

The Origin and Use of Swash Letters

By Everett R. Currier

Probably you never read anything on this subject before. Yet it is a matter of which every advertiser and printer should know

THE swash letter, now so popular in the finer kind of typography, is no new trick of the type founder. It has simply been taken from its hiding place in the occasional privately printed handmade edition and pressed into the service of American advertising, which wants, uses, and pays for the best of everything it can discover.

Swash letters are those Italic letters in which the normal, plainer form is elaborated by curves and other variations suggesting the pen stroke, conspicuously the tail of the K and R. These and other variations will be apparent by comparing the exhibit below, which shows the Caslon swash letters from the American Typefounders' Specimen Book Supplement:

A B C D E G K L M N P R U

SWASH

A B C D E G K L M N P R V

REGULAR

k v w z

SWASH

k v w z

REGULAR

The origin of the term "swash" I am unable to trace. It happens to be a slight case of onomatopoeia, in which the word sounds like the thing it describes, as in this instance something soft, round, and flowing.

We frequently hear these variants called in all seriousness "squash" letters, presumably because the outstanding feature in the printer's mind is their extreme fragility. The kerned or overhanging flourishes squash or break off at the slightest tap of the planer, to say nothing of what happens during the process of electrotyping, or in printing directly from the type.

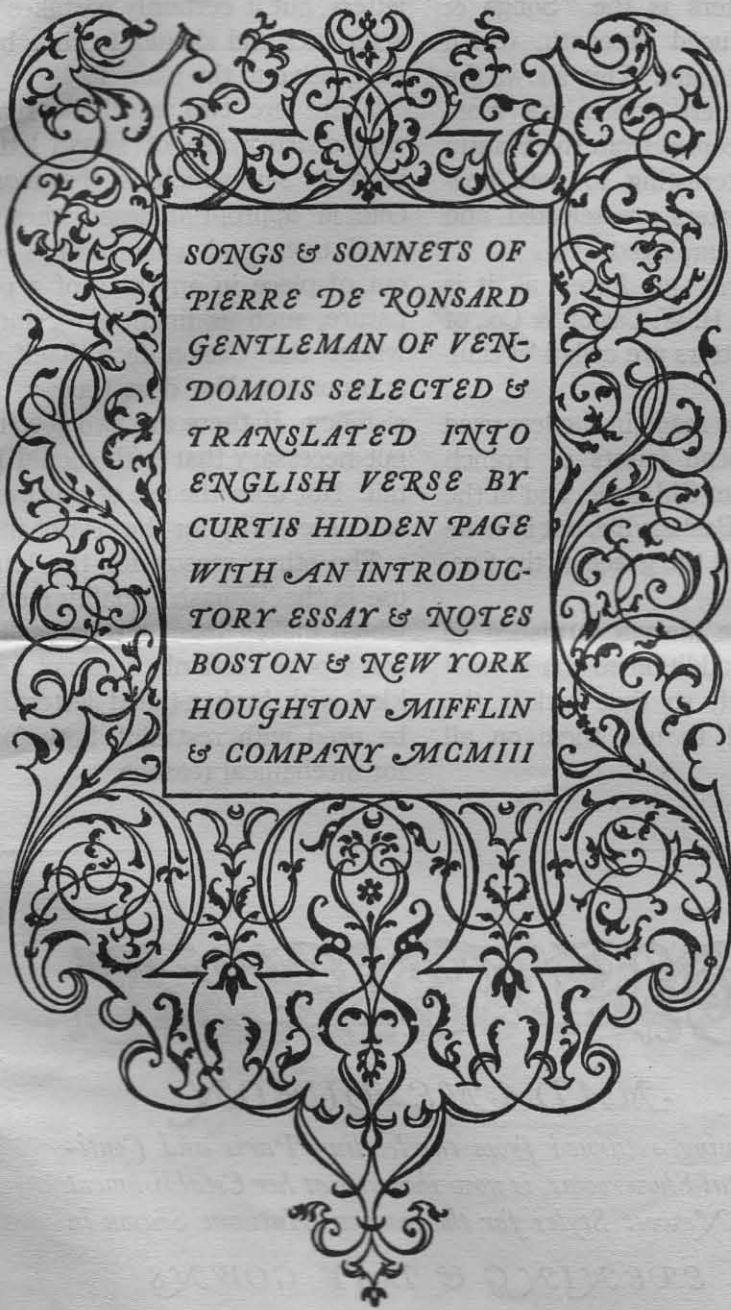
Mr. Bruce Rogers, who for many years de-

signed the beautiful Riverside Press Editions in Cambridge, Mass., was one of the pioneers in the introduction of swash caps into modern American typography, about the beginning of this century. He has used these accessory letters with an appropriateness and restraint that have made their charm apparent to all lovers of good printing. Their introduction into advertisements and commercial printing probably goes back not more than a half-dozen years, but they are now to be found in every magazine and newspaper.

My impression is that the earliest swash letters were used by Venetian printers about the beginning of the sixteenth century, though perhaps not earlier than 1525. They were probably cut at the same time that the first Italic caps were produced. For many years small Roman caps were used with Italic lowercase, and I have seen a book, printed in Paris in 1533 by Simon de Colines, in which a few swash letters are used together with his Roman caps. But as the early Italics were much more upright than those of the present day, these swash letters look as much like "swash Roman" as "swash Italic." The lowercase *v* is also very common in this fount and others of the same period. It is the form of U for the initial letter of a word.

Swash letters were much used all through the sixteenth century in Italy, the Netherlands, France, and especially at Lyons, where some very fine ones were in use around 1550, and in Paris. The finest designs I know were those used by Plantin, the ones made for Mr. Rogers' eleven-point Caslon Italic being copies from a Plantin book of 1585.

Inferior designs of swash letters were used by nearly all printers in England in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The French type founder exaggerated the swash, and the simple



Title-page of "Songs and Sonnets of Pierre de Ronsard," composed in Italic capitals with swash border in the original was printed in a light brown color. Shown by of the publishers, Houghton Mifflin Company

One of the finest examples I have showing the use of swash letters is the "Songs & Sonnets" page reproduced herewith, which was designed by Mr. Rogers. This shows the eleven-point swash letters which are mentioned as having been copied from the Plantin book of 1585. It is interesting to note how carefully the swash letters are selected and how relatively few are employed.

In a book of Caslon "Old Face," as it is called by the founders, H. W. Caslon & Co., of London, these swash letters are called "Peculiar Italic Sorts."

Swash letters are also made in the less-used Italics of some American founts of French Old Style, in Cheltenham Old Style, and in the more recently adopted Baskerville, but in none of these do they possess the grace of the Caslon swash letters.

These characters are always furnished as extra sorts, that is, in addition to the normal letters of the alphabet, so that luckily the printer is not obliged to use them on all occasions.

The cap T is not classed among the swash letters, but it certainly partakes of their characteristics and should, I think, be listed as an alternative to the plain T.

There are two excellent reasons for the very sparing use of swash letters, and it is hard to say which is the more important. One is appropriateness: when are they in good taste and when not? They are surely out of place in anything of a plain, practical nature, such as financial or industrial work where the Caslon face itself is eminently appropriate. Nor does their use demand consistency. If there are two R's in a word, it is not necessary that both should have the long tail. Nor does the use of one swash character call necessarily for the rest of the set.

The other reason for the limiting of their use is the "squash" quality mentioned above which makes them mechanically a nuisance and a page certainly does not look well sprinkled with broken-tailed letters. They should be used with restraint, both for artistic and for mechanical reasons.



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