the mistakes would be about equal in both cases, while the difference in cost would be greatly in favour of the older method.

Again, let us go to the London publisher and ask him how much per copy he could supply and leisurely turn out an edition of the thirteenth book of Martial's "Epigrams," assuming there were a brisk demand for the work. Suppose he said two thousand copies at sixpence each, would that be considered an excessive price? We think not; but for all that the Sosii would not ask so much; for again, on the authority of Martial, we learn that a copy of his thirteenth book of "Epigrams" might be bought from the booksellers, who were a distinct class from the publishers as they now are, for the equivalent of a little over fivepence.
This excessive promptness and cheapness shows conclusively that there must have been a very large demand for books in the time of the Romans, and when we come to look into the authorities we find that such was actually the case.

Examples might be multiplied to show that the ramifications of the Roman bookselling trade stretched into every part of the civilized globe, even into our own country of Britain, where Martial and Ovid, Virgil, Cæsar, Propertius, and the rest were as well known among a small class as in Italy they were read and digested by the masses.

Books were to the Roman an absolute necessity, and, as in the case in our own day, there were bad books as well as good ones in profusion. Thus it is related that Augustus, once making a raid on the pseudo-Sibylline literature, succeeded in discovering no less than two thousand copies of this spurious publication in Rome alone. How many remained hidden it is impossible to say, but probably three or four times that number, since the stationarii, with their eyes on the market, would know well that when the heat of the raid was over the value of the surviving copies would increase tenfold.

There were bibliophiles also in Rome, ever anxious to snap up rare originals at almost any price, as indeed there were in Greece as well, where Plato paid a hundred Attic minae (more than £300) for three small treatises of Philolaus the Pythagorean. And as there were bibliophiles so also were there bibliomaniacs in profusion, for towards the end of the Republic it became the fashion to have a library as part of the household furniture, and the booksellers carried on a flourishing trade in their shops in the Argelatum and the Vicus Sandalarius, where they exhibited catalogues on the side-posts of their doors, as their modern prototypes in Holywell-street do now, and as Maunsell first did in London in 1595. Seneca ridicules the prevailing mania for book collecting in men who, as he says, knew nothing of their possessions except the outsides.

Such is a bare outline of the state of the book trade in ancient Rome; an outline which, though necessary meagre, is still, it is to be hoped, sufficient to show that literature was held in high repute many hundreds of years ago as it is now. The modern system of publishing in all its branches is indeed almost precisely the same; even the destination of the books themselves is the same, for Horace relates that if an author failed to please in the metropolis, his works were foisted on the provinces; and if this were of no avail, the “remains” were sold to the proprietors of pastry and spice shops for paper.

Mr. Henry Blackwell, a New York bookbinder, recently completed the binding of an extra-illustrated edition of Shakespeare for a well-known New York collector, which is a marvel of ingenuity and perseverance. The original edition consisted of only eight volumes, and these have been extended to forty-three. There are thousands of prints, playbills, and autograph letters of all shapes and sizes, so deftly incorporated as to secure a uniformity which is positively surprising.

A few lines from a letter from Mr. Blackwell, recently received in the office, may serve as an illustration of his work:

“Rome, November 15th, 1893.

Dear Mr. Blackwell,

I am truly grateful for the beautiful binding you have done for the Shakespeare. It is a work of art, and I cannot say enough in praise of your skill and craftsmanship. I look forward to seeing the final result when it is completed.

Yours truly,

[Sign.]

[From the American Bookmaker.]

Bookbinding Awards at Chicago.

LINCOLN, Neb., December 19th, 1893.

To the Editor of The Bookmaker.

Your correspondent, “Subscriber,” in your last issue calls attention to the fact that American exhibitors were almost ignored by the judges in the late Columbian Exposition at Chicago, and that foreign exhibitors were awarded prizes for samples of work much inferior to that shown by firms in this country. This fact was so patent to bookbinders that much public comment was made, and considerable dissatisfaction exists in binding circles.

The members of the craft will probably be interested in a few stubborn facts which came under my personal notice. On the 28th day of last June I received notice from John Boyd Thacher that I had been selected as one of the judges of awards in the book-binding department, and to be prepared to assume my duties on July 3rd. On July 2nd I received another letter from him stating that I had failed of confirmation, but the news columns of the morning papers that day contained my name as confirmed by the executive committee. I then wrote to Mr. Thacher asking for an explanation, but for quite a while received no reply. I then wrote to General Davis on the subject, with like results. Next I induced a couple of friends who were visiting the Fair to make inquiries regarding the matter at headquarters; but just as soon as they announced their business to the attendants they were informed that neither Davis nor Thacher could be seen, although both gentlemen were “get-at-able” to ordinary visitors.

My friends, having had considerable newspaper experience, ferreted out the following facts: I was dropped because I had for several years maintained that American bookbinders were the equals, if not the superiors of any foreign binders, and that I would not be a safe judge in the matter, as offence might be given to the French and German exhibitors if Americans were allowed to carry off the prizes.

This, I think, will be a sufficient, although unjustifiable reason why American exhibitors were ignored when prizes were awarded.

WILLIAM O’SHEA.

The number of new books and new editions of books printed in France during the year 1893 was about the same as the year before—20,000 volumes, in plain figures. Of this number, Paris accounts for 6,200 volumes, that is to say, an increase of one hundred on the output in 1892. The various departements follow with: Indre-et-Loire, 850 volumes; Seine-et-Oise, 600; Seine-et-Marne, 550; Eure, 370; Haute-Vienne, 450; Rhone, 380; Gironde, 460; Nord, 450; Meurthe-et-Moselle, 420; Bouches-du-Rhône, 250; Cher, 240; Doubs, 400; Maine-et-Loire, 400; Somme, 240; etc.

If brevity is the soul of wit, then there is wit in the following quaintly worded par. just now going the rounds of the press:—

“Anebium Eroditum, the devouring book-worm, turns up its nose (and its toes) at Stickfast Paste.”