Constructed letters and illuminated texts: Regiomontanus, Leon Battista Alberti, and the origins of the Roman type

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Constructed Letters and Illuminated Texts: Regiomontanus, Leon Battista Alberti, and the Origins of Roman Type

M. D. Feld

Among the incunabula in the Pierpont Morgan Library is a copy of the De oratore of Cicero, printed in 1465 at Subiaco, Italy, by Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz. This particular book is remarkable both in what it represents and in itself. It is part of what is perhaps the first edition printed in Italy. The characters in which it is printed represent the earliest known example of roman type. The copy in question is an especially handsome piece of work. The paper and the presswork are in a remarkably fine state of preservation, and the initial letters for each of the three books into which the De oratore is divided are hand illuminated in elegant fashion.

It is not merely the careful workmanship of these three illuminated initials that is striking. Their effect is heightened by the fact that their own particular form is remarkably apposite to the roman type they serve to introduce (Fig. 1). In contrast to the illuminated initials found in other comparable books of this period, they give the impression of having been consciously responsive to the typographical innovations of their specific time and place.

The motif, the white vines so characteristic of the illuminated initials in early humanist manuscripts, is not in itself unique. It is its combination with the carefully proportioned letters that merits our atten-

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1 There is documentary evidence, but no known copy, of an earlier work by the same printers, the Donatus, Pro patre. See Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Museum, Part IV (London, 1916), p. vii ff.
tion. This combination was to be repeated. The white vine motif and the particular shape and proportions of the letters appear again in sets of woodblock initials used by the printers Sweynheym and Pannartz in Rome ca. 1470 (Fig. 2), by Regiomontanus, also known as Johannes Mueller of Konigsberg, in Nuremberg in 1474 (Fig. 3), and by Erhard Rading in Venice in 1478 (Fig. 4).

There is nothing immediately worthy of comment in this last observation. Woodblock initials did not, obviously, spring out of the thin air. They must have been modelled on something, and there is no likelier candidate for such a model than the illuminated initials which had appeared in earlier manuscripts and in the earliest printed books. It is highly likely that the first woodblock initials were made from the stencils of illuminators, and even in the selfsame workshop.

What is most interesting about this family of initials, however, is the fact that while the white vine motif dates back to the early years of the quattrocento, the letters themselves belong to a particular species whose earliest instance can be precisely assigned to the year 1463. They are unmistakable examples of the letter form known as "constructed" letters, that is to say, letters made in accordance with geometric rules and principles (Fig. 5).  

The study of the cultural significance of constructed letters is still in its infancy. Pioneer contributions have been made by such eminent scholars as Millard Meiss ³ and Giovanni Mardersteig. ⁴ Both interpret the practice of forming letters in accordance with strict geometrical proportions as a manifestation of the dominant Renaissance impulse to reform all modes of thought and expression in accordance with the practices and principles of ancient Rome. This impulse focused on two aspects of classical culture, its surviving monuments and inscriptions, and its authentic texts.


⁴ Giovanni Mardersteig, "Leon Battista Alberti e la rinascita del carattere lapi
FIG. 1. Cicero, De oratore (Sobiaco: Sweynheym and Pannartz, 1465).
By permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library.


FIG. 4. Appian, Romanae historiae (Venice: Randolf, 1477).
Fig. 5. Luca Pacioli, *Divina proportione* (Venice, 1509). Houghton Library.
The theory of constructed letters was based on an effort to reconcile these two sources, namely to analyse and recreate the surviving monumental inscriptions of Republican and Imperial Rome in terms of the geometric canons of classical architecture, particularly as exemplified in a treatise written somewhat before 27 B.C., the De architectura of Vitruvius. Constructed letters must not only have that authentic "Roman" look, they must be capable of description in terms of the parameters and divisions of the two basic geometric forms, the square and the circle.

The uniqueness in this respect of the series of initials described above is borne out if one takes the trouble to compare them with roughly contemporary illuminated and woodblock initials, such as are, for example, to be found in Lamberto Donati's census of the woodblock borders used in early Venetian printing. The white vine motif is quite common in this latter group, but with that the resemblance ceases. The almost aggressive display of strict ratios between the components of individual letters and the emphatically fixed relationship with their encompassing space that characterizes the Sweynheym and Pannartz-Rigiomontanus-Ratdolt initials is nowhere else employed.

This family of constructed woodblock initials can thus be assigned to a particular time and place. We can assume with reasonable assurance that they were devised at or in the vicinity of Rome sometime between 1465, the date of the Sweynheym and Pannartz De oratore, and 1470-71, the date of the Sweynheym and Pannartz woodblock Suetonius. They were then somehow transmitted to Nuremberg and employed by the printer, mathematician, and astronomer Regiomontanus in a series of editions in 1474. Close copies of them appear in Venice where Erhard Ratdolt made use of them in 1478. After this point they are inflated into the general and somewhat debased currency of book decoration. The nexus of affiliation between these three printers is easily explained. Sweynheym and Pannartz, as I have elsewhere demonstrated, operated in all probability under the patronage of Cardinal Bessarion. Regiomontanus' role as a protégé, companion, and


M. D. Feld, "Renaissance Humanism and Some Early Printers' Choice of Texts," unpublished manuscript. This theme is to be developed at length in a book in progress: Printing and Humanism in Renaissance Italy: An Essay on the Revival of the Pagan Gods.
agent of Cardinal Bessarion is well documented. Radvolt seems to have regarded himself as the heir to the printing program of Regiomontanus.

The genealogy of the idea of constructed letters is somewhat more complicated. Millard Meiss believes that Andrea Mantegna was the originator of the concept. Giovanni Mardersteig assigns that role to Leon Battista Alberti. These two Renaissance artists and antiquarians at any rate were associated in many projects, particularly at the courts of the d'Este in Ferrara and of the Gonzaga in Mantua. Their particular alphabets were at no time systematically described. What we have of them is derived by later scholars from letters painted and inscribed in their paintings and architectural projects. The first known systematically described constructed alphabet is to be found in a treatise written in 1463 by one Felice Feliciano, a friend of Mantegna. The next recorded instance of this genre is a book printed in Parma about 1480 by one Damiano da Moille, who belonged to a local family of illuminators and of whom virtually nothing else is known. Following this was the highly influential *Divina proportione* of Luca Pacioli (Venice, 1509). Pacioli, a protégé of Piero della Francesca, was a friend of Leonardo and, most significantly, amanuensis to Alberti during the last two years of the latter's life. External evidence points to Alberti as the most likely source for these early Roman constructed letters. We know that as a member of the Papal Chancery he was resident in Rome at this time, viz. 1465-1470. He dedicated one of his books to Giovanni Andrea Bussi, the editor of Sweynheym and Pannartz's texts. Regiomontanus, in his

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6 Anderson, op. cit. (note 1 above), pp. 126-128.
8 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture; The Latin Texts of De
correspondence, testifies to his admiration for Alberti and to the interests he shared with him.15 Alberti himself, in his treatise on cryptography, De componendis ciuis, written in 1466, provides us with what is, I believe, the first reference to printing in Italian literature.16 From it we can infer that he visited Sweynheym and Pannartz during their Subiaco period (ca. 1465-68) and observed them at work.

Alberti, however, was not the designer of the Roman woodblock initials. A comparison of his initials with those of Sweynheym and Pannartz–Regiomontanus makes this clear. As we run through the assembled corpus of early constructed alphabets, his (Fig. 6), that of Feliciano (Fig. 7), of Mantegna (Fig. 8), and of da Moille (Fig. 9), it is obvious that the most likely candidate for this honor is Damiano da Moille. A side-by-side comparison of individual letters seems to me not only convincing, but also one in which the few anomalies, namely D and M, can be easily accounted for on rational technical grounds (Figs. 9–10).17

This by no means rules out the seminal role of Leon Battista Alberti. Moiss has cogently argued that the ur-treatise of Felice Feliciano represents the somewhat botched effort of a “Dr. Watson”-like companion to capture the ideas that his more gifted friend, Mantegna, expounded in conversation and in practice but was too busy to set down in systematic form. The relationship between Alberti and da Moille may have been somewhat similar. They could have met during one of Alberti’s numerous sojourns in the Po Valley, and Alberti may have brought him back to Rome as a protégé and assistant. There he worked out in systematic fashion this particular aspect of the master’s multifaceted genius. Upon Alberti’s death in 1472, da Moille may have returned to Parma to continue his career in his native city. There he printed a pattern book of the letter forms he had worked out during his more adventurous youth.

17 The splayed legs of the woodblock M, and the shortened radius of the woodblock D arise from the technical necessity of keeping the lines away from the very edge.
Fig. 5. Leon Battista Alberti, from Mardersteig, op. cit. (note 4).
Fig. 7. Felice Feliciano, ca. 1460–1463 (Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, Vat. lat. 6851) from Meiss, The Painter’s Choice (note 3).
Fig. 8. Mantegna, Initials (Albi, Bibliothèque Rochechouard, MS. 4) from Meiss, Andrea Mantegna (note 3).
Fig. 9. Damiàn da Mollo, from *The Mayfuss Alphabet* (note 8).

Fig. 10. Swynheym and Pannartz — Regiomontanus Woodblock Initials, ca. 1470-74.
This *Ars alphabeticum* was printed by da Moille about 1480. It appears to have escaped all notice until it was rediscovered sometime in the early 1920s.  

It may, however, have had some impact on its contemporaries. The Munich Staatsbibliothek contains a manuscript alphabet which, to judge from the direct comparison of facsimiles (Fig. 11) and with the prestigious concurrence of Dr. Giovanni Mardersteig, appears to be a direct and accurate copy of the da Moille treatise.  

This manuscript, dated ca. 1482, is in the hand and from the collection of the Nuremberg humanist, physician, and bibliophile, Hartmann Schedel, most generally known as the author of the *Nuremberg Chronicle.* But how accurate is this dating? It is based only on the assumption that the manuscript must have been copied from the book, which itself was printed in 1480. The letters themselves are demonstrably Italian in origin. A German manuscript of Schedel's lifetime must, therefore, have an Italian source.

But is this source necessarily the printed book of 1480? There is also the possibility that the book and the manuscript have a common source. Some of the known particulars of Schedel's life lend themselves to this hypothesis. We know that the Schedel family was part of the circle of Nuremberg patricians who welcomed and supported the scientific and printing activities of Regiomontanus during the latter's brief sojourn in that city. Hartmann Schedel himself was in Rome in 1471. While there, he must have visited the shop of Sweynheym and Pannartz in the Campo de' Fiori. As evidence of this we have Schedel's manuscript price list of the twelve books available at that time and in that place.

It seems highly unlikely that Regiomontanus was in Rome at that time. From his journal of astronomical observations, we know that sometime after 15 March 1471 he left Budapest and the court of Matthias Corvinus and that by 6 June 1471 he was settled in Nuremberg, hardly enough time for the humanist in transit to go to Rome and

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Fig. 11. Hartmann Schedel, Ms. Alphabet, ca. 1482 (München Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 561).
visit his patron, Cardinal Bessarion. But he would, given the fact that
the move to Nuremberg was the product of ripened negotiations, have
time to employ an agent to visit his Roman friends and intellectual
coworkers in order to acquire the necessary printing equipment. This
Roman agent would also account for Regiomontanus' Roman type-
faces, which bear a striking resemblance to those already employed by
Sweynheym and Pannartz, and for his acquisition of a set of wood-
block initials which appear to be precisely the ones used by Sweynheym
and Pannartz.

I shall even go so far as to argue that these woodblocks were in fact
made for Regiomontanus, and that the actual circumstances of their
use by Sweynheym and Pannartz in late 1470 or early 1471 can be ad-
duced as evidence for the presence of such an agent in Rome at that
time. The facts are as follows: the white vine pattern woodblock
initials are used by Sweynheym and Pannartz in only one edition, the
Vitae Caesarum of Suetonius issued late in 1470, and not even con-
sistently there. The initials have been used in the exemplars of that
edition in the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Princeton University
Library, and in libraries in Florence, Naples, and Rome. They are
not used in a copy once owned by H. P. Kraus (cat. 276, no. 33), in
the British Library copy, nor, according to Lamberto Donati, in
other copies of that edition found in Italy. The John Rylands Univer-
sity Library of Manchester has two copies, one with, and one
without. They are never again used in Rome, nor even in Sweynheym
and Pannartz's 17 September 1472 reissue of Suetonius. In the case of
Regiomontanus, however, these particular initials, identical down to
the number and pattern of background dots, are to be found in, so far
as I can make out, every known copy of the five classical and neo-
classical Latin texts he printed in the course of his brief typographical
career (Figs. 12, 13).

What I believe happened is this. Regiomontanus had the wood-
blocks cut in Rome by da Moille according to proportions established
by Alberti. Regiomontanus then had Sweynheym and Pannartz, who
were also supplying him with type-faces, instructed to make a trial
run using these very woodblocks for the initials, otherwise hand-

24 Catalogue (note 1 above), Part IV, p. 11. A census of the surviving copies of
this edition would be useful.
25 Donati, op. cit. (note 5 above), LXXV, 131.
Fig. 12. From Sweynheym and Pannartz Edition of Suetonius, 
_Vita Caesarum, ca. 1470–71._

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Fig. 13. From Books Printed by Regiomontanus in Nuremberg, ca. 1474. (P from 
Regiomontanus, _Disputationes_; M from Manilius, _Astronomica_).
Harvard Library Bulletin

... painted, in an edition they then had in press. The agent of Regiomontanus, satisfied with the demonstration, accepted the woodblocks and shipped them off to Nuremberg, where they were put to more consistent use.

How does Hartmann Schedel fit into this? He was from Nuremberg and was a member of the circle of patrician families (including, particularly, his uncle Hermann Schedel) which invited Regiomontanus to Nuremberg and which supported his scientific and humanist projects while he was there. Moreover, Hartmann Schedel, in all likelihood, visited the Roman printing establishment of Sweynheym and Pannartz ca. 1470-71. His manuscript price list of their books has as its last entry the Catena aurea of Thomas Aquinas, an edition dated 7 December 1470. It does not include the Vitae Caesarii of Suetonius. From circumstantial evidence, however, we know that the latter must have been printed sometime between 15 September 1470 and 15 March 1471. It was, therefore, presumably in press at the time of Schedel's hypothetical visit to Sweynheym and Pannartz, and, given its imperial subject, was an ideal vehicle for a trial run of constructed woodblock initials. At the same time and on the same hypothetical mission, with an introduction from Regiomontanus to Alberti or some other member of the latter's circle, Schedel was put in touch with the workshop of Damiano da Moille, where he saw the commissioned woodblock initials, and in the process made himself a copy of the pattern book employed in this project. Sometime about 1476 Hartmann Schedel returned to Nuremberg where he achieved prominence as a physician and as a patron of both humanism and printing.

To summarize what has been said of the Morgan Library 1465 De oratore and of the woodblock initials employed in some but not all copies of the Sweynheym and Pannartz ca. 1470-71 impression of Suetonius' Vitae Caesarii and consistently throughout all the Latin books printed by Regiomontanus in Nuremberg ca. 1474: examination and comparison supports the assumption that all of the initials in question are constructed letters and that they have a common source. Given what we know about the history of constructed letters, this source must have been associated with the circle of Leon Battista Alberti, and active in Rome ca. 1465-1471. An examination of the letters themselves supports the belief that the woodblocks used by

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26 Catalogue (note 1 above), Part IV, pp. 11-12.
Sweynheym and Pannartz in Rome in 1471 and by Regiomontanus in Nuremberg in 1474 are physically one and the same. Hartmann Schedel's documented interests, family connections, and itinerary make him a plausible candidate for the agent who oversaw the execution of these woodblock initials in Rome and their subsequent trial and shipment to Nuremberg. The existence of a manuscript "constructed alphabet" in the hand of Hartmann Schedel and similar in form to one printed in Parma ca. 1486 by the illuminator Damiano da Moille, both expounding the basic proportions of the illuminated and woodblock initials discussed above, is an additional support for these hypotheses.

II

It seems appropriate that these particular woodblock initials were designed expressly for Regiomontanus, surely the most distinguished humanist mathematician-astronomer ever to manage a printing press. The underlying ideas, however, did not belong to him alone. As printer and scholar, Regiomontanus was an active participant in a closely knit and self-consciously radical cultural movement. The principles governing selection of his specific forms and texts were directly related to the beliefs and objectives he shared with his patron, Cardinal Bessarion, and with fellow members of the latter's entourage. What they had in common was the vision of a neo-Platonic rational cosmos, one in which all things were governed by and achieved their particular perfection in terms of divine mathematical proportions.87

The constructed letters commissioned and employed by Regiomontanus were graphic evidence of such a comprehensive world scheme. The letter forms which most effectively conveyed the wisdom of the ancients and the message of the heavens were governed by the very principles determining the authenticity and values of the conveyed texts. Printing was thus integrated into the humanistic discipline which made man, literally as well as in every other sense, the measurer of all things. His measuring was the key to the understanding both of the world about him and of the body of classical literature in which it was most fully and most intelligently described. It was the principle according to which the perceived and the ideal, the physical and the rational, were to be harmonized.

These letters which carried the message of the productive reconcilia-

87 Feld, op. cit. (note 6 above).
tion of the square and the circle were only part of an architectonic order which, starting with the human body, comprehended all the creations of man's arts and science and ultimately reflected the structure of the heavens themselves. The basic ideas in question represented diverse intellectual strains which happened to converge in early fifteenth-century Florence. There the discovery of the historical and cultural uniqueness of ancient Rome associated with such names as Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Alberti, through the occasion of the council of Florence (1438-39), received further stimulation and enrichment in the presence of Picto and Bessarion, apostles of Platonic timelessness. The Vitruvian notion of man as the basic measuring and measurable principle was reinforced by the deeper Platonic mythology of a divinely measured and constructed universe. Alberti had the personal mission of formulating and conveying this message in modern form. Through him, in his chosen twin modes of mathematical perspective and archaeological antiquarianism, it was transmitted to painters of the Florentine Quattrocento.

From that point on the stream broadened to include such figures as Leonardo da Vinci (Fig. 14), Luca Pacioli (Fig. 5), Francesco di Giorgio (Fig. 15), Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 16), and Geoffroy Tory (Fig. 17).

If Alberti can be said to embody the Roman edge of this movement, with its emphasis on the practical and the physical, the Greek impulse towards the theoretical and the ideal is represented by Regiomontanus. Along with his teacher Georg Peurbach he was the instigator of a program to reform the corpus of celestial observations. Here precise measurement was essential, and the Romans were notably deficient in higher mathematics. Under the direct stimulus of Bessarion, Regiomontanus learned Greek and applied the principles of the ancient mathematicians, notably Archimedes, Apollonius, and Diophantus, to a more exact description of the heavens.

For Regiomontanus, astronomy, properly taught, was the science that separated man from the animals and brought him nearer to God.

Fig. 14. Leonardo, Figure after Vitruvius, from André Chastel, The Genius of Leonardo da Vinci (New York, 1961).

Fig. 16. Dürer, from his *On the Four Species of Letters* (New York, 1965).

Fig. 17. Geoffroy Tory, from his *Champ Fleury* (New York, 1967).
The proper teaching of astronomy, therefore, is the link that joins his scientific interests to his printing program. If this celestial pedagogy was to thrive, it was essential that the fundamental ancient and modern works be readily available, and that the basic Greek texts be accurately translated into humanistically sound Latin. Having himself mastered Greek and as an accomplished humanist, Regiomontanus was uniquely capable of carrying out both these aims. His printing program is explicit on this point. One book, perhaps the first, the *Tractatus contra Cremonenses*, demolishes in detail the competence of rival translators and commentators. He then went on to edit his own basic works of astronomical observation, as well as the *Theoricae novae planetarum* of his master Petrucci and the *locus classicus* of Latin and Hellenistic astronomical lore, the *Astronomica* of Manilius. The direct or supervised translation of the relevant Greek mathematical texts would have shortly followed, but for his sudden departure from Nuremberg and untimely death.

However logical it may seem in retrospect, the decision of Regiomontanus to become a professional printer still requires explanation. He was, after all, one of the most distinguished scholars of his age, and printing, at a time when such distinctions went beyond mere nomenclature, was a mechanical trade. There was no precedent for such behavior, and we have to wait twenty-five years to find something analogous, though not quite the same, in Aldus Manutius. The setting up of a press in Nuremberg can be explained on the basis of the papal anti-Platonic reaction which had since 1467 made Rome increasingly inhospitable for Bessarion and his associates. But why should this have led to Regiomontanus' personal involvement in the printing trade? Germany was hardly lacking in skilled practitioners; indeed, almost all of the Italian printers of that time were of Teutonic origin. And as for Nuremberg, Anthonius Koeburg, the very model of an enterprising and innovative printer, was already in business there.

Regiomontanus' choice of this new and somewhat déclassé profession must, I believe, he analysed not only in terms of his printing program, but more specifically in terms of his choice of roman type, which he was the first German printer to use in systematic fashion. Like those

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31 The practical management of the Aldine Press may very well have rested in the hands of Aldus' original partner and eventual father-in-law, Andrea Torresani; see Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius: Business and Scholarship in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford, 1979), p. 76 ff.

32 Feld, op. cit. (note 6 above).
of Sweynheym and Pannartz, his type-faces appear to be modelled, to the best of some matrix maker’s ability, after some humanistic script. Type and text were so intimately associated that their union could not be entrusted to a hand unfamiliar with the basic principles governing both. In all of Germany, Regiomontanus was the only man who could meet his own stringent requirements.

It is difficult if not impossible to place ourselves in the frame of mind of the Italian humanists confronted by the technique of printing. This imported invention was so thoroughly and immediately accepted and assimilated that the impression of novelty was overwhelmed and forgotten. It might, however, be useful to remember that in the first description we have, that of Alberti in his treatise De cifris, ca. 1466, printing and cryptography or, to be yet more specific, movable type and the cipher wheel are casually affiliated; printing, that is to say, is treated as an alternative method for extracting the hidden meaning of a text. 25

As has already been noted, it is not difficult to assume that Alberti was familiar with the work of Sweynheym and Pannartz from the earliest phases of their Italian operations. He did after all dedicate one of his works to Giovanni Andreas Bussi, the editor, from 1468 on, of Sweynheym and Pannartz’s classical texts. De cifris itself was dedicated to Bishop Leonardo Dati, head of the Chancery, and, on the evidence of his autograph inscription, the purchaser in November 1467 of these printers’ De civitate Dei, Subiaco, 12 June 1467. 26 By 1467, therefore, it is plausible to assume that printing was known and accepted in the most enlightened Roman intellectual spheres.

But what were the terms of its acceptance, particularly among its earliest sponsors, the advanced humanists of Bessarion’s circle? It seems to me not far-fetched to hypothesize that the roman type-face immediately and without any precedent adopted by the first printers in Italy was a guarantee of the orthographical and philological correct-

25 Baroli, op. cit. (note 16 above), p. 200. It is worth noting in this context that Hartmann Schedel had the manuscript alphabet described above bound with his transcription of the dedicatory epistle of Lascaris to his edition of the Anthologia Graecae Platonica (Florence, 1494). Lascaris advocates the exclusive use of lapidary capitals in Greek and Latin printing as essential for restoring the philological, historical, and aesthetic purity of the text. All other letter forms represent a barbarian increment. See Emanuele Cassanbanna, “Lettere Antiche,” Gutenberg Jahrbuch, 1964, pp. 17-26 (p. 22).

24 Carosi, op. cit. (note 22 above), illust. 21.
ness of the texts. Such claims were common among the proponents of humanistic script. "Habet," Guarino da' Verona, the teacher of Bussi, had written, "Macrobius, ut audio, litteris antiquis, fidelem emendatum.

Antique (i.e. humanist or roman) letters were therefore both a guarantee of the authenticity of a classic text and a key to the decipherment of its true meaning. To transcribe a manuscript from medieval to humanist characters was in itself an act of emendation, the first step in a program of philological reform. Within the technical limitations of early type-casting, the exact proportions worked out by Alberti and Mantegna could not, of course, be achieved. They could, however, be regarded as an approximation, a claim which could in no way be made for their black-letter counterparts. With the device of "constructed" woodblock initials such claims were made, as it were, heraldic. The texts were "illuminated" with the recaptured light of ancient wisdom. The rational ordering of the universe, the real secret of the ancients, was presented in perspicuous form.

Roman type and the printing programs with which it is closely associated can thus be regarded as an integral part of the Renaissance humanism which gave us linear perspective, proportioned architecture, and the empirical measurement of astronomical phenomena. The typefaces first used in Italian printing were not simply part of a copying system. They were rather a direct manifestation of the principles which, in the most advanced circles, were thought to motivate the texts most worthy of preservation and distribution. Roman letters were in themselves evidence of an all-pervasive underlying rational order. It was the quest for this order that justified the study of ancient literature and made printing itself worthy of enlightened patronage. The McLuhanite formula of the medium being the message may hold in some cases, perhaps those where the message is not worth the effort of repetition. It scarcely holds for the phenomena discussed here. It was the message of the Renaissance that fashioned the media of its presentation. The special genius of the period may be found in the fact that the message and the minds that formulated it were so powerful as to fuse all into a system seemingly coherent, yet so complex that the elucidation of all its details and connections forever evades us.

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