

## 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 rivalled 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 recognised 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. "Hæc 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 at 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.



