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# Elucidating and Enigmatizing: the Reception of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* in the Early Modern Period and in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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1499. The well-established Aldine Press in Venice publishes an illustrated book which was going to preoccupy the minds of many learned individuals in the following centuries up until our own age, influencing a wide range of disciplines such as art, architecture, literature and typography. It came under the enigmatic and intriguing title *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (hereafter abbreviated *HP*).

Though the content of this book and the mystery surrounding its author will be discussed briefly, a textual analysis is not this article's aim. What is of interest here is the dissemination, reception and influence of *HP* during the aftermath of its publication until the beginning of the seventeenth century and its 'revival' in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The reason for choosing these two periods is because that is when *HP*'s presence is most evident and influential. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries its circulation was limited, between 1657 and 1804 there were no further publications of the book and when J. G. Legrand's unillustrated edition appeared in 1804, it presented an *HP* deprived of its emblematic character, an essential element to fully comprehend the work. One of the reasons for *HP* falling into obscurity could be the more general shift away from an emblematic culture and towards

a culture that favors text over image. An etiology of *HP*'s limited reception in these centuries, however, is a different issue and would require another essay examining it, thus I will refer to these periods only in brief to provide a full account of the book's tradition.

### **Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: the text and its author**

The readers of *HP* encounter their first challenge from the title page itself, which anticipates, even in its brevity, the nature of the whole book. Simplistic in its design, comprising of only two capitalized sentences formed as an upside-down pyramid, the title page informs us that this is the story of Poliphilo's Hypnerotomachia, which takes place in a dream and contains 'many other things worthy of knowledge and memory' (HP Godwin, p. 1). Hypnerotomachia is an invented term from three Greek words; ύπνος (sleep), έρωσ (love), μάχη (battle), generally translated in English as the 'strife for love in a dream'. Poliphilo also has Greek origins and might mean different things depending on how one translates the first component: πολύς, πολλή, πολύ (adjective meaning many) or πολίός, α, ον (adjective meaning white, shining and when applied to a person alludes to old age) plus φιλώ (to love). Thus, it can be interpreted, beyond the obvious meaning 'lover of Polia', as 'lover of many things' or – if we combine the meaning of the adjective πολιά with the name Polia – as 'lover of antiquity', with Polia functioning as an impersonation of classical antiquity (Fierz-David 1987, p. 43-44). I will attempt to illustrate in this article that *HP* is a complex multilayered story which has appealed to audiences from different backgrounds for different reasons and thus, arguably, all interpretations can be taken into account and considered acceptable.

The ambiguity and complexity of meaning as well as the inventive language of the title reflect the main characteristics of the

entire book. It is a lengthy prose romance, published fully illustrated with 172 woodcuts and pioneering typography, written in an idiosyncratic vernacular, difficult to read even for the most learned readers whose knowledge of the classical world is a prerequisite to fully appreciate and enjoy the book, since it contains a remarkable amount of references to classical antiquity, and which uses, or rather reuses, motifs and ideas from the previous literary tradition. Furthermore, depending on each reader's expectations and understanding, the story could be considered allegorical, alchemical, pornographic, antiquarian, or simply as theses on architecture, botany, gardening or other subjects embedded in a romance.

*HP* is comprised of two parts and the plot goes as follows: Poliphilo, spending a sleepless night because of his love for Polia, finally falls asleep at dawn and submerges into the dream realm where he traverses through several landscapes containing ancient ruins, magnificent buildings, fantasy creatures and pagan figures such as fauns, nymphs and Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses, in order to be reunited with his beloved Polia, who in reality, as the epitaph at the end of the book informs us, is dead. After finding each other, the couple goes to the temple of Venus Physioza to marry and to the island of Cytherea to receive the blessings of Eros and Venus, the gods of love. After the couple has an epiphany of Venus, accompanying nymphs ask Polia to recount her own version of the story, thus commencing part two. Polia's story takes place in the 'real' world, in Treviso, and she relates how she converted from performing the rites of chaste Diana to those of amorous Venus through Poliphilo's immense love and Cupid's threats. There is another story-within-a-story here, when Poliphilo narrates his own version of Polia's story to the priestess of Venus. Finally, after Polia's narration is over, the couple embraces and kisses one last time; then

Polia vanishes and Poliphilo wakes up alone to the nightingale's song. The text is accompanied by illustrations, depicting either scenes from the story or the objects and buildings described. These illustrations are not necessarily elucidating – at least not in the Aldine editions – but rather they tend to conceal their meaning and puzzle the viewer/reader. Being less detailed than the text itself, they also provoke our imaginations to fill in what is missing.

Poliphilo's quest progresses through consecutive stages linked in different ways. He moves from one space to another through prayer (to be saved from the dark forest), deeper sleep (dream-within-a-dream), through portals and via the sea, while the locations shift from *loca terribilia* (dark forest, ruins) to *loca amoena* (realm of Free Will, realm of Aim and the island of Cytherea) (Stewering 2000, p.9). These transitions can also be interpreted, in psychoanalytical terms, as a progression from the conscious to the subconscious, through a series of mental conflicts, which at times find our hero hesitant and unwilling to proceed but forced to, as in the case when he is pursued by a dragon and forced to enter a dark labyrinth (for a psychoanalytical/ Jungian analysis of *HP*, see Fierz-David 1987). The transitions can also be seen as different stages of time: past, present and future, a sequence defined by Poliphilo's participation in his quest. To be more specific, he begins his journey alone driven forward through external factors (wild animals, curiosity for buildings) then he gains the ability to make decisions in the land of Free Will and finally he joins Polia with whom he continues the journey having a clear aim for their future (Stewering 2000, pp.8-9). Furthermore, this structure resembles Dante's *Divina Commedia* with Poliphilo going from Inferno (dark forest, dragon) to the Purgatory (land of Free Will and of Aim), where he is cleansed and prepared for Paradise (Cytherea) (Lefaiivre 2005, pp.59-60). Again, all of the

above mentioned interpretations – and there could be even more – can be taken under consideration and each reader's approach may differ, depending on what the reader is looking for in the text and on the reader's cultural context. For example, if the reader is deeply interested in alchemy, he or she could favor an interpretation based on the stages of the alchemical process or even a Jungian analysis.

Dante's *Divina Commedia* is only one of the many literary works by which *HP* seems to have been influenced. Tracing sources, both literary and pictorial, has been one of the main preoccupations of scholars dealing with this work.<sup>1</sup> Among such sources posited are: Petrarch's *Trionfi*; Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* as well as *Ameto*, *Fiammeta* and *Corbaccio*; Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and many more.

A complete textual analysis of *HP* and of its sources is beyond the scope of this article, since it would require an entire volume to deal exclusively with this issue. Nevertheless, it is important to mention one last basic element of the book: the relationship between architectural landscape and love. The landscape, natural and artificial, functions in *HP* as a metaphor of the body (a view supported by Lefaivre 2005 and Stewering 2000). Poliphilo's reaction to his surroundings and his detailed descriptions reveal a tendency to eroticize them and parallel them to his passion for Polia. This eroticizing aspect is also evident in the illustrations: stone sculptures depicting nude nymphs and satyrs; the altar of Priapus; the obelisks (which could be seen as phallic symbols) and other symbols with sexual connotations. The most conspicuous example of eroticized architecture in *HP* is the epiphany of the goddess Venus to the two lovers (*HP* Godwin, p. 361 [z1r-v]). In order to witness the goddess in her glory, they need to tear the curtain that covers her with an

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<sup>1</sup> See inter alia: *HP* P&C 1980, *HP* A&G 1998, Lefaivre 2005.

arrow. The curtain is referred to as YMHN, alluding to the virginal female genitalia. Polia hesitates to obey, while Poliphilo performs the tearing violently and passionately. The vocabulary used and the reactions and the feelings of the two lovers indicate explicitly that this scene is symbolic of the sexual act.

After this brief overview, there is only one major issue left to address: the authorship. If the text and illustrations seem challenging and dubious, the identity of the author is perhaps the greatest mystery surrounding the *HP*, provoking the most debate amongst its scholars. The book itself does not provide any clear information stating who the author was. The only coded messages the reader is given is the acrostic formed by the first letters of each chapter: POLIAM FRATEM FRANCESCUS COLVMNA PERAMAVIT, and the phrase concealed in the first letters of the first three lines of Polia's epitaph at the end: F[rancescus] C[olumna] I[nvenit] (Heiatt & Prescott 1992, p. 295). Whether Francesco Colonna is another pseudonym or the author's actual name remains unsolved. The most dominant hypothesis leans towards the Dominican friar Francesco Colonna from Venice, where evidence is supported by certain historical documents concerning his life, which fit the dates associated with the writing and publishing of the book and its provenance.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, I will follow this hypothesis and accept the Venetian Francesco Colonna as the author.

## **Circulation**

Within the span of 500 years (1499-1999), Colonna's work has been published in Italian, French and English versions from different printers with varying intentions. Copies and facsimiles of *HP*'s editions are now located in private and public collections around the

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<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see: Casella & Pozzi 1959. Also: Brown 1996, pp. 287-290; *HP A&G*, pp. lxiii-xc; and Godwin 2004, pp. 69-104

globe; perhaps the most famous example is the Princeton copy of the 1499 Aldine edition, around which the events of Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason's best-selling novel *Rule of Four* (2004) take place.

The first edition of *HP* was published in Venice by Aldus Manutius (1440s-1515), a pioneer in the art of typography, who has been constituted as one of the most distinguished printers of all time (Lowry 1979, p.109). One might ask whether Aldus was acquainted with the author and, in effect, whether they collaborated in the production of the book. Also, who was the illustrator and what was the system of editorship in Aldus' press at the time? There can be no definitive answers to these questions due to the lack of evidence. Nevertheless, Lowry has attempted to demonstrate that the extremely close and harmonious relationship between text, layout and illustrations suggests that 'the author, the illustrator, and the printer had sat together in consultation' (Lowry 1979, p.121).

The year 1499 places *HP* in a transitional period: at the close of the age of incunabula, at the peak of renaissance humanism, carrying within it past literary traditions and at the same time transforming them into something new – using the past to move towards the future (Barolini 1992, p.91). However, the 1499 edition was initially a business failure owed to the unfavorable sociopolitical conditions in Venice that caused an economic and cultural crisis (Lowry 1979, p.124). Nevertheless, after the military crisis had passed, the Aldine edition must have had some success, because it was republished in 1545 by Aldus' heirs, corrected and with minor differences in the illustrations.

That the Aldine editions were successful even beyond Italy is made evident by the later editions in France and England. France is the place where *HP* attracted the greatest interest and exercised the most influence. The first French edition was published in Paris by

Jacques Kerver in 1546 (1535-1583). It was translated by the (anonymous) Knight of Malta, with the collaboration of Jacques Gohory and Jean Martin. Though the whole of the story was included and the acrostic preserved, the translation text was less elaborate and complex than the original. The most interesting feature of this edition is the way they dealt with the illustrations. Their obvious model was the Italian version, but all of the latter's woodcuts were 'translated into the French Mannerism of the school of Fontainebleau' (Blunt 1937, p.118). Apart from the differences in technique and the more detailed representations, the illustrator enhanced the woodcuts with additional details, non-existent in the original version, such as the reliefs of the magnificent portal through which Poliphilo passes to the realm of Queen Eleuterylida. These additions follow the descriptions in the text, thus informing and elucidating the reader's visual aids. There are also additional woodcuts with the same function: for example, of the aforementioned portal, the French edition includes another illustration explaining the geometry of the structure as Poliphilo describes it while, later on, there are illustrations of the bath-building, of the labyrinth in Queen Eleuterylida's garden and of the frontal view of the Temple of Venus Physioza. Moreover, the frontispiece is elaborately illustrated with pagan figures and floral patterns. Could this tendency to elucidate the content of the illustrations and to provide a simplified version of the text in its French version be seen as the editors' conscious effort to contemporize *HP* and adapt it to their audience's needs? Given the edition's success – it was reprinted twice and then reedited by Verville – and its accordance with and influence on sixteenth century French culture discussed later on in the article, a study of this edition could give us a glimpse of the book's reception by French readers.

The same translation, revised by François Bérolde de Verville (1556–1626), was published in the press of Matthieu Guillemot, Paris, in 1600. Bérolde also provided a lengthy introductory essay on the association of *HP* with alchemy and a mirror romance of his own associating love and hermetism. The alchemical approach to the work is already evident in the frontispiece, which consists of alchemical symbols on a floral background surrounding the framed title. Bérolde's intentions were to re-interpret, or rather over-interpret, *HP* imposing his own beliefs and ideas as a 'student of alchemy' and a 'libertine' (Blunt 1937, pp. 124–126). The tendency to view *HP* as an alchemical metaphor may have been inspired by its hieroglyphs and by the emblematic character of some of its illustrations combined with the tendencies of the time towards esotericism.

In England, only two editions are known to have been published. The first one dates to 1592 and was published in London by Simon Waterson. It was probably translated by Sir Richard Dallington (1561–1637) and was entitled *Hypnerotomachia, The Strife of Loue in a Dreame*. The translation is abridged, ending the story at the Temple of Venus Physioza. This Elizabethan version was re-edited by Andrew Lang and published by David Nutt in London in 1890.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the interest in *HP* decreased considerably, since there were no further publications of the book in any of its versions. In 1804, J.G. Legrand, an architect, published a new French translation of the romance, without the illustrations, in a pocket-sized edition, including an introduction and a commentary, where he analyses his approach, which is strictly of an antiquarian and architectural interest, and comments on the previous editions providing useful information

about them. His edition was republished in 1811 in two deluxe volumes dedicated to the Queen of Two Sicilies. During the nineteenth century there was also a scholarly edition by the poet Claudius Popelin, published in 1883.

Overall, judging by its editions and their circulation, during the Renaissance, *HP* advertised itself either as a gateway to a utopian landscape filled with knowledge and mysteries for the readers or as an alchemical handbook disguised as a romance. It was also a source of inspiration for artists, architects, writers and printers. Beyond that, the scholarly interest in it was scarce, usually restricted to some annotations referring to its authorship. Hypnerotomachian scholarship begins in the nineteenth century and was perhaps instigated by the appearance of new editions and by the emerging concerns of Napoleonic Egyptology. It is interesting to note that one of the earliest scholarly articles on *HP* dealt with the book's hieroglyphs (Goulianof 1827). A significant year in the history of Hypnerotomachian scholarship is 1999, partly because it was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its original publication, which resulted in a renewed popularity of the book, and partly because Joscelyn Godwin published the first complete English translation following the original edition's layout and reproducing all its woodcuts, which made *HP* available to an even wider audience. As David Hemsoll commented in his review: 'this handsome edition will undoubtedly make the work much more accessible not just to inquiring readers but also to Renaissance scholarship, which can only benefit from greater access to the work's remarkable riches' (Hemsoll 2002, p.37).

## **Reception and influences**

Before embarking on enumerating and analysing the various ways in which *HP* was received and used in the early modern period as well

as today, I will clarify my intentions when using the term ‘reception’. Reception theory turns one’s attention to the audience of a work of art or theme and their expectations, reconstructing the socio-cultural environment of a particular period in order to better understand the function and impact of this work of art or theme on that society. The study of *HP*’s reception will take under consideration: (a) the targeted audience and its cultural background in each of the two periods, (b) this specific audience’s views on the book and the criticism it accepted, (c) the interaction of the book within the audience’s existing cultural framework, and (d) the creative results of this interaction.

Regardless of its complexity and difficult language, *HP* became a popular and well-known book in Renaissance Europe, especially in France, as was made evident by the frequency of its editions. It was successful not only as a text, but also as a physical object; a beautiful book any learned or high-status person would desire to have in his/her private collection. It is important to note here that, given its cost, its content and its difficulty in terms of its language, its target audience was clearly educated and wealthy. Thus, its popularity should be seen under this light: restricted in the environment of the royal courts and in the literate circles of artists, architects, writers and scholars. It is through these social circles that it circulated from Italy to France and gradually became known to the wider public. What then were the reasons the book attracted the interest of monarchs, artists, and scholars alike in the sixteenth century? What were the cultural circumstances?

The humanistic movement of the early Renaissance combined with the increased interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs as conceived in classical writings created the ideal background for a new literary genre, where text and image closely interacted and were dependent

on each other: emblems. *HP* belongs to the category of proto-emblematics, because it is one of the earliest examples in which ‘images play an intrinsic role in the creation of meaning’ and it is traditionally considered as one of Alciato’s sources for developing the idea of the *emblem*, providing him ‘with stimulating pictorial and ideogrammatic models’ (Grove 2005, p. 9; Russell 1995, p. 113).

Browsing through the digitized Italian emblems collection and the Alciato project of the University of Glasgow, I selected several examples that reveal echoes of *HP*’s devices, hieroglyphs and typography. To begin with, Andrea Alciato seems to derive some of his iconographic themes from *HP* but he uses them with different meanings: the dolphin entwined with the anchor, the statue of Bacchus and the blindfolded Cupid riding a chariot driven by wild beasts. Alciato’s emblem books were published throughout Europe in the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, thus the appearance of similar themes elsewhere, even in Italian emblems, does not necessarily show Hypnerotomachian influences but rather a dissemination of the emblem forms established by Alciato and others. Moreover, some emblem books imitate *HP*’s layout with the goblet shaped text; two examples are Girolamo Ruscelli’s *Imprese illustri* of 1584 published in Venice and Luca Contile’s *Ragionamento* of 1574 published in Padua (Sp.Coll: S.M.1462 and S.M.1609).

Achille Bocchi’s *Symbolicarum quaestiorum* of 1574 contains the emblem of Victoria ex Labore (a bull’s skeletal head flanked by agricultural tools and ribbons) which is almost identical to *HP*’s hieroglyphs for hard work (Sp.Coll: S.M.1257, p. 0002, HP Godwin, p. 41 [c1r]). Another emblem shows an obelisk inscribed with hieroglyphs, whose shape resembles the obelisk in the garden of Queen Eleuterylida in *HP* (Sp.Coll: S.M.1257, p. 0104, HP Godwin, p. 129 [h5r]). Obelisks are a frequent image in emblem

books and *HP* is not the only source for them; real obelisks were also part of the urban landscape of some cities, in Rome, for example. Thus, instead of a Hypnerotomachian influence perhaps we should ascribe these similarities to a common cultural environment which favored a deep appreciation and a fascination with ancient monuments, classical and Egyptian. We can certainly speak of direct influence if the device is a genuine creation of Colonna, such as in the case of the hieroglyph emblem with the elephants becoming ants and vice versa, which was used in one of the frescoes from S. Giustina in Padua, preserved in an etching by Mengardi (HP Godwin, p. 244 [p6v]; Iversen 1993, Plate XIX.1).

Regarding Italian art and architecture in relation to *HP*, three artists will be mentioned whose work seems to have been directly influenced by it: Donato Bramante, Benvenuto Tisi or Il Garofalo, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Bramante (1444-1514) was an architect who, according to Sir Ernst Gombrich, was influenced by *HP* in his artistic decisions; he wanted to include a hieroglyphic sequence from the book referring to Julius Caesar in an inscription adorning the Belvedere, but was prevented from doing so by his patron, Pope Julius II (HP Godwin, p. 244 [p6v], Gombrich 1951, p. 120). He also suggested changing the orientation of St. Peter's Basilica to be in harmonious relationship with the Vatican obelisk, which, as Gombrich claims, he considered a religious symbol, a conception he must have acquired from *HP* (Gombrich 1951, p. 121).

Garofalo (1481-1559) was a painter of the School of Ferrara and his familiarity with *HP* is evident in one of his paintings, which is modeled according to one of the book's woodcuts. Specifically, the woodcut depicts a sacrifice to a dead lover that was found on a historiated tomb, which Poliphilo encounters at the Polyandrion (HP Godwin, p. 255 [q4r]). Garofalo's painting (1526) follows the

theme closely applying his own technique, adding minor details found only in the text and omitting others, resulting in a slight alteration of the meaning of the scene from a funeral rite to a pagan sacrifice in general (Saxl 1937, p. 171).

Bernini (1598-1680) was a Florentine sculptor and architect. The work of art associated with *HP* is his monument in the Piazza Minerva in Rome of an elephant upon whose back stands a tall obelisk inscribed with hieroglyphs; a clear reference to the mausoleum Poliphilo finds among the ruins after leaving the dark forest, which must have served as the model for Bernini's monument (HP Godwin, p. 38 [b7v]; for the association with Bernini's monument, see Heckscher 1947).

Thus, *HP* exerted a considerable influence in the way these artists viewed classical antiquity and expressed their humanistic concerns. Bramante seems to have been more influenced by the religiosity ascribed to pagan symbols in *HP*, such as the obelisk, and this element elucidated the way he viewed similar existing symbols in his cultural environment. Garofalo and Bernini filtered their works of art through the lens of *HP*'s presentation of classical antiquity. The above-mentioned examples also demonstrate how inspiring the vivid architectural and sculptural descriptions were in *HP* and how influential the woodcuts to these artists.

Even though Italy was the birthplace of *HP* and of the idea of the emblem, France was more receptive to both than any other European country, possibly because of certain cultural tendencies within the French court during the early sixteenth century. In 1509, Louis XII (1469-1515) returned from Venice having acquired copies of *HP* and Horapollo's *Hieroglyphs* published in 1505. During the reign of his heir, François I (1494-1547), there was 'intense proto-emblematic activity at court', especially around Louise de Savoye,

the queen mother, for whom François Demoulins composed a treatise on the virtues in which ‘the personifications use configurations of symbolism’ following *HP*’s example (Russell 1995, p. 89). Moreover, *HP* seems to have exercised significant influence on François I and Henry II’s (1519-1559) architectural and artistic agenda, especially in terms of the association between love and architecture (Heatt & Prescott 1992, p. 307). Specifically, the frescoes in Galerie François I<sup>er</sup> within the Château of Fontainebleau borrow themes and ideas from the book. The portal of the Château of Chambord is directly influenced by the illustration of the magnificent portal through which Poliphilo passes in the realm of Queen Eleuterylida and the architecture of the chapel in the Château of Anet designed by Philibert de l’Orme resembles the representation of the Temple of Venus Physizoa.

Through the influence of the court and the circulation of the first French editions, *HP* gradually became a point of reference for architects, garden and topiary art designers, writers, and others working in various crafts and disciplines. One could also argue for influences in several French emblem books on the level of themes. For instance, Pierre Coustau’s *La pegme* of 1560 contained two such examples; l’Empire de leurs femmes, which reminds us of Queen Eleuterylida’s court and an emblem depicting a marriage associated with sacrifice which brings in mind the rites in the Temple of Venus Physizoa (Sp.Coll: S.M.372, A8v-p.16 and R4v-p.264).

*HP* exercised a great influence on François Rabelais’s *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, functioning as a subtext in many instances. Rabelais was evidently familiar with the book, in which he refers to in chapter nine of the First Book in relation to hieroglyphs (Rabelais 1999, p. 28). Apart from this clear reference, there are other more subtle ones. For example, the Abbey of Thélème has parallels with

Hypnerotomachian structures and its name linguistically resembles that of Thelema, Poliphilo's guide to the three portals. Furthermore, in the fifth book (chapters 23-24) the living chess game recalls the chess ballet in *HP* though they have different functions in the narrative. Another interesting parallel is that the author's alter ego, Alcofribas Nasier, enters Pantagruel's body just like Poliphilo enters the colossal statue at the first stage of its journey and in both there is association with medicine.

In England, the interest in *HP* seems to have been meager. As we have seen, there was only one English edition of the work published, whilst it is difficult to detect any echoes of the *HP* either from its original or from its English version in literary or artistic works. Some literary works do present similarities but there is no concrete evidence for direct, or even indirect, Hypnerotomachian influences, except for Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones's early masques. A.W. Jonson argues in favor of an association between *HP*'s triumphs, especially the sea triumph that the couple encounters when sailing to Cytherea, some of its architectural illustrations and the staging of the *Masques of Blackness and Beauty*, the *Speeches of Prince Henry's Barriers* and *Oberon*, performed in the Whitehall Banqueting House. He bases his argument on similarities in imagery and linguistics and also on the fact that Ben Jonson owned a copy of the 1545 Aldine edition, which he heavily annotated (Jonson 1994, pp. 52-75).<sup>3</sup>

The *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosekreutz*, published in 1616, is another early modern literary work which seems to have been influenced by *HP*. It is viewed by some as the third Rosicrucian manifesto following the publications of *Fama* and *Confessio* in 1614 and 1615 respectively (*The Chemical Wedding* 1991,

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<sup>3</sup> For the counter-argument, see Leslie in Hunt & Leslie 1998, pp. 131-132

p. 7) or as an alternative answer to the Rosicrucian movement by others (Montgomery 1973, vol. 1, pp. 160–240). It is an allegorical novel narrating Christian Rosenkreutz's experience when called to attend a long expected, highly important wedding. The whole story is symbolic of the alchemical process. Given the fact that Béroalde's edition of an alchemy-oriented *HP* had recently appeared, it should come as no surprise that the *Chemical Wedding* could have been influenced by it. Several points of interest in the story which allude to the *HP* are the following: (a) Rosenkreutz has to choose between three paths (a perilous one, a spiritual and a pleasurable) just like Poliphilo has to choose one of the three portals (asceticism, military success, love); (b) Rosenkreutz, after pondering on his choices, is driven to one of the paths by accident and goes through a dark forest, resembling the hesitant Poliphilo who is driven through the portal out of fear for the dragon and finds himself in a dark labyrinth not very different from the dark forest in the beginning of his dream; (c) to get to the palace Rosenkreutz needs to pass through three guarded portals and so does Poliphilo in order to get to the throne room of Queen Eleuterylida; (d) both protagonists have an epiphany of naked Venus; (e) Rosenkreutz sails towards Olympus Tower and during his journey he sees the games of the sea-nymphs just like Poliphilo sails towards Cytherea and witnesses a sea-triumph; and (f) both find inscriptions and symbols/hieroglyphs in their path, which they need to interpret. The parallels between the two works do not stop there, but a full length comparative study is beyond the limits of this article. What is of interest here is that *HP*, most probably in its alchemical beroaldian rendering, had appealed to a seventeenth century reader who, a writer himself, used many of its elements creatively in his own work.

*HP*, however, has also encountered negative criticism during the Early Modern period mostly because of its complex language, resulting in the common phrase ‘Poliphilian words’ which refers to pretentious or daedalic rhetoric, unsuitable for courting ladies (for example, see Castiglione 1976, p.271). Another issue regarding negative associations with *HP* is censorship. In several copies, the readers censored the provocative and ‘pornographic’ illustrations by covering them up with ink. Nevertheless, it is not always possible or easy to determine when and who of the different owners and readers of each of these censored copies made those interferences. Moreover, some copies were published without the details considered to be inappropriate by those involved in the publishing process, such as the phallus attached on Priapus stele. The censorship, when applied, focused exclusively on sexual imagery and, in the case of individual reader’s interferences, it is probably a matter of the reader’s personal attitude and morals.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *HP* received attention mainly by antiquarians and book collectors and this is echoed in the 1804 edition and particularly in Legrand’s introduction where he expounds on the historical significance and beauty of *HP* as a book. Legrand’s unillustrated edition also makes evident that *HP* has lost its emblematic character, since the text is disconnected from the image.

It was not until the latter quarter of the twentieth century that renewed interest made it a creative force inspiring novelists, film-makers and graphic designers. To what factors should we attribute this rejuvenation of interest in *HP*? First of all, to the technological advances, particularly in the field of mass media (TV, internet, periodicals etc.) which made a huge amount of information available to a wider audience, geographically and socially, while contributing

to the re-emergence of an emblematic culture, which had already begun with the appearance of the comic strips (bandé dessinée) (On emblems and comic strips see Grove 2005). Secondly, the publication of three critical editions of *HP* (1980, 1994, 1998) and the resulting intensification of Hypnerotomachian scholarship during the second half of the twentieth century along with the appearance of new creative retellings of the story in novels and films altered the traditional view of an almost unreadable – in terms of language and complexity of content and of meaning – though eloquent romance, contemporizing its content with our own age. Thirdly, the appearance of a modern English translation in 1999 made it accessible to a wider audience both in terms of book availability and in terms of language. Due to this accessibility more and varied interpretations were attempted, which have contributed greatly in renewing the interest in *HP*. Lastly, with the publication of Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* in 1980, another genre of novels emerged involving the semi-historical, murder mystery novel, in which the reader and the protagonist(s) go through a series of clues, enigmas and riddles in order to solve a murder case while uncovering (pseudo)historical conspiracies and secret histories of the world. What is most interesting about these novels, particularly the illustrated ones, is the way they incorporate images – even in the form of ambigrams, anagrams and other word-forms – in their texts as essential parts to understand the various stories.

Caldwell and Thomason's novel *Rule of Four* (2004) uses *HP* as its subject matter, as the mystery the protagonists need to solve. In the text, there is a great amount of historical as well as pseudo-historical references reconstructing an alternate history for the latter half of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, while using ideas existing in *HP* including the acrostic, the hieroglyphs, and other symbols, the

two authors apply these ideas to the entire *HP*, presenting it as an enigma, a well-constructed puzzle leading to a secret. The publication contains illustrations from *HP* and other works of art which are integrated into the story. Austin Shepard, an American graphic designer, having read the novel was inspired to create a typographic video for a Hypnerotomachian quote in November 2007, experimenting with the content and the form of the text and embedding a Pink Floyd track into the video.

Another murder mystery with possible Hypnerotomachian echoes is Mark Mills's *Savage Garden* (2007). The protagonist is a young scholar of the 1950s specializing in medieval and renaissance studies, who, while researching on a renaissance garden full of sculptures from mythological stories, discovers the secrets lying beneath the surface by decoding the garden's enigmas (inscriptions, design, etc.). The novel makes reference to artists and writers of the Italian renaissance, including Dante Alighieri, Andrea Mantegna and Marsilio Ficino. Even though there is no clear indication that the author is familiar with *HP*, the research required to write such a story makes that possibility plausible.

In addition, *HP* is cited in the third chapter of Arturo Pérez-Revert's murder mystery novel, *The Dumas Club* (1996), and in its film adaptation *The Ninth Gate* (1999) by Roman Polanski, starring Johnny Depp. *HP* is presented as an invaluable rare book belonging to a family of collectors.

Another novel linked with *HP* is John Crowley's *Love & Sleep*, published in 1994, which comprises the second part of his *Ægypt* cycle. The protagonist, Pierce Moffett, is a modern alchemist who desires health, money and love. This second volume of the cycle is about his childhood and the fulfillment of these desires. Having everything he wished for, he poses a question for the future focused

on how he will transform his ordinary life. The novel contains alchemical symbolism and notions of antiquity, thus, its association with *HP* reaches beyond the similarity in the title. They also share similar concepts as well as a parallel in narrative. Just like Poliphilo moves from the dark forest and the ruined buildings to the Realm of Queen Eleuterylida and to the Land of Aim where he is initiated in the mysteries of love and inner transformation, Pierce moves from 'dark' Brooklyn where he lived with both his parents to Kentucky where he stays with his mother, uncle and cousins and is gradually initiated into the world of alchemy and of the secret history of the world. Later on, the image of a woman will accompany Pierce's thoughts as an object of desire, just like Polia's image fills Poliphilo's thoughts and urges him forward. The eroticism in Crowley's novel is also associated with his passion for alchemy as Poliphilo's love for Polia intermingles with his love of antiquity. Thus, for Crowley, *HP*'s amalgam of dreaming, love, and mysteries served as a strong inspiration for his novel, while he used it to narrate a story about a modern-day man, which shows *HP*'s diachronicity.

In the same year, Arturo Pérez-Gómez publishes *Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited*, a modern literary re-telling of the *HP*. The story takes place in a post-modern, high-tech environment, where Polyphilo is in search of his beloved Polya who represents the age of information. The body metaphor applies to airplane design and flight equals liberation. As its subtitle reveals, it is above all 'an erotic epiphany of architecture'. Like *HP*, it is a complex book both in terms of language and meaning, partly because it uses a lot of specialized terminology. Moreover, it follows *HP*'s example in re-using the existing literary background as a subtext and recombining it to say something new and different. Finally, it makes use of images but they are more abstract and detached from the text. Through his

book, Pérez-Gomez manages to contemporize *HP* in a way that the modern day reader can relate to it, since this retelling can express his/hers anxieties and concerns.

In 2005, Umberto Eco published a novel entitled *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. The plot of the book concerns Yambo, a Milanese rare-book dealer, who wrote his doctoral thesis on *HP*. He then suffers from a stroke and experiences episodic memory loss, remembering only everything he has ever read. In an attempt to regain his memory, he revisits his old family home and relives his youth through the boxes of old newspapers, comics, records and other things kept in the attic; many of these are also illustrated in the book. After retrieving his childhood memories, Yambo then struggles to regain the one memory he seeks above all others: the image of his first love. Thus, as Poliphilo, Yambo moves metaphorically from darkness to a rediscovery of his self and of his past and then on to a quest to regain the memory of his beloved.

With growing appeal, *HP* garnered attention in other media and artistic outlets in the late twentieth century. It has inspired two directors to adapt it for the screen. In 1992, director Andrey Svislotskiy of Russia's Pilot Animation Studio made an eight-minute animated short film entitled *Гипнэротомехия* (*Gypnerotomahiya*), where the rather grotesque figure of Poliphilo journeys through a barren, grey land full of obelisks depicting melting figures making love, blood dripping and other nightmarish themes, searching for the portal that leads him to Polia's tower. The next half of the film shows sleeping Polia having nightmares of wolfs hunting her and of many Poliphilos pursuing her until she wakes up crying. Her images freezes and is enclosed into a large eye falling asleep.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This short film can be viewed on youtube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-mz183VRy8>

In 2000, Raoul Ruiz directed a movie entitled *Combat d'Amour en Songe*, starring Melvil Poupaud. The plot is complex and comprised by several different tales, having as an axis a quest for a treasure. There are surrealistic settings, indecipherable manuscripts, beautiful gardens and more, intermingled with theological and philosophical discourse, adding up to the mystery surrounding the story. There are transformations, concepts of love and death, esoteric conflicts. In other words, it takes bits and pieces of *HP* and unravels a new story.

Overall, an initial examination of the primary and secondary material relating to the *HP*, either directly or indirectly, from the moment of its publication to the present day, has led to the ascertainment that there are two distinct periods in which the book was well received and culturally influential. The interest in it seems to have been generated in both instances due to the socio-cultural background, which was welcoming to a close text/image interaction, symbolism and emblematics.

There is, however, a difference in the reception of *HP* between the Renaissance and our own era. On one hand, there is a tendency in the French editions of the book to contain detailed illustrations and additional visual aids to clarify the meaning of the text to the reader, to elucidate the mysteries concealed in the book along with the long introductory essays in some of these editions interpreting the text. The choices made for each edition by the editors, illustrators and printers reflect up to an extent the audiences' needs that should be met in order for the book to be marketable. Moreover, the description of buildings, gardens, and objects are sometimes taken literally by artists who use them as models for their own works of art and structures.

On the other hand, the second half of the twentieth and the twenty-first century show a reverse tendency in cultural production relating to *HP*. A postmodern creative dialogue has generated renewed attention to interactive forms of meaning production such as mysteries, enigmas, puzzles, riddles, and open-ended questions as well as more abstract forms of expression, which instead of solving questions, generate more, while further encouraging a creative dialogue of the viewer/reader/recipient with oneself and the work of art. Also, in an age of vast amounts of information, where almost everything is made available with little effort, perhaps one tends to seek challenges by creating the illusion of enigmas.

Thus, we are presented with two models of reception: an elucidating sixteenth century versus our enigmatizing age. Equally important is the fact that *HP* fits into both models, adapting in their respective cultural environments like a chameleon, showing once again the potential of the book's ambiguity and complexity, which in my opinion should be viewed as providing opportunities for creativity rather than as barriers to approaching the work.

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