

“The Triumph of the Text:” A Reconsideration of Giovanni Vendramin’s Architectural Frontispieces

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Giovanni Vendramin (active 1466-1508) was one of the most distinguished Paduan miniaturists of the Quattrocento.¹ Many of the manuscripts that he illustrated were commissioned by Bishop Jacopo Zeno of Padua (r. 1460-1481), an important humanist and patron of the arts.² This paper will consider the role of classicism and antiquarianism in the architectural frontispieces that Vendramin painted as a prominent introduction to many of the books he decorated and suggest a new source for them. These frontispieces are a major marker of the fascination with the revival of the Greco-Roman tradition during the Renaissance, but have been less studied than related phenomena in the monumental arts, for example, Mantegna’s paintings. The development of the new type of frontispiece coincided with the publication of newly translated, edited, or discovered classical texts such as Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* and Cicero’s *Orations*, but Vendramin used the frontispiece to illuminate contemporary philosophical and religious treatises such as Giovanni Camphora’s *On the Immortality of the Soul*.

This paper argues that the format of the architectural enclosure for decorating frontispieces is, in part, derived from the canon table, and that this source was carefully chosen to reinforce visual and iconographic associations with late antique and Byzantine culture and to enhance the classical associations of fifteenth-century manuscripts and incunables. Before turning to the canon tables, allow me to present the key features of Vendramin’s architectural frontispieces. Their form and function was in response to the need to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on the two-dimensional surface of the printed page, enhancing the reader’s visual experience of the text. In one example of a frontispiece illuminated by Vendramin for Cicero’s *The Dream of Scipio* (Figure 1), the juxtaposition of text and image through the placement of the printed word in a triumphal arch or *stèle* against a landscape

emphasizes the treatment of the text as a monumental cultural artifact, evoking an idealized realm of classical learning, where the primacy of the written word is heralded. The colossal architectural forms employed to construct an illustrated frame for a particular passage are removed from their functional purpose and are converted to an ornamental scheme that ultimately serves as a support for a given text, highlighting the text as the central figural component. The addition of a monumental form in service of the text, thus, transformed the character of the architectural frontispiece.³

Now let us compare the frontispieces to canon tables. The canon table was developed in the fourth century by bishop Eusebius of Caesarea.⁴ It served as a concordance for the Gospels in Byzantine manuscripts and functioned primarily within a religious context. Although extant examples of late antique canon tables are relatively rare, the tradition of the canon table was very strong in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The canon table demonstrates a complex level of architectural decoration that is comparable to the architectural frontispiece. In one example of a late eleventh or early twelfth century Byzantine canon table (Figure 2), the decoration is executed in gold-leaf and painted with deep-red and blue tempera; votive crowns are suspended from the architrave. Richly ornamented columns, peacocks in the capitals, and flowers add to the luxurious decoration of what was essentially a reference tool for the Gospels. This type of decoration removes architecture from its functional purpose and converts it to a decorative scheme.⁵

Furthermore, the format used for the canon table was employed to illustrate deeper levels of significance and meaning, underscoring the liminal effects of the rich ornamental decoration of the canon table, as noted by Jeffrey C. Anderson:

Given a belief in the power of numbers to express underlying truths about the world, the tables may have also assumed a mysti-

¹ The following studies provide further biographical information on Giovanni Vendramin: Mirella Levi D’Ancona, “Giovanni Vendramin da Padova,” *Arte Veneta* 32 (1978): 39-45; Giordana Mariani Canova, “Influssi mantegneschi nella miniatura padovana del Quattrocento,” *Santo* 38.3 (Sept.-Dec. 1998) 331-40; Michele Benetazzo, “Giovanni Vendramin miniatore padovano del tardo Quattrocento,” *Padova e il suo territorio* 4.78 (Mar-Apr. 1999) 43-45.

² E. Govi, “La biblioteca di Jacopo Zeno,” *Bollettino dell’Istituto di Patalogia del Libro* 10 (1951): 34-118; Margaret L. King, *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986) 449.

³ Lilian Armstrong, “The Impact of Printing on Miniaturists in Venice after 1469,” In *Printing the Written Word: The Social History of Books, circa 1450-1520*, ed. Sandra Hindman, (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1991) 174-202.

⁴ Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843-1261* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997) cat. no. 46, 93.

⁵ Kurt Weitzmann, *Studies in the Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination* (Chicago, 1971) 19; for further discussion on the development of the canon table, see Carl Nordenfalk, “Canon Tables on Papyrus,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 36 (1982): 29-38.

cal significance; indeed, from early on they were decorated with a degree of care that far exceeded what was required for their use as a reference tool.⁶

In their suggestion of deeper levels of knowledge, fifteenth-century frontispieces, such as those illustrated by Vendramin, paralleled the canon tables.⁷ Given the power of the written word and the layering of different planes illustrated in the monumental frontispiece (the printed text unfolding as a parchment scroll, hanging from an architectural frame and set into a landscape), the reader would be initiated into the complex intellectual and spiritual experience to be encountered further into the text, gaining greater insight into its truths and meaning.⁸

A frontispiece decorated by Vendramin for an edition of Pliny's *Natural History* (Figure 3) exemplifies the artist's concern with antiquity, a heightened sense of illusionism, and the *trompe l'oeil* effects characteristic of Paduan painting in the fifteenth century. The printed text appears to have been handwritten on parchment on an ancient scroll that hangs from the top of a classical edifice and is unfurled by winged putti.⁹ The building is made of green and purple marbles, flanked by two tall dead trees. Cherubs animate and "populate" the edifice, serving as foil to the dead trees in the background. They play musical instruments, support and hold up the parchment, and frame the abraded coat of arms (which were possibly those of Jacopo Zeno) at the bottom of the base.¹⁰ Charles Dempsey has convincingly argued that the putti who inhabit the architectural frontispieces represent animated spirits or *spiritelli* that personify the random thoughts (as well as the flashes of insight and illumination) that arise when one is actively engaged in pursuit of knowledge.¹¹

Further references to the antique are made in the decoration of the base of the structure, which imitate classical bas-reliefs painted in grisaille. These sculptural effects are en-

hanced by the large "*littera mantiniana*" rendered as fake carving against a purple background and richly decorated with acanthus leaves.¹² The elaborate Corinthian columns are shown as variegated marble with capitals and bases cast in bronze.¹³ More significantly, the architecture acts as a scenic background, where the text is the "protagonist" of the action, similar to the architecture in Donatello's altar in Sant'Antonio, where the figures are "displayed like actors on a stage, or relics in a reliquary."¹⁴

Giovanni Vendramin also illuminated a different edition of Pliny's *Natural History* that was translated into Italian by Cristoforo Landino and published in Venice by Nicolas Jenson.¹⁵ The frontispiece to this edition (Figure 4) displays the text hanging from four Corinthian columns of variegated marble on a base with nereids and tritons. As in the canon table, there are two peacocks resting on the edge of the entablature. A putto on the right cornice plays a trumpet. The letter "E" contains a portrait of Pliny the Elder as a Renaissance scholar, seated at his work, and surrounded by a red frame. His study contains books and a bowl of fruit featured on the top shelf. Pliny examines and points to a golden armillary sphere, which symbolizes his focus on investigating the cosmos.

At the bottom of the base, there are two standing putti with a staff and two other putti on the ledge restraining two deer on leashes. The peacock, deer, and hanging fruits are delicately modeled, enhancing the refined quality of this painted page. The peacock, the symbol of immortal life, is frequently depicted on both the canon table and the architectural frontispiece. Attention to the careful depiction of natural phenomena may suggest Vendramin's familiarity with the research in science and medicine for which the University of Padua was renowned. Vendramin's father was a *bidello* (university bookseller), who sold books on law and medicine; it is likely that Giovanni consulted with the faculty and experts in

⁶ Evans and Wixom 93.

⁷ For a discussion concerning the context of architectural decoration as memory devices in medieval imagery, see Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990) 221.

⁸ Roland Barthes' semiotic interpretation of the experience of the text has partly informed this interpretation of how the Renaissance reader may have appreciated the decoration of the architectural frontispiece; see *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

⁹ Giordana Mariani Canova in Jonathan J.G. Alexander, *The Printed Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination, 1450-1550* (New York: Prestel, 1994) no. 78.

¹⁰ Giordana Mariani Canova, "Nuovi contributi per Giovanni Vendramin miniatore padovano," *Miniatura* 1 (1988): 91; Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, 64, cat. 78. In both sources, Mariani Canova has hypothesized that the abraded coat of arms on this page may have been that of Jacopo Zeno.

¹¹ Dempsey describes them as "...the childish follies, or empty daydreams, that fill the scholar's mind as he prepares to read the great exploits of the

Caesars, diverting him from serious study and crowding his brain with distracting fancies..."; *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill and London: The U of North Carolina P, 2001) 94.

¹² Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, cat. 78; Giordana Mariani Canova, *La miniatura a Padova: dal medioevo al Settecento* (Modena, 1999) 271, no. 105.

¹³ The veined marble of the columns may also illustrate the archaeological references to Pliny, who in the thirty-sixth book of the *Natural History*, describes the appearance of colored marble in antiquity and its associations: "Marble marked with different colors first appeared, I believe in the quarries of Chios when they were building their walls."; *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. John F. Healy (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 348.

¹⁴ Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, 163-4, cat. 78.

¹⁵ The seminal work on the impact and importance of Nicolas Jenson's press in Venice and North Italy is Martin Lowry, *Nicholas Jenson and the Rise of Venetian Publishing in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

medicine and natural sciences at the University of Padua.¹⁶

The writings of Cicero were accorded a premier position in the humanist movement in the fifteenth century and were printed numerous times. Poggio Bracciolini’s discovery of a manuscript at Cluny in 1415 contained five of Cicero’s orations that were previously unknown. In the Figure 5 example, the text is printed on a sheet of parchment that unrolls in front of a *stele* with a deep purple base and deep red on the sides. Gold letters spell out the title across a mottled green and red frieze. Two putti stand on the cornices holding strings that “support” the text. The brown-haired putti on the top cornices wear necklaces of red beads and classical sandals. The blond putto at the left bottom foreground points to the text and the one to his right holds a string that bears the weight of the text. In the left margin are foliage and a tree on which a peacock stands. Garlands and fruits dangle from the top plinth and a putto playfully sits on a garland along the right margin. The mountainous landscape in the background serves as a stage that reveals the different levels of illusionism that are presented to the viewer/reader, heightening the surreal aspects of the scene.

Indubitably, one of Vendramin’s masterpieces is the frontispiece (Figure 6) for Giovanni Camphora’s *On the Immortality of the Soul* (*De immortalitae animae*). An inscription written in the colophon in red ink identifies the *scriptor* of the book as Giovanni Trotti: “De immortalitae animae opusculum in modum dialogi explicit per me Johannem de Trottis die 4 aprilis 1472.” [On the immortality of the soul a work in the form of a dialogue as explicated by me, Giovanni Trotti, April 4, 1472]¹⁷ The book was dedicated to Ercole I d’Este by Naimerio Conti, a Paduan nobleman, whose family was once under the protection of the Este family. The text deals with the subject of the immortality of the soul in the form of a dialogue between the author Genoese Dominican Giovanni Camphora and the Paduan humanist Giovanni Marconova. The frontispiece shows a gilded figure of Hercules in a porphyry frame, topped by an arched typanum with purple cor-

nices.¹⁸ The duke’s emblem, a ring with a carnation, is attached to the typanum with cords that are tied on either side of the arc and are held by putti. On the architrave an inscription in gold ink set in Roman capitals reads “A DEO FORTITUDO MEA” [“To god my fortitude”]. The verse inscribed on the face of the base in cursive script comments on Hercules’ “Olympian” strength and the gruesome labor of battling with the destructive Lernean Hydra. Two putti hold the two blue Este coats of arms with the imperial eagle, the fleur-de-lis of France and the crossed keys of the papacy which the family had been given to use in 1470 when the Pope awarded them the freedom of the city.¹⁹

Scholars have supported the position that the Codex Calendar of 354 is the source of the fifteenth-century frontispiece have corroborated their argument by citing the figure of Hercules, which appeared in that manuscript, as the inspiration for the fifteenth-century illustration. However, a more likely source for the representation of Hercules is illustrated by a miniature of Hercules in Hyginus’ *Astronomia*²⁰ (Figure 6) that has now been attributed to Giovanni Vendramin.²¹ Vendramin’s Hercules, in turn, probably derives from a compendium of drawings, the *Liber de imaginibus deorem*, dated circa 1420, which contained twelve images devoted to the labors of Hercules and was extremely influential in Ferrara in the 1460s.²²

In conclusion, Giovanni Vendramin’s architectural frontispieces illustrate the complex visual culture that developed in Padua in the mid to late Quattrocento. As a superb illustrator, Vendramin played a fundamental role in the development of the monumental frontispiece with painted architecture and printed texts that beautifully synthesized his patrons’ interests in antiquity and classical learning. Vendramin’s architectural frontispieces, moreover, exemplify the fluid character of antiquarian culture during this period, when images and ideas circulated widely across geographical boundaries.²³

While this paper presents one possible source for the origins and development of the architectural frontispiece, fur-

¹⁶ Alexander, 1994, 70-72. See the following article regarding the culture of booksellers and book illuminators in fifteenth-century Padua: Myriam Billanovich dal Zio, “Bidelli, cartolai e miniatori allo studio di Padova nel secolo XV.” *Quaderni per la storia dell’Università di Padova* (1973): 59-72.

¹⁷ Although one is tempted to hypothesize that Vendramin, the illuminator, and Trotti, the *scriptor*, possibly collaborated on this work, it is difficult to connect them at this time.

¹⁸ Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, 78, cat. 20; Although Mariani Canova describes the material of the frame as violet marble, I have suggested porphyry as the material of choice because of its imperial connotations, which would have greatly resonated with Ercole I d’Este. See also the following article for the meaning and significance of the color purple in fifteenth-century manuscript illumination: Giordana Mariani Canova, “La porpora a nei manoscritti rinascimentali a l’attività di Bartolomeo Sanvito,” *La porpora: Realtà e immaginario di colore simbolico. Atti del convegno di Studio, Venezia 24 e 25 ottobre 1996*, ed. Oddone Longo (Venice: Instituto veneto di scienze, lettere ad arti, 1998) 339-71.

¹⁹ Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, 78, cat. 20.

²⁰ The influence of astronomy and also astrology was especially strong in Padua; John Tiptoft, an English humanist and scholar produced an extremely influential edition of Basinius’ *Astronomicum* in 1458 and 1461.

²¹ Mariani Canova in Alexander, 1994, cat. 20; Mariani Canova recently attributed the miniature to Giovanni Vendramin; *La miniatura a Padova: dal medioevo al Settecento* (Modena, 1999).

²² Armstrong, 1981, 60.

²³ As rightly noted by Patricia Fortini Brown, the visual and literary arts of the fifteenth century “(i)lluminat(e) a tension between detachment and approach, these captivating mixtures of the real and the imaginary past reflect two contradictory, but intertwined, tendencies that dominated the art and literature of the period. On one side there is a growing sense of historical distance: that separation of the past and the present that defines a modern sense of history. On the other side, the same impulses that demanded separation also engendered synthesis and the desire to link the lost world of antiquity to the present.” *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 1996) 206.

ther research focusing on a careful re-evaluation of related imagery and the conceptual significance of the architectural frontispiece in fifteenth-century manuscript illumination is evidently required. Vendramin's exquisitely decorated frontispieces, nonetheless, confer prestige and status to antique texts

by presenting them in a monumental setting, celebrated as highly prized objects of learning and as works of great beauty and virtue.

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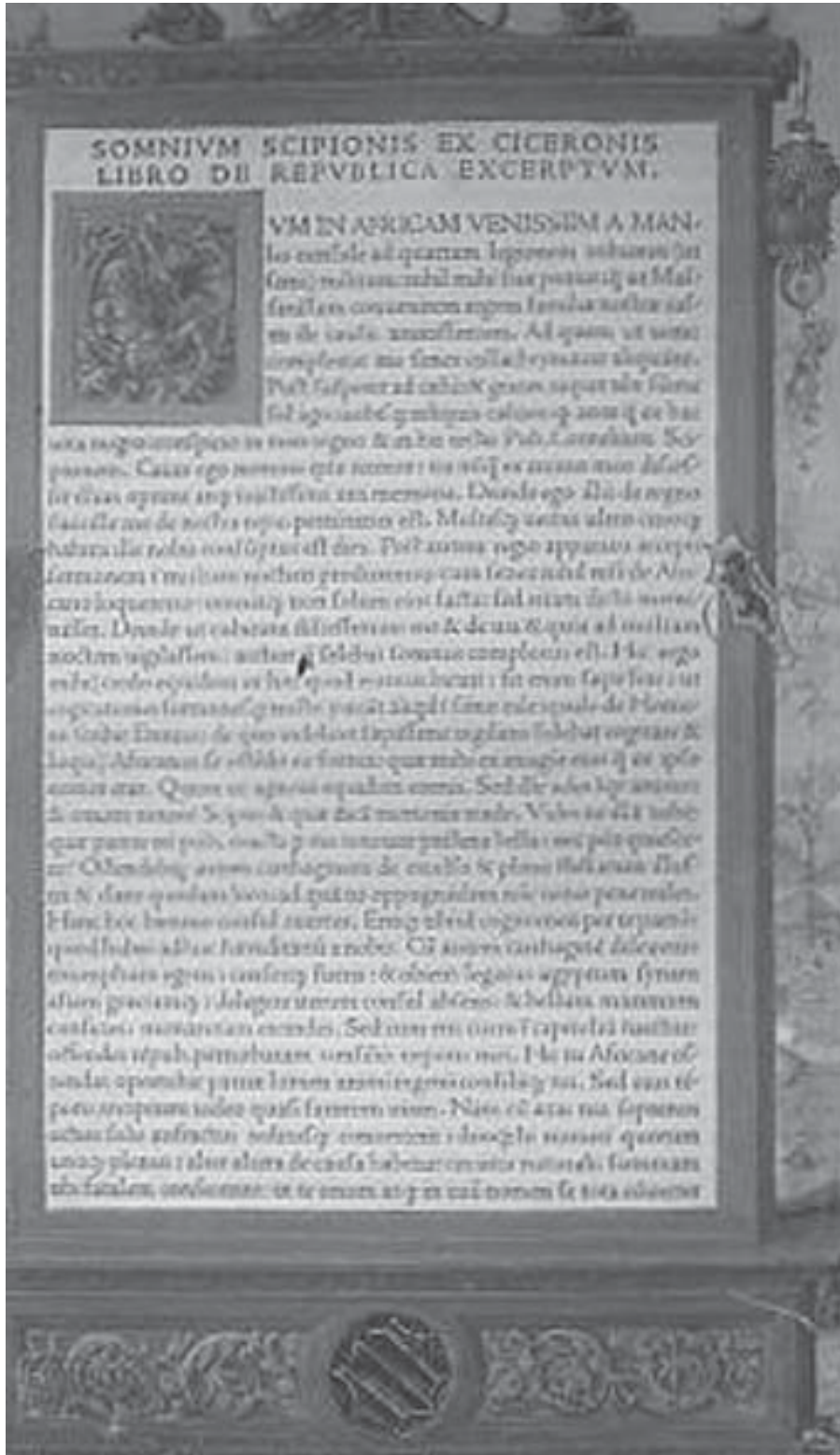


Figure 1. Cicero, *Dream of Scipio*, Venice, Printed by Nicholas Jenson, 1472. Padua: Biblioteca Capitolare, Inc. 249, f 1r.

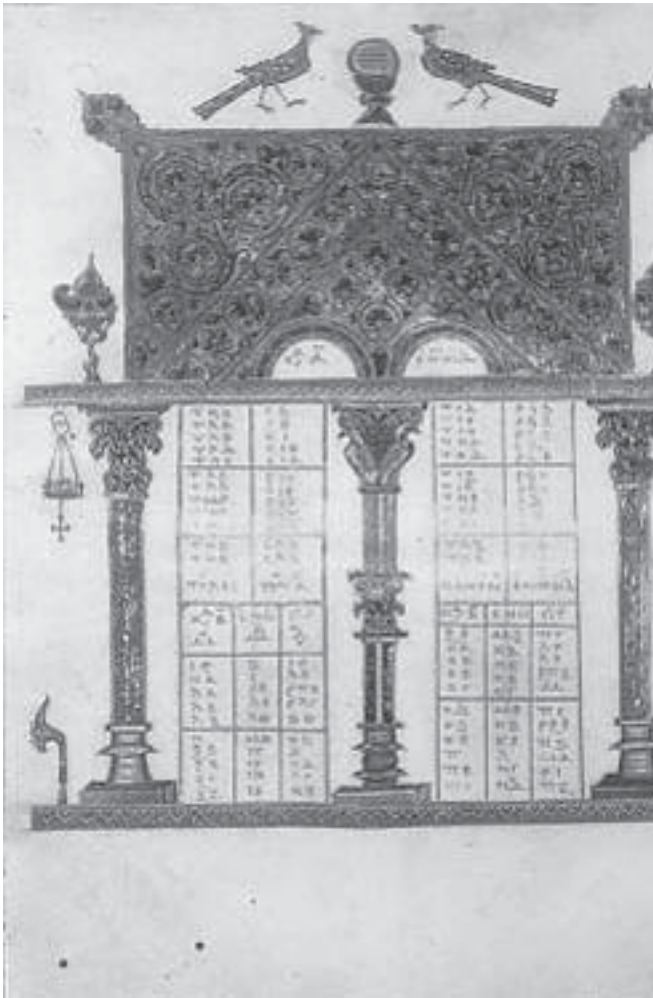


Figure 2. Canon table, fol. 60v, *The Four Gospels*, Byzantine (Constantinople), late 11th or early 12th century. Tempera on vellum; 192 fols. Scheide Library, Princeton University Libraries, Princeton, N.J. (Scheide Ms. 70).



Figure 3. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Caius Plinius Secundus. *Historia naturalis*. Printed in Venice by Johannes da Spira, 1469. Ravenna: Biblioteca Classense, Inc. 670/I, f. 1r.

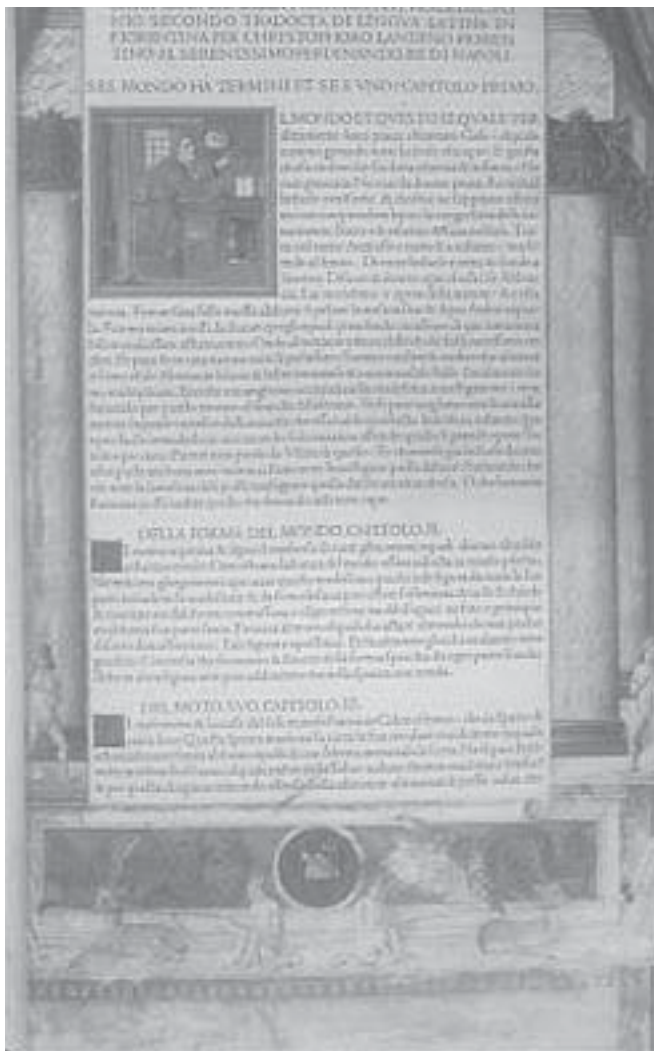


Figure 4. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated into Italian by Cristoforo Landino. Printed in Venice by Nicholas Jenson, 1476. Holkham Hall, Norfolk, The Earl of Leicester and the Trustees of the Holkham Estate. MLC52 BN 1985.



Figure 5. Cicero, *Orations*. Marcus Tullius Cicero. *Orationes*, edited by Ludovico Carbo. Printed in Venice by Christopher Valdarfer, [not after 9 November] 1471. Philadelphia: The Rosenbach Museum and Library, Inc. 471ci (1062/64).



Figure 6. Giovanni Camphora, *De immortalitate animae*, written in Ferrara, c. 1472. London: The British Library, Additional MS 22325. Frontispiece (*Hercules and the Hydra*, f 4).



Figure 7. Hyginus, *De astronomia*. Script by Francesco Buzzacarini and miniatures by Giovanni Vendramin, the Douce Master, and other collaborators (c. 1475-1480). New York: The New York Public Library, ms Spencer 28.