

LETTERS ON THE MARCH

"I have been passing my time very pleasurably here, But chiefly in lounging on a sofa (a la the poet Grey) & reading Shakspeare. It is an edition in glorious great type, every letter whereof is a soldier, & the top of every 't' like a musket barrel!"

Herman Melville, *Letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, February 24, 1849*



ABC, chromolithograph, Frederick Warne & Co., around 1880

We will never know why Melville's unconscious latched onto this particular letter—the "t"—and the image of a musket, but it is true that the lining up of letters and of lines into rows on a printed page has something martial about it. Chinese characters are lined up from top to bottom and from right to left, and nothing looks more like a page of Chinese than the 3rd-century terracotta army of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. One might develop far-reaching ideas about this correspondence between letters and military order, but what the heck! everyone loves a parade!