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[Gothic Alphabet Model Book]

Illustrated manuscript on paper

Central France (region between Chartres and Tours; Mayenne?), c. 1550

25 folios, complete (collation not possible or relevant), paper (watermarks of the type Briquet, "Pot à une anse avec couvercle languetée surmonté d'une fleur," no. 12732, Le Mans, 1550-1555; no. 12733, Châlons-sur-Marne, 1553; no. 12734, Chartres, 1553-1555, Le Mans, 1553-1560), interleaved with nineteenth-century French paper, modern foliation on the interleaved sheets from 1 to 25, f. 26 not foliated, original paper written on one side only (recto), with the exception of f. 25 written on the verso, in blackish-brown ink with some bleed-through (the lower letter on each page bleeding more than the upper letter in most cases), large cadel initials of the alphabet varying between c. 110 x 110 mm. and c. 140 x 140 mm. Nineteenth-century full red morocco, spine sewn on five thongs, title gilt in second and third compartments, board edges and turn-ins tooled, gilt edges, marbled endpapers [signed Rivière and Son, English bookbinder]. (Slight foxing, edges of most sheets frayed but paper in good unrestored condition, occasional slight smudges of ink). Dimensions 310 x 225.

In large format, this model or pattern book of the Gothic alphabet in flourished "cadel" initials is organized with two examples of each letter per page, presenting slight variations (perhaps as scribal exercises in virtuosity), and includes an elaborate full-page endpiece "M" (the name of the scribe?). Late Gothic alphabet books, like that once attributed to Nicolas Spierinc, are very rare, although the initials they present circulated widely in both manuscript and print from c. 1400 to c. 1550.

PROVENANCE

1. Likely written in France in the mid-sixteenth century based on the watermarks and the note in a sixteenth-century hand on f. 1, "A Châteaudun," which is located between Chartres and Tours, where the paper was probably made. The name, inscribed in an awkward hand on f. 26v, "Francois M," could refer to an early, possibly contemporary owner, and although the scribe's last name may have begun with an "M," the ornamental letter used for the endpiece in the manuscript, he was likely more accomplished than the hand that added the inscription on f. 26v.

2. The manuscript must have been in England in the nineteenth century when it was bound, although the interleaving is of French paper, and from then passed at some point to a private collection in Italy. No indications of modern ownership in England, France, or Italy survive.

TEXT

Composed of 25 folios, this complete Gothic alphabet consists of all the letters in "cadel" initials with the exception of "I" and "V." Each page displays two examples (usually nearly identical, but perhaps by different hands, see discussion below) of the same letter, one on top of each other.

There are two letters "Z" (one an abbreviation?) and there is an endpiece, an elaborate letter "M" as follows:

- f. 1, Letter A, a bearded face on the right and another face, with a pointed nose on the left, in the right margin "A chasteau/ d'un."
- f. 2, Letter B, two faces on the right and one face on the left in the upper model and two faces on the left in the lower model; in the right margin "onn..." (smudged);
- f. 3, Letter C, two faces on the right in the lower model and one face on the left, with a beaked grotesque; and one face on each side of the letter in the upper model:
- f. 4, Letter D, a face with a tongue and inked lips imbedded in the interior of the letter in the upper and lower models, and in each case a face on the left;
- f. 5, Letter E, two faces on the right and one face on the left in each model;
- f. 6, Letter F, two faces, one on either side of the vertical bar, those on the right bearded;
- f. 7, Letter G, one face on the right and one on the left, both of these on the left with hooked noses;
- f. 8, Letter H, one face on the right, another on the left, elaborate letter with phylacters twisting around the vertical bar of the letter;
- f. 9, Letter J, one face on the right, another on the left, branches growing from the bar of the letter to the right;
- f. 10, Letter K, two faces on the right, and one on the left in both examples, phylacters twisting around the bar;
- f. 11, Letter L, two faces on the right in the upper example, and one on the left, lower example without the face on the lower right;
- f. 12, Letter M, a bar with branches in the middle, and one face each on either side;
- f. 13, Letter N, three faces in all in both examples, two facing right, and one left;
- f. 14, Letter O, three faces, one facing right, and two facing left in the upper example, an additional face embedded in the acanthus in the lower left of the lower initial;

- f. 15, Letter P, two faces, one on the right and one on the left;
- f. 16, Letter Q, four faces, two in the interior of the letter facing each other, and two on the exterior, each facing out (bottom letter unfinished on the right?); on the verso of this sheet two faint, but clearly discernible, pencil drawings of heads, one frontal and one profile;
- f. 17, Letter R, three faces, two facing right and one left, the upper bar decorated with hollow branches;
- f. 18, Letter S, two faces, one facing right and one left;
- f. 19, Letter T, three faces, one facing right and two facing left;
- f. 20, Letter U, three faces, two facing right and one left.
- f. 21, Letter X, one face each on left and right, each sprouting acanthus from their mouths;
- f. 22, Letter Y, one face each on left and right;
- f. 23, Letter Z, one face each on left and right;
- f. 24, Letter Z, one face each on left and right, right one bearded;
- f. 25v, Letter M, endpiece, wholly composed of branches with acanthus decoration;

Strictly speaking this is not a calligraphy manual *per se* but a Gothic alphabet or pattern book composed of flourished penwork initials without wash. Such pattern books are very rare. Ranking just above ephemera, they must have been often destroyed or lost or discarded, as having little value. The present manuscript includes *cadels* initials (from the old French verb, “*cadeler*” meaning “to pamper”), known as “*cadeaux*” in French (for gift), which Michelle Brown defines as “a calligraphic decorative extension to the ascending or descending strokes of letters, usually on the first or last lines of a page. They sometimes feature human or animal heads.” Such pattern books evolved into copy books of specimens demonstrating the skill and virtuosity of the scribe.

Manuscript copy books of the alphabet include two famous copies, the so-called Gothic Alphabet of Mary of Burgundy, of which one copy is in Paris (Musée du Louvre), dating from c. 1480, and the other is in Brussels (Bibl. Royale, MS II 845), dating c. 1550, contemporary with the present manuscript (see Dumon, 1972). In the case of the Gothic Alphabet of Mary of Burgundy, once attributed to Nicolas Spierinc, only one letter adorns each page, and short textual extracts follow in *bâtard* script. Ornamental flourishing and embedded masks, faces, and grotesques display the imagination of the artist-copyist. Our ingenious scribe(s) likewise include faces and masks with occasional grotesques in letters ornamented with acanthus, branches, and sometimes bead-work, all of which also appear in the Gothic Alphabet of Mary of Burgundy.

After the middle of the fifteenth century, famous scribes, such as Nicolas Spierinc in Bruges and Ricardus Franciscus in England, wrote in bâlard script using cadels (a well-known example occurs in the Hours of Engelbrecht of Nassau, attributed to Spierinc, Oxford, Bod. Lib., MS Douce 219-220). Other examples include an initial by the Burgundian author, scribe, and miniaturist Jean Miélot (see Alexander, 1978, pl. 40). Scholars have traced the origins of the cadel to chancellery script, Alexander noting that as early as c. 1400 the librarian Jean Flamel used cadels in the ownership inscriptions he penned in the Duke of Berry's manuscripts (Alexander, 1978, p. 27). Cadels continue to adorn Flemish manuscripts (the Alamire Choir books), English royal documents, French land records, and printed books through the first half of the sixteenth century, eventually evolving in Germany into "Fraktur" script (for the evolution, see Hildebrandt, 2002, and Brown, 1999). Woodcut and figural manuscript alphabets also exist from the period (e.g., the famous woodcuts by the Master E.S. or the illuminated letters by Giovanni di Grassi; see Alexander, 1978, p. 26), but these are distinct from the present example.

There is an interesting peculiarity about the present manuscript that is worth noting and remains unresolved. It appears that a pair of scribes may be responsible for the letters on each page, the first scribe at the top of the page executing a flourished letter and the second at the bottom of the page trying to better the letter—in a sort of competition—which he did by adding grotesques, additional faces, or by changing in subtle ways the definition of the letter. Perhaps this manuscript survives as a virtuoso exercise book of the Gothic alphabet, in which the master-scribe (at top) is surpassed by the student-imitator (at the bottom).

LITERATURE

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Dumon, Pierre. *L'Alphabet gothique dit de Marie de Bourgogne. Reproduction du codex Bruxellensis II 845*, Brussels, 1972.

Hildebrandt, Bill. *Calligraphic Flourishing. A New Approach to an Ancient Art*, Boston, David R. Godine, 2002.

ONLINE RESOURCES

History of Script (Medieval Writing)

<http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/writing.htm>