



The Kelmscott Press.

A MASTER CRITIC ON THE MASTER PRINTER.



R. WILLIAM MORRIS has but lately explained in *The Daily Chronicle* the missionary object of the Kelmscott Press: the world is to be provided with "nice books," and he himself is to be amused. The amount of amusement is of course his own affair. But since he makes the "nice books" the concern of the public, it may be interesting to inquire how far they justify his experiment. I think I can prove to you (writes a master critic), if you will permit me, that more is to be learned of the actual work accomplished by the Kelmscott Press by looking at its publications than by listening to Mr. Morris's explanations of its aims.

We all know well that the art of bookmaking has been degraded in proportion as the number of books has multiplied. Indeed, it would be more useful were Mr. Morris to point out how, so long as the many are the publisher's patrons, it can be otherwise. Had an Elzevir, an Aldus, a Plantin been forced to provide an educated democracy with books, he too might have fallen from his high estate. Not for the reader who can only afford sixpence were his stately, elegant tomes produced. Cheap, and therefore but too often nasty, books are one of the principal outcomes of general education. In theory Mr. Morris's sympathies may be with the many; in practice they are wholly with the few. His books, like his wall-papers, are specially intended, not for the proletariat he loves, but for the capitalist he hates. Now, perhaps, when this fact is understood, Mr. Morris's achievements as a "master-printer" may be more fully measured if it be remembered that much had already been done in the way of artistic bookmaking, where expense is no consideration, before he set up his press in Hammersmith. The man who follows in a path made clear for him is not judged by the same standard as the pioneer. As he himself is ready to admit, printing has been immensely improved of late years in England. Indeed, he would not find it easy to surpass with his hand-press the work by steam of the Constables in Edinburgh, to mention but one example. His estimate of Continental printing, however, is scarcely too low. Nothing very good has come from Italy or from Germany—that is, no notable specimens of fine bookmaking. But in America, where Mr. Morris finds nothing that is not quite abominable—save extensive patronage—far more legitimate effort has been made to restore the book to its original dignity. There is no more beautiful printing done to-day, even in Hammersmith, than that which comes from the De Vinne Press in New York; no contemporary publishers, the world over, have devoted more successful attention to the get-up of books than the Grolier Club in the same city. So much having been accomplished, the question is, to what degree of perfection has Mr. Morris, at the Kelmscott Press, now brought the art of book-making?

He has, in the last two years, produced not quite a dozen books, each in a limited edition, a fact which implies a deliberation, and should allow of a thoroughness, not possible to the printer or publisher who supplies the wants of an ordinary public, paying cheap prices. Of the literary value of his publications I do not speak; it is merely as specimens of bookmaking that I ask your permission to discuss them. In a printed book the type is the first consideration, and here I have little but praise for Mr. Morris. Only the other day he was explaining in your columns where he went for his models when designing his three founts. He has left it for us to add that he has improved upon the originals, and indeed it would have been strange if he had not. The early printers, as was inevitable, copied the handwriting of the professional scribes (not the everyday handwriting of the period, as Mr. Morris and his school would have us believe); since then, what has been lost in beauty has been made up in greater clearness and legibility. In his gothic founts, his Troye and Chaucer types, as he calls them, Mr. Morris has profited by the later work which he despises. His letters are far more clearly cut than the old ones, and in thus adapting them to his modern readers he has but added grace and harmony to their proportions. But it is a question whether the use of gothic type at this late date is not an affectation for which there is no reasonable excuse. It is not easy to read; it dazzles and wearies the eye. It may be argued that Mr. Morris has used it as the most appropriate in his reprints of Caxton's books, but this argument will not hold good, for while the "Troye" and the "Reynard" are in gothic type, the "Golden Legend" is in roman. In the latter case it is only the inconsistency which puzzles us, for Mr. Morris's roman fount is in every way an improvement upon the gothic, though a heaviness in some of the letters, and an affectation in others, are faults which somewhat detract from its beauty.

Mr. Morris apparently makes the mistake of supposing that if type be good the battle is won. Certainly, when it comes to the actual printing, his books are filled with blemishes which would be ascribed to carelessness even in printers of lesser pretensions. There is a weakness, a faintness in many of his impressions, which is unpardonable when the standard he sets up and the prices he asks are borne in mind. Indeed, in my own copy of the "Love Lyrics of Proteus," there are pages which the average "commercial" publisher or printer would throw away as so much waste paper, rather than try to palm them off on his customers. The most glaring instance is where the same capital, inserted on opposite pages, would seem in one impression to have reached the last degree of feebleness, were it not that in the other it is almost washed out. If this be the best that can result when three hundred copies of a book are printed on a hand-press, while the steam-press will throw you off its thousands and hundreds of thousands without degenerating into such feebleness and inequalities, why, then, the sooner the hand-press is done away with the better. But, unfortunately for the Kelmscott Press, we have had examples of work

turned out by the hand-press in America which reach the high-water mark of accomplishment. When Mr. Morris, at Hammersmith, can from his wood-blocks obtain such marvellous impressions as those which Mr. De Vinne, of New York, has given us of Mr. Cole's engravings—in the fine edition—then indeed may he be hailed as "master-printer." Because much rubbish is produced by machinery it does not follow that everything made by hand is good. But there seems a superstition nowadays that handwork must necessarily, because it is handwork, be perfect. Mr. Morris has achieved too great a success with his type to continue to be so careless with his printing. With his paper again his recommendation is that it is hand made. Excellent in itself, for his special purpose it is less desirable. It is far too thin. The type can be seen through it, thus destroying the effect of the page at which the volume is opened. It may be said that the same defect often occurs in the earliest printed books. But if the "master-printer" of the nineteenth century cannot improve upon the materials and methods of the fifteenth he had better shut up shop.

But it is when we come to the ornament and arrangement of the page that Mr. Morris's inconsistencies and shortcomings are most serious. He and his fellow-members of the Arts and Crafts Society have so often explained the nature of the perfect book that it is their own fault if we look to them for perfection. According to them, no book illustration is legitimate unless it be decoration in the narrowest sense of the word, and no decoration is possible unless it be appropriate. And now with this for our standard, we turn to the publications of the Kelmscott Press. We find, to begin with, that the page is almost always well spaced, even if it be too often bound without thought of preserving harmony in the proportions of opposite pages, though there is an improvement in this respect in the more recent books. To compare the "Proteus" to "Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets" is to admit that in the latter the page gains in dignity, serenity, and charm by the omission of the capitals, supposed to be printed in a good red, with which every short song and lyric in the "Proteus" begins. Of illustration, that is, of drawings illustrating the text, as yet but little has been given—the frontispiece by Mr. Burne-Jones to "John Ball," and the two woodcuts, also designed by him, for the "Golden Legend"—though we have the promise of the "Chaucer" with sixty drawings. But all the books have ornamental initial letters and borders, and a few have elaborate title-pages. Several of the borders, when seen in one book, many of the initials when seen each on one page, are pleasing and effective enough, though by no means of extraordinary merit. But, with constant recurrence on page after page, in volume after volume, they grow wearisome, and unavoidably lose in effectiveness. When the same "A" or the same "W," as in the "Proteus," stares at you from opposite pages it assumes a certain unwelcome commonness. To chance upon the same border in the "Gothic Architecture," in the "Proteus," and in the "Shakespeare," to learn that the same title-page does duty in the "Golden Legend,"

the "Troye," and the "Reynard," is to wonder if cheapness, instead of beauty, was not Mr. Morris's object in his choice of ornament. And his practice is a direct contradiction to his own gospel of appropriateness. If the initials, the title-page, the marginal ornaments in the "Troye," or the "Reynard," are well adapted to the gothic fount used and to the text, then must they be wholly out of keeping with the roman type and the subject of the "Golden Legend." I am the more ready to point this out, since it is just the inconsistency that Mr. Morris would be the first to anathematise in others. It is true that he is designing new capitals, but he still uses the old in the same volume, though in feeling and motive the two designs may have nothing in common. True, he occasionally introduces a new border, but when the latter is as clumsy as that which encloses the first page of "John Ball," we are not sure that we would not prefer the omission of ornament altogether. He may, to authorise this repetition, quote the methods of Caxton, who did not object to making the same wood blocks do service again and again. But when the facilities and resources of the two printers are considered, the defence becomes impossible; and when, where everything was to be invented and originated, a copy of Caxton's "Golden Legend," published probably in a far more limited edition, sold at the average price of 6s. 8d. (equivalent to £2 13s. 4d. to-day), we cannot be blamed for expecting from Mr. Morris, who had but to borrow his text, in his tennineas version of the same book, greater care and elegance in the get-up than was possible in the infancy of printing. It is as inevitable that we should also look for a beauty and perfection not to be had in the cheaper publications of our own day. I say nothing of the numerous books and magazines, which have nothing in common with his productions. But I have seen sheets of a book now passing through the press, Mallory's "Morte D'Arthur," which threatens to compete with him on his own ground. A long series of original drawings, and initials and borders changing with every page or chapter, are being designed for it. The reproductions by process are quite equal to his woodcuts, and save to the expert, indistinguishable from them. It should be noted, too, in passing, that the man who does the wood-cutting for Mr. Morris gets no credit for it—a neglect which might be referred to the Arts and Crafts Society. And yet the "Morte D'Arthur" will cost infinitely less than Mr. Morris's "Golden Legend."

I do not quarrel with his prices. They are not really excessive; but I do protest against being asked to accept as the finest specimens of modern book-making volumes which are ornamented with stock blocks—even if Mr. Morris did make them—with initials which, though they are designed by Mr. Morris and Mr. Burne-Jones, are nothing more than inappropriate *clichés*, coloured caps, which have been half-inked, or on which inks of different degrees of strength have been used; and with pages after pages that do not balance. These defects would disgrace a sixpenny magazine. I cannot understand how such slovenly work is allowed to be issued from the Kelmscott Press.—*Daily Chronicle*.