

An Investigation: Jean Gerson's

Opera - Paris, 1521

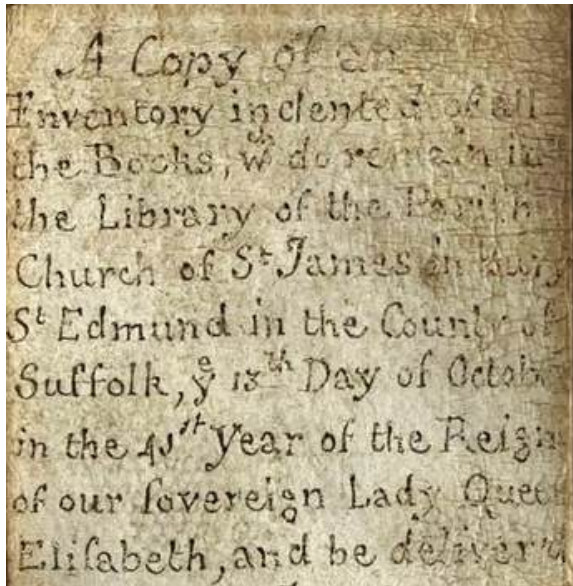
Ancient Library Exhibition



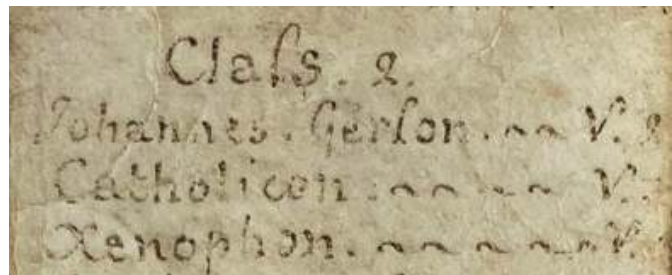
Quarta et nuper coquisi-
ta pars operū Joānis de Gerson Archiepiscopi
runt Academic Cancellarij. Christianissimi
Theologi *Almshelvingiana* recognitione il-
lustrior. Jam quodq; longe emaculatioꝝ prece-
dentibus tribus *adiecta.*

Jill de Laat and Debbie de Cova

The 1599 Inventory of the Library of St James (extracts shown below) includes these two volumes by Jean (Johannes) Gerson – just visible below ‘Class 2’.

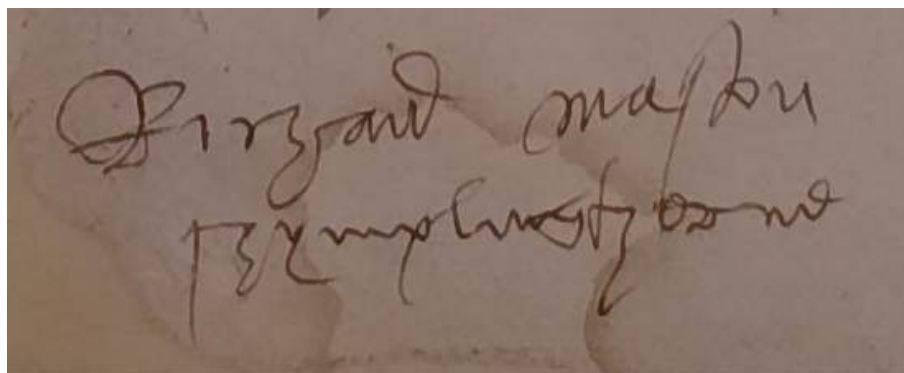


A Copy of an
Inventory in Lenten of all
the Books, w^{ch} do remain in
the Library of the Parish
Church of S^t James in Bury
S^t Edmund in the County of
Suffolk, y^e 18th Day of October
in the 40th Year of the Reign
of our Sovereign Lady Queen
Elizabeth, and be deliver^d



Class. 2.
Johannes. Gerson. V. 2
Catholicon. V.
Xenophon. V.

A signature on the title page shows that it previously belonged to Richard Mason of Shimplingthorne (Shimpling), a village seven miles south of Bury St Edmunds.



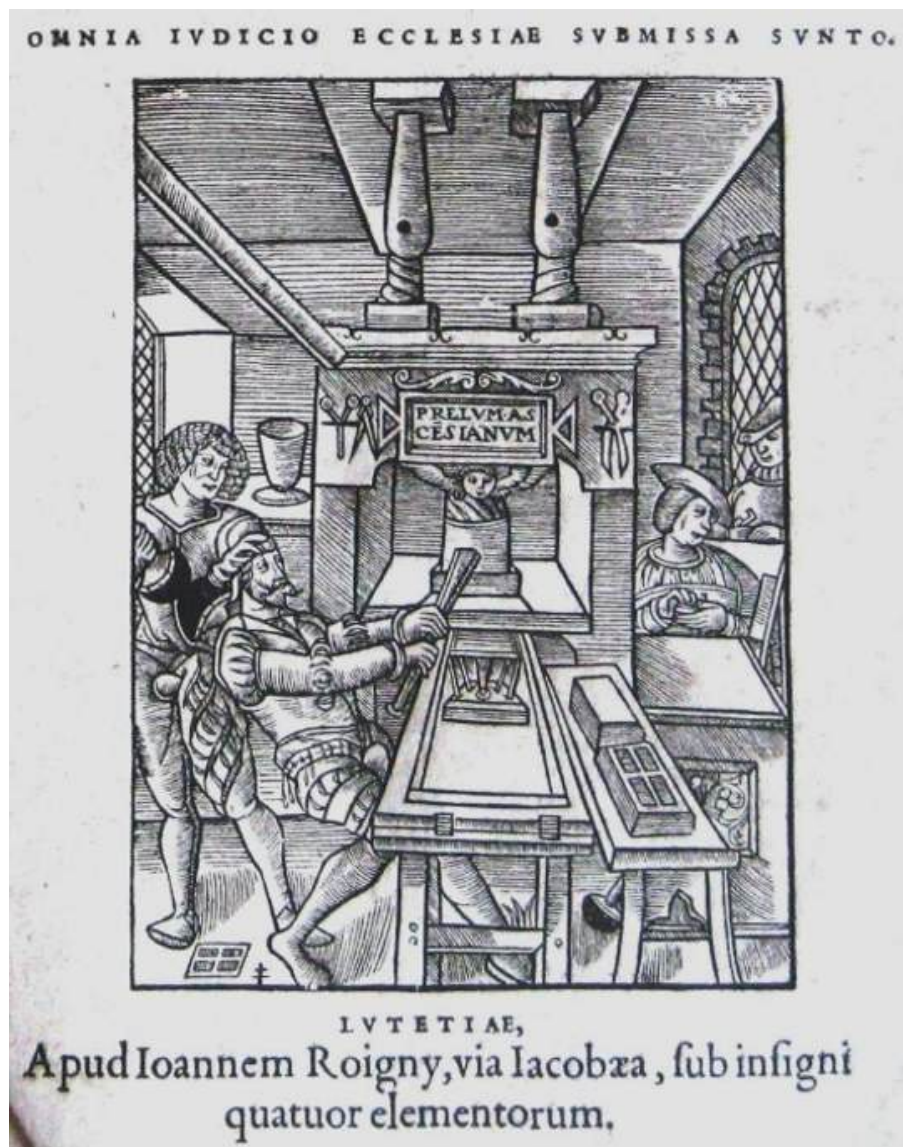
Richard Mason
Shimplingthorne

Jean Gerson (1363-1429) was Chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395. His theological works include sermons, twelve treatises on the Magnificat, a commentary on the Song of Songs and a guide to contemplation.

The library holds one volume of the first edition from Cologne in 1483 but this investigation looks at the printing, structure, illustrations and use of this Paris edition of 1521.

Printing

The volumes were produced using the moveable-type printing press developed by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s, as shown in this printer's mark of Jean de Roigny in our volume of Claude Guillaud's *Commentary on St John's Gospel* (Paris, 1550).



The Gerson volumes, like the Guillaud above, was printed in the Rue Saint-Jacques. It is one of the oldest streets in Paris, known to the Romans as Via Superior and renamed in the 13th century. Jacques is French for James – appropriate for our St James' church. Until the end of the *Ancien Régime*, Rue Saint-Jacques had a virtual monopoly of printing.

Printers, Publishers and Booksellers

The printer's mark on the title page of volume 4, shown below, gives the name of Petrus Gromorsus, with his initials P G either side of the image.



However, printing was an expensive business and collaboration frequently spread the risk. The three men responsible for the volumes were:

Petrus Gromorsus, or **Pierre Gromors**. Originally from Champagne, he worked at the Sign of the Golden Sun (shown above) in Grande Rue Saint-Jacques.

John or **Jehan Petit**. From 1493 to 1530 he printed about one tenth of all publications in Paris, more than 10,000 volumes. Petit was one of the four major booksellers at the University of Paris and was an example of a prosperous early printer.

François Regnault (died 1540/41) Born in Caen, he started as an independent printer around 1500 and published under the sign of the elephant. Regnault printed a lot of liturgical documents for the Catholic church in England along with historical and classical works.

Stolen Elephant

The title page is damaged. Someone has carefully cut around the picture leaving only a small part showing the decoration and the 'pom-pom', as shown on the pictures below. The lack of 'pom-pom' on the title page of volume 4 (previous) shows that the image must have been different.

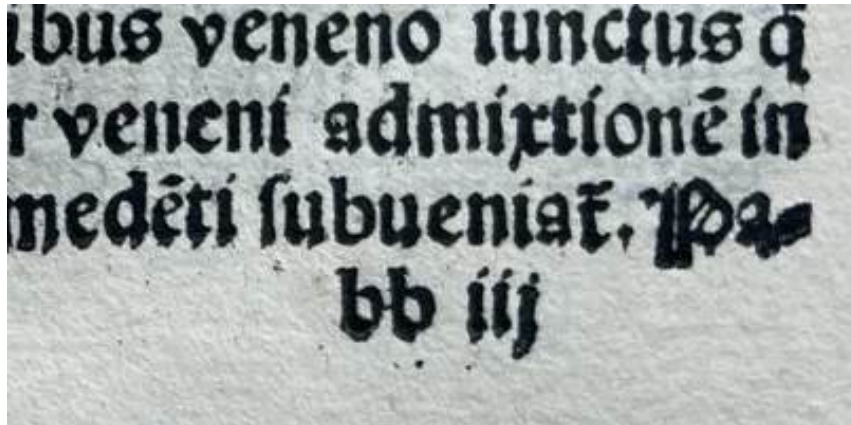
Fortunately, our volume of Pope Gregory I's *Opera* (Paris, 1521) has a 'pom-pom' on the elephant printer's mark of François Regnault. This has the initials F R as expected. We're not certain why the damaged page has the initials P G. The elephant title page in the copy held in the Bavarian State Library has F R. Perhaps it just shows the extent of collaboration.

Anyway, somebody clearly wanted a copy of the Elephant printer's mark of François Regnault.



The Structure of the Books

There are lower case marks at the bottom of the pages which demonstrate how the books were printed and assembled (bb iii below).



Gerson's *Opera* follows the Octavo format, where a full sheet of paper is folded three times to create eight leaves (16 pages). Each leaf represents one eighth of the original sheet.

OCTAVO

abbreviated

8vo, 8°

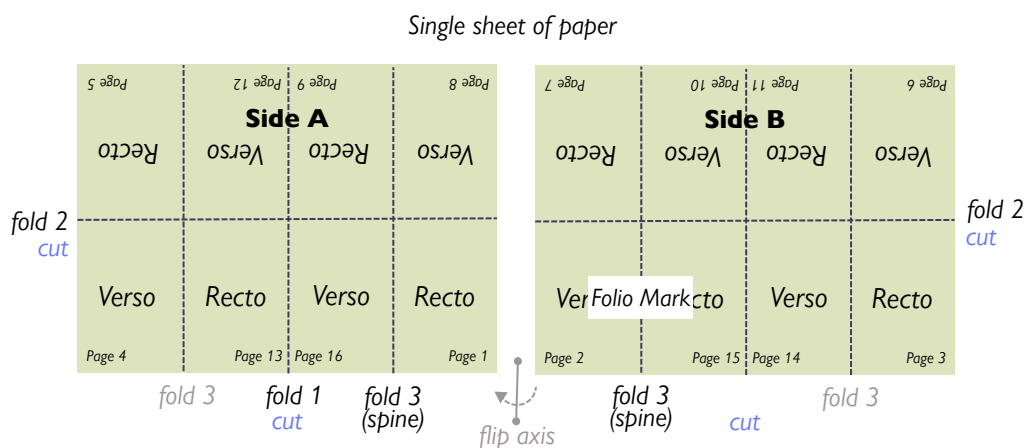
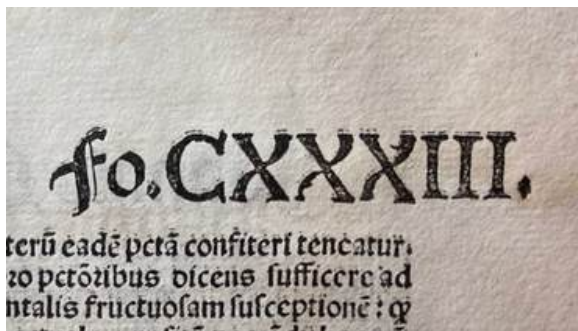


Diagram showing the sequence of folds and cuts to produce a gathering

The lower case marks show how four sheets of paper are folded to make a 'gathering' (in this case bb). They are at bottom right on the facing (recto) side of the leaves and identify a sequence of four marked (bb, bb ii, bb iii & bb iiiii) then four blank pages (all back – verso – pages are blank). This sequence ensures the compositor arranges the typeface correctly before printing, then folding, cutting, and binding them into an Octavo 'gathering'. These 'gatherings' are then combined with others to form the final book. Volume 2 has 22 gatherings.

At the top right on the recto side of each sheet is the folio number. These are in Roman numerals, changing from upper case to lower case. (Here is folio 133)



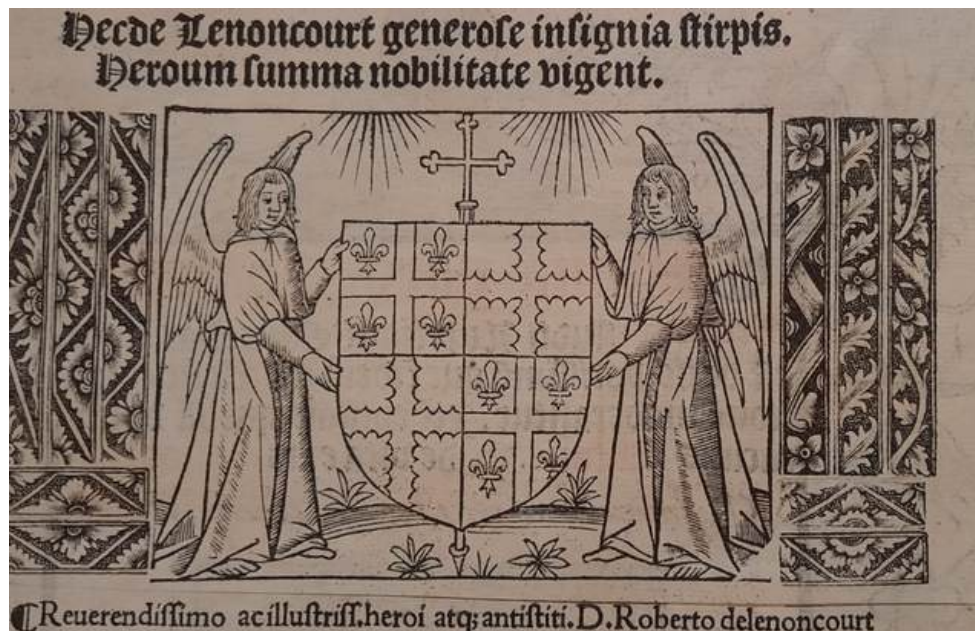
The binding of the four volumes is unusual. Gerson's four volumes do not follow a logical sequence in the two bound books housed in the Cathedral Library. Book 265 houses volumes 1 and 3, and Book 266 contains 2 and 4. Additionally the foliation in the four volumes is not consistent, the majority being in upper case, and some in lower case.

The following table gives an analysis of the complexities.

Volume	Book	Foliation	Upper/Lower Case	Gatherings	Notes
1	265	I to CXXVI (1 TO 126)	All upper Case	a – qiiii	Handwritten table of contents in front
2	266	CXXVIII to CCLXXXV (128* to 285) *Page CXXVII (127) Title Page missing	Upper Case to page CLVIII** (158) (Except cxxxiii (134) Lower Case) Lower Case to end	aa ii – viiii Letter case change at folio change (ee)	
3	265	CCLXXX to CCCCCX (288 TO 510)	All Lower Case	xx - bb	
4	266	I to CLXXXVIII (1 to 184)	All Lower Case	aaa - zzz	Print indexes in back

A possible reason for these inconsistencies could be the trend of 'shared editions' where two or more booksellers jointly financed an expensive publication. Less common are cases where printing is shared between workshops.

Dedication



The book is dedicated to Robert de Lenoncourt, Archbishop of Reims (1509-32), whose coat of arms is shown in this illustration. Whilst looking into his background, we found that he was known as *le père des pauvres* because of his unstinting work amongst the poor of Reims; he fed 300 poor people every day during the 1520 famine in Champagne.

He crowned King Francis I in the Cathedral of Reims in January 1515, rebuilt the portal of the Saint-Remi basilica and commissioned a series of 17 tapestries on the Life of the Virgin Mary for the Cathedral.

Robert is referred to as 'archiepiscope magnificentissime' (most magnificent archbishop) who has *eximia clementia & humanitas* (exceptional clemency and kindness).

Illustrations

The following pages give possible interpretations of some of the images found in the capital letters throughout the volumes.



F – At the top a bird like a parrot appears to look down at the creature below. Not easily identifiable, this has ears like a hare, is sitting like a deer and with a slightly dog-like face.

R – The lower creature has a pig-like face, or a boar with a longer snout. He looks docile, almost sleepy. The upper part of the letter bears a human face with a beard, and maybe wearing a cap. Or is his face coming out of part of a plant?



J – A gardener, or perhaps a monk, is stooping to work in a garden. He looks to be wearing a habit and cowl (or at a stretch it may be a halo). The plant is like a thistle and but could that be a flame bursting out of the top of the plant? Around the image are floral decorations.

I – Two goats stand on their hind legs to reach the tastiest morsels on the uppermost limbs of the tree that forms the letter I. In Christianity the goat represents the Devil, lust, lubricity and the damned. Christ is portrayed as the Scapegoat taking away the sins of the world. But in the Bestiaries, the goat, which climbs the highest peaks and possesses wonderful vision, depicts the highest perfection of searching. Christ sees all - past, present and future.



Illustrations continued



V – An impish face appears out of the top of a flower which could be a thistle. He seems to wear a large-eared hood and has a downcast or pensive expression.

P - Cockatrice? A cockatrice is a two-legged dragon, wyvern, or serpent-like creature with a rooster's head. They were said to be born from a cock egg (a small yolkless egg) and its birth could be prevented by throwing the egg over the house without it touching the roof.



E – A charming nativity scene. Mary and the baby sit in the stable whilst the Three Wise Men pay homage, presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The star that guided them to Bethlehem is clearly visible.

F – Intertwining plants surround this letter and sitting on a branch or stem is a naked figure. Could this signify fertility?



Illustrations continued



O – Another mythical beast, probably a dragon. Dragons were ubiquitous in medieval culture and were sometimes seen as guardians of treasures. The name comes from 'draconta', Greek for 'to watch'.

A – Decorating this capital are three images. At the bottom, below the horizontal line of the A, a small dragon-like figure is illustrated. Long nose, big ears and claw-like feet. Above the line is a flower; maybe a daisy. To the left of the A, a large bird is taking flight.



D - Wyvern? A dragon-like creature with two legs, two wings and a pointed tail. The image is used a lot in heraldry.

Q – The only example of a human portrait in a capital. The cap is medieval and he is looking straight out of the letter at the viewer.



Illustrations continued



V – 'Prebe Deo Laudeum' Give Praise to God.
This is the only capital we found with words.

I – These birds could be doves. They have a benign look as they stare at something in the distance - but then doves are birds of peace.



P – This is a pelican, a bird with special cultural significance in Christian mythology. They represent many things – motherhood, self-sacrifice, healing and rebirth.