Hypnerotomachia Poliphili

Introduction

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is a strange book (see Figure 1) in many ways. It is mysterious as both its author and the illustrator are anonymous; it contains so complex a language that the book cannot be read smoothly but has to be studied in order to be partially understood; it forms a symbiotic relation between text and illustration, which cannot be separated; it engages with the reader who will have undoubtedly turned pages back and forth to study the illustrations based on the descriptions in the text. There are many more peculiarities, all of which have served as ideas and influences on other works throughout the past 500 years or so.

Its influence is manifold, spanning over the disciplines of Arts, Humanities, Sciences and Technologies. The influence can be traced to Italy, France, England and Germany but also to the Mexican Inquisition in the 1600s and up to present-day typography. All this by the means of a very common object, a book, printed in Venice in 1499. The book, in turn, has become an archaeological object, that contains the spirit of the Renaissance reflection on antiquity, while at the same time shaping the future of the cultural movement that had a lasting effect on following centuries. Its main attraction is certainly the layout of the pages, which form a beautiful composition of woodcuts, typography and text, which inspired the recreation of several fonts by Aldus, including the font "Poliphilus."

Original Purpose

The book has always enjoyed a high scholar status, not least because it was published by Aldus Manutius’ printing press that was known for its unique academic selection of Greek, Latin and other Italian Renaissance titles (Lefaivre 1997). All the initial letters of each chapter reveal an acronym that reads “POLIAM FRATER FRANCISCVS COLUMNA PERAMAVIT,” which lead to the assumption that the traditional author of the book was a Francesco Colonna. Colonna finished the *Hypnerotomachia* in 1467 and is said to have lived until 1527, well after the first publication of the book.

Just how far the original author of the book was involved in its production is unknown, but it seems reasonable to assume that he remained anonymous as no early account of the book associates it with Colonna. Leonardo Crasso, the patron of the book, bore the expenses of production and is probably the one who edited the book, which was substantially altered before it was printed. For instance, the preface was originally written in Latin (Ivins 1923: 273) and later translated into the strange mixture of Tuscan/Latin/Greek that prevails in the novel. Other changes might have taken place between the
Figure 1. Cover sheet of the 1499 edition of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (HAB 2009)
completion of the novel in 1467 and the publication in 1499. The woodcuts were added during that 32-year period and are, because of discrepancies between illustration and description in the text, not attributed to Colonna himself. Crasso complained that of the 600 copies he had published, only very few were sold, since the book was certainly ahead of its time. It was only fully embraced as a genius’ work in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Only very few of the original copies exist today. One is in the collection of the Vatican Library and was once owned by Pope Alexander VII. His copy is said to be heavily annotated and censored (Lefaivre 1997: 42). Many illustrations with explicit material were inked over and in that manner tell their own story of how Pope Alexander VII’s personal copy was modified to conform to the Catholic regulations and sense of moral. Another important person who possessed the original Hypnerotomachia was Francis I (Blunt 1937: 118), king of France and commissioner of the Louvre. As an art lover he must have recognised the uniqueness of Colonna’s work.

**Modification and Republication**

The second edition was published in Venice in 1545. One year later the first foreign translation was published in French. The French edition saw the modification of the woodcuts and adopted a 'more contemporary, northern woodcut style' (Pals Chalmers 1969: 459), in addition to that, 14 supplementary woodcuts were included, which were produced based on the text in the Hypnerotomachia. The French edition was very popular and was republished another six times after that in 1553, 1561, 1600, 1804, 1811 and 1882. The 1882 edition was the first complete translation of the work.

The first English translation was published only in 1592 and was a badly translated, shortened version (Lefaivre 1997: 23). The first complete translation in English was not published until 1999, it retained the same title as the first English version "The Strife of Love in a Dream." As Ivins (1934) and others have argued, the early translations and their woodcuts served as carriers of the Renaissance Italian style into France and England among other countries.

Whereas today as accurate a translation as possible is of scholarly importance, during the 16th to 19th centuries this seems not to have been the case in France and England. Instead, the translations are not mere copies of the 1499 version but culturally adapted texts and illustrations, adapted to a different environment: the illustrations in French Mannerism style and the text for the emerging militant Protestant audience in England (Semler 2006: 230). Especially the additional French woodcuts bear witness to the extensive study of the book.
Inspiration on Art

Vouet, in 1637, handed over to his pupil Le Sueur the commission of 8 paintings with sceneries from the *Hypnerotomachia*. Three have been identified at the Musée at Rouen, the Musée Magnin at Dijon and the Czernin Collection in Vienna (Blunt 1937). The discrepancies between the book and the paintings are quite obvious. Rather than copying and elaborating the woodcuts Le Sueur interpreted the text and gave it a personal touch. The sceneries had been adapted to the *Zeitgeist*: instead of rocky backgrounds he painted classical palaces, instead of roofed buildings he painted open-air structures in the manner of classic baroque. The Musée Magnin Painting by Le Sueur represents the five senses, a theme first encountered in association with the ancient world in Colonna's book (Nordenfalk 1985: 15).

Another example is the "Sleeping Venus" by Giorgione. It is said to have derived from a very similar woodcut in the *Hypnerotomachia*. Radiography of the painting revealed the face and body of Cupid sitting to Venus' feet, which was later painted over (Lüdemann 2005: 94-95). Was Cupid initially supposed to replace the Satyr from Colonna's book? Instead of representing the Satyr or Cupid, as suggested by Saxl (1957: 163), Giorgione 'eliminat[ed] the onlooker in the picture and ma[de] the spectator play his part'.

A very clear inspiration drawn from the *Hypnerotomachia* is Titian's "Sacred and Profane Love." Since Titian, in his youth, actively produced woodcuts he must have been very familiar with the book (Friedlaender 1938: 321). The painting represents a sarcophagus with two themes of Colonna's book, a Horse and the "Punishment of Adonis." Furthermore, he incorporated the fountain in the woodcut of the Tomb of Adonis to water the roses in his painting (ibid 324). Other examples include Garafalo's "A Pagan Sacrifice" (Saxl 1937) and Rembrandt's "Rape of Ganymede" (Russell 1977).

Finally, probably the strangest reference to the *Hypnerotomachia* is encoded in the 1530 Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus by Holbein the Younger. Erasmus is depicted with an opened book where the sentence "amor vincit omnia" is legible. The sentence comes from Virgil where the word order is "omnia vincit amor," the alteration of the word order is first attested in the *Hypnerotomachia* (Asmus 1990: 298). In the context of Colonna's book the motto "love conquers all" is found allegorically on a banner, depicting a bowl of fire, a sphere - the universe - containing the sun and the moon, both connected by a withe. The use of that sentence is now regarded as some form of secret parol or password of Erasmus' followers (ibid 299). In Basel, where the portrait was painted, the university register of 1519 depicts the exact same symbols of Colonna's book: the royal orb, connected with burning fasces. The exact meaning is unknown, but the initials A · V · O "amor vincit omnia" might refer to the political and religious struggles in Europe during the 16th century, the burning fasces signifying the Papal authority and the influence of the emerging Reformation.
Influence on Architecture

The *Hypnerotomachia* is said to have inspired the design of the balcony of the Odoni Palazzo in Venice, and the depiction of Bacchus and Ceres as pictorial pair on its façade. Odoni was certainly a fan of the *Hypnerotomachia* as he recreated the entrance of his palace to match the dream-like environment of the novel (Schmitter 2007), it is reminiscent of a woodcut of Colonna's and so is Lotto's portrait of Odoni. The same artist, Lorenzo Lotto, further incorporated Colonna's iconography and hieroglyphica in many works of his, such as the frescoes in St. Giustina in Padua and the coperti in St. Maria Maggiore in Rome (Galis 1980: 363).

The Colonnade in the gardens of Versailles is also derived from the *Hypnerotomachia*. It represents the combination of several features of two particular buildings. Blunt (1937) notes how the ornamentations, figures and styles of the Colonnade were copied and can be traced back to Colonna's book with small adaptations to Louis XIV's definition of formal gardens.

Other examples of Colonna's influence can be seen in Bernini's Elephant in Rome from 1667 (e.g. Lefaivre 1997: 42; Curran 1998/1999: 179; Heckscher 1947). It was preceded by Jean Goujon's 1546 obelisk on a rhinoceros, created in celebration of Henry II's visit to Paris, which was based on Dürer's 1515 woodcut of a rhinoceros (Petzet 1984: 443). Furthermore, the Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo is cluttered with figures and architectural features from the *Hypnerotomachia* (Lefaivre 1997: 42; Pieper 2009: 323-331). Finally, as suggested by Jacques (1999: 45), the Tudor gardens can be seen as derived from experiments by French garden designers who, based on descriptions in the *Hypnerotomachia*, created the first "parterre designs" and knot gardens mentioned by Colonna.

Literature and Typography

Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* brought attention to the importance of philological studies in the vernacular (Trippe 2002: 1230). The French satirist Rabelais copied whole chapters and La Fontaine adapted Colonna's descriptive style for his "Psyché" while also copying some of its passages (Blunt 1937: 118-119; Françon 1955: 52-55). In England, traces of the *Hypnerotomachia* can be found in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "The Woodspurge" (Maxwell 1993: 34). Philip Sidney's "New Arcadia" has borrowed ideas from the *Hypnerotomachia* for the fountain of Venus described by Aeneas, which is not found in the "Old Arcadia" (Parry 2009: 307). More recently, the calligraphy of the book 'considered the most modern in appearance of fifteenth-century types' (Lefaivre 1997: 12) inspired the recreation of the font "Poliphilus" in 1923. The font is an exact copy of the 1499 book, even the 'original ink spread [was] reproduced' (Linotype GmbH 2011).
Conclusion

The Hypnerotomachia is an excellent example of the innumerable relationships that a book can have. It is not just an object, it is a container of knowledge that has served as inspiration and influence on works of art of all sorts. It also demonstrates how easily such sources can be lost, and certainly have been in the past. In this way, one can truly appreciate the printing press as one of the greatest inventions in the past two millennia.

In the future, the Hypnerotomachia will be published in other languages other than French, English and Russian. A revival of its popularity in the 20th century marked the future importance of the book; the recreation of its font was requested for the republication of the book; the Herzog August Bibliothek scanned the 1499 edition and published it in high resolution on their website. Cruz (2006) digitally reconstructed some of the monuments in his dissertation. Future research could focus on the scientific nature of the book, which mastered Vitruvius' mechanics of architecture and is said to have influenced some of Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions.


