

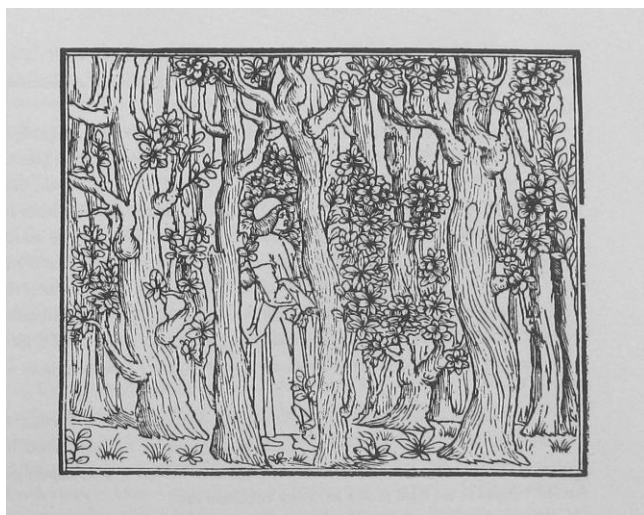
The Dream of Poliphilo. A talk by Robin Raybould at the Grolier Club on 9/30/2010

Good evening every one. Thank you Bill for that fulsome introduction and thank you for arranging this evening and asking me to talk. For me it's fun since this is one of my favorite books and I hope it will be fun for everyone. As is customary I will speak for about 40 minutes.

The description of the Dream of Poliphilo as 'the most glorious book of the Renaissance' is not my own. It comes from one of the many, many commentaries, books and articles written about it. It has also been called "the most perfect example ever produced of the joint endeavors of printer and illustrator."ⁱ

Why is it so 'glorious'. Well for many reasons. The typography, the pictures, the contents, and the mysteries surrounding it, the mystery of the authorship, still unknown today, the mystery of the name of the illustrator, still unknown, the mystery of the language that it is written in and the underlying purpose and symbolism of the book.

The original title of the book is in Greek the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili or the Struggles of love in a Dream of Poliphilo. When I refer to the book I will call it the Poliphili and when I refer to the hero I will call him Poliphilo so there will be no confusion. I should open with a picture of the title page but one of the smaller oddities of the book is that there is no title page and no colophon. This is the first illustration – Poliphilo in a dark wood.



Poliphilo translated means lover of many things and also lover of Polia, the name of his beloved. The title may seem pretentious but it is actually a parody of a famous Greek poem the Batrachomyomachia, the Battle of the Mice and Frogs, traditionally thought to be written by Homer but almost certainly not written by him.ⁱⁱ There were several other Renaissance works and a few medieval ones which had titles derived from this original.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Poliphili was first published in 1499 and written between 1467 and the date of publication. It was probably being revised up to the moment of publication since it incorporates material that was only discovered just before publication.^{iv} it was published by the famous Venetian printer Aldus. Unusually for Aldus, the publication was paid for by someone else, one Leonardo Crasso, who apparently lost money on the venture since in 1509 he petitioned the Venetian Council for an extension of his 10

year privilege or right to sell the book. Crasso says that he spent thousands of ducats producing the book but because of the foreign wars, he had not been able to sell any copies abroad and most of them were still in his hands.

The book was priced at 1 ducat which made it the second most expensive book of the time after Aldus edition of the complete works of Aristotle at 1 ½ - 3 ducats but this latter was several volumes.

Here is a Venetian ducat from the 15th century. The Venetian ducat was the reserve currency around the Mediterranean during Renaissance times – weighing about 1/10 oz in almost pure gold it would have a face value of about \$100 today.



Talking about money. Grolier owned 5 copies of the book and one of his copies has just been sold at Christies. It had the same or a very similar binding to the Grolier book in the case in the rare book room downstairs.



It actually went for \$475,000 before the buyer's premium. Another 'ordinary' copy has also just been sold for \$375,000. So as always the moral for Signore Crasso is when you have a great book never part with it.

Quite apart from the fact that someone else paid for it, the book is unique in many respects in Aldus' output. It is obviously not in the mainstream of his publishing which was authoritative editions of the classical authors.

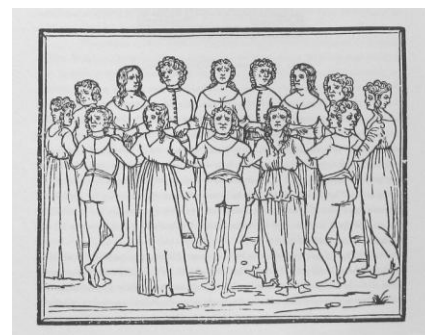
In fact he seems quite reticent about it since his name is only given almost apologetically right at the end of the book in the last line of a long list of Errata of which this is only part. His assertion that the book had been printed 'accuratissime' seems paradoxical in the context! In spite of this the overall result is reckoned to be a masterpiece.

p Caruatione. ch. f. l. i. Ornate. pro ornato. l. i. Artificis. pro Artificia. l. i. ultima. uerna. pro uernea. f. f. l. i. excedente pro exceduano. prope. io. uacat. l. i. 7. aptissima. pro aptissime. l. i. 3. mirando. pro uario. ch. f. l. i. 3. cōpēto. pro comspēto. l. i. ultima. diafpre. pro dediasprea. di. uacat. ch. f. l. i. 7. securofo. p si curiofo. l. i. 7. pīto. pro pēto. l. i. ultima. appropriauano. p approbauano QVademo. A ch. f. l. i. 3. Melinia. pro Melmia. l. i. 3. perimorida. pro periuanda. l. i. 3. truncato. pro troncato. ch. f. l. i. 3. l. i. 4. manca dapo. Comente gli pectinaua. Dindi acafo passando allhora Poliphilo. ch. f. l. i. 7. Commoſſa. p comoſa. ch. f. l. i. 3. diſpumale. pro deſpūa Lecaneſcēte. l. i. 3. petrace. p petrace. QVaderno. B ch. f. l. i. 3. Saporoso. Pro Soporoso. l. i. 3. fere. pro. fere. ch. f. l. i. 3. iſtinatione. proeſtinatione QVademo C ch. f. l. i. 3. cōtemto. pro cōtempto. l. i. 3. ſuſpicare. pro ſuſpicace. QVaderno. D ch. f. l. i. 3. parare. p parlare. ch. f. l. i. 3. fa patturice. ch. f. l. i. 3. Gratis. p Citacis. QVaderno. E ch. f. l. i. 3. ſeguitoe. p ſeguiroe. ch. f. l. i. 3. ſeruli pro ſerali. QVaderno F ch. f. l. i. 3. ſultima amante. pro amātime. ch. f. l. i. 3. Caro. pro Claro. Nō ſenumetra le linee delle maiuſcole. Venetiis Menſe decembris. M. l. d. in ædibus Aldi Manutij accuratiſſime.

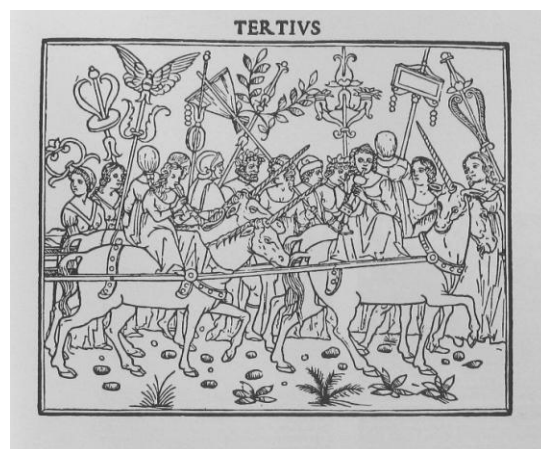
First it was the only book he published which had more than a handful of images.

Then he used a special type famous for its quality and clarity created by his type designer Francesco Griffo based on ancient Roman inscriptions. This was a revised version of a type which he had first used in 1496 in a book written by the humanist Cardinal Bembo. This type

The latter is not a fanciful suggestion since Botticelli had already illustrated two editions of Dante's *Commedia*^v. Here is a copy of a Botticelli sketch for the *Commedia*. And a picture with not dissimilar characteristics from the Poliphili. Look at the stance on the left of the Poliphili (they are wearing masks on the back of their heads). You may not think that this is up to the quality of Botticelli but remember his was a drawing and the Poliphili is a woodcut.



Another more likely candidate is the illustrator of the first illustrated edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published in Venice in 1497 by Bonsignore.



The Ovid is on the left. The two images show great similarities but unfortunately we do not know the identity of this illustrator either so it does not help much.

Before coming on to the controversy about who wrote the book I will describe some of the contents since this is obviously relevant to who could have been the author.

The Story

The story of the Poliphili is pretty simple and takes up only about 30 pages of the 460 page text. The rest of the book consists of descriptions of what Poliphilo sees on his quest towards the consummation of his love. I will come to the descriptions in a moment.

At the beginning of the book Poliphilo falls asleep and begins to dream of his love for Polia. As we saw, he finds himself in a dark and frightening forest where to emphasize the symbolism of dreaming he falls into a second dream. Then in this dream he travels through



ruined buildings and gardens admiring the architecture and meets up with Polia and falls in love with her again. They continue their travels and finally end up on the Island of Cythera where they are welcomed by Cupid and Psyche and are transfixed by Cupid's arrow. Then in a second part

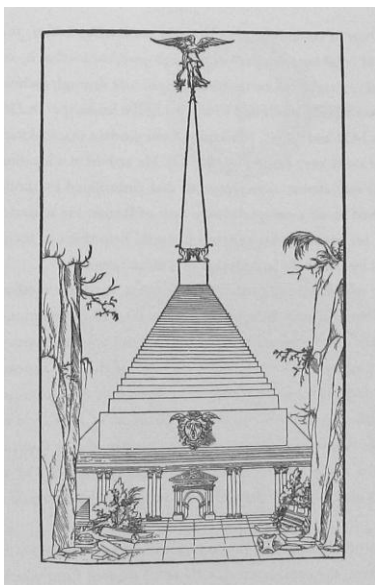
of the book Polia tells her side of the story. Finally the couple embrace, and, as they do so, the image of Polia dissolves and Poliphilo awakens.

The Descriptions

This is all fairly banal stuff but layers of extraordinary been described as a knowledge available to the

Over two hundred pages of the than half the illustrations architecture that Poliphilo his journey. He has an erotic and architecture. So enamored actually manages to have buildings.

Another large section is devoted There is said to be a description then known in Europe. A journal *Word & Image* of 1998 is taken up with thirteen essays on the gardens and architecture of the Poliphili^{vi} and according to Anthony Blunt the English art critic, "the

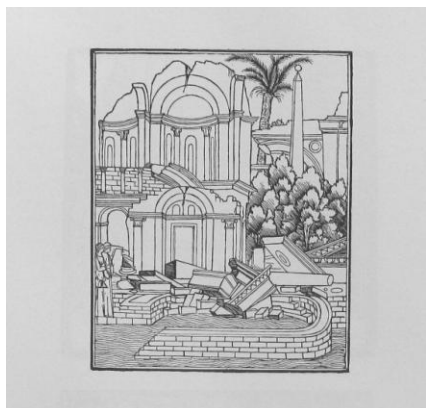


behind this simple tale lie complexity. The Poliphili has compendium of all Renaissance humanist.

book, together with more describe the fantastic encounters in the course of appreciation of ancient ruins is he of architecture that he intercourse with three of the

to a description of gardens. in the book of every plant complete edition of the

Poliphili became the most influential treatise on architecture and landscape gardening over the next three centuries.”^{vii}



Blunt incidentally was the British aesthete who turned out to have been a Soviet mole and master spy during the whole of his career. He ended up becoming the art advisor to the Queen herself.

Someone has gone to the trouble of computerizing the gardens the lovers visit so that you can examine every plant from every angle.



Then there are dozens of other topics on which the narrator expounds at length including music, topiary, mosaics, fabrics, painting and food and others

Yet another complication is the language of the book. It is primarily in Tuscan an Italian dialect but there are extracts in Latin, Greek, Aramaic and some inscriptions in Hebrew and Arabic and one of the most extraordinary features of the book is that a large chunk of the vocabulary is invented by the author. There are over 5,000 original words and the Latin vocabulary has been described as “an obstinate chase after the most precious word taken from the most remote regions of Latin literature.”

Even in its own time this language became famous. When the Venetian senate wanted to engage in the equivalent of a filibuster, they would use as they said Poliphilian language.

The language is so difficult that the first person to attempt to translate it into English in 1592, probably Robert Dallington, gave up after 1/3rd of the book and even got the first sentence wrong as shown below.

The first full English translation had to wait for the 500th anniversary. Here is a copy. A rather shoddy piece of work but it does reproduce the size and pagination of the original. It is a labor of love by the translator even though he doesn't attempt to emulate the gothic language of the original.^{viii}

THE AUTHOR

Bearing all this extraordinary erudition in mind – who wrote the book? No one is certain and after 500 years discussion continues. Probably a dozen names have been suggested of which the foremost and the one by which the book is known for convenience is Francesco Colonna.

Soon after publication it was discovered that the first letter of each Chapter formed an acrostic which translates as: 'Brother Francesco Colonna loved Polia immensely'.

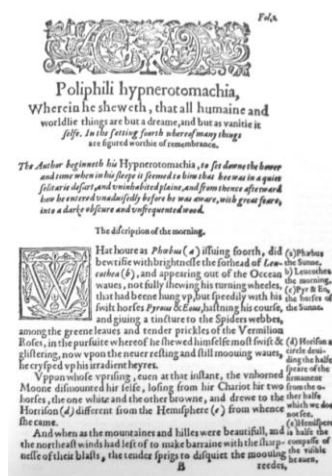


Note incidentally the past tense. Polia if she has been correctly identified had died of the plague in 1467. Other references have been found to Colonna in the text and this one might think would be the end of the question.

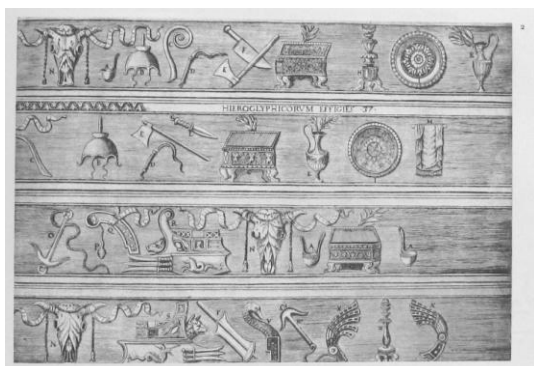
But no. First there are two possible Francesco Colonnas. The one whom it is usually attributed to is Francesco Colonna, a monk from Venice, i.e. a Brother. The problem with him is that in spite of being a monk his life was characterized principally by extreme dissoluteness. He was continually being disciplined by his superiors. At the age of 82 for instance, he was involved in an incident in which he falsely accused others of being the perpetrators of rape. He was convicted and banished from Venice. He was a poor student in his youth and gives no indication of having the interest, the ability or the opportunity of acquiring the almost superhuman knowledge exhibited in the *Poliphili*.

Then there was Francesco Colonna from Rome who has a better claim in this last respect. He was a member of one of the most cultured families in the whole Renaissance; one member of the family had been Pope, another, Cardinal Prospero Colonna, was a learned patron of the arts, and possibly the inspiration for Prospero in the *Tempest* and another, Vittoria Colonna, was one of the great poets of the Renaissance. The *Poliphili* has obvious Roman connections since many of the buildings in the story have been identified as copies of Roman ruins.

Here are two examples. First we have a picture from the book of so-called hieroglyphic writing which Poliphilo comes across in his wandering. Then I have two pictures of extant



friezes from Roman times, one in the Capitoline Museum and the other part of the Temple of Vespasian.



It seems impossible to believe that the illustration in the book is not copied from one or other of these last two.^{ix}

But although this Roman Colonna appears to have had well-placed cultural connections, from what we know, he also appears to have been completely disinterested in literature or writing and so he is also discounted as the author.

Another high-level candidate for the authorship is Aldus himself and it does seem that he had some special sympathy with the events in the story since, like Polia, he also, just in the very

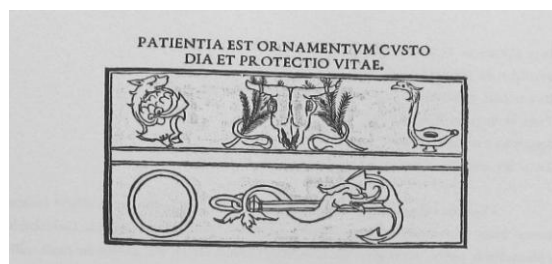


year before the publication of the book, had been stricken by the plague and, like Polia, he had vowed that, if he survived, he would dedicate himself to God and thereafter live a monastic life. When he did recover, this idea was not so much to his liking, and he petitioned the Pope to relieve him from his vow and, fortunately for us, the Pope agreed.

Aldus had another connection with the book, his famous printer's mark the dolphin entwined round an anchor, with the motto, *festina lente* or hasten slowly. Aldus didn't start using it until 1502 after the publication of the Poliphili. This is from the 1508 edition of Erasmus adages. Erasmus in fact is the source of the usual story of the origin of

the mark which is that on a visit to Aldus in Venice, he was shown a coin of the Emperor Vespasian (69-79CE) given to Aldus by Bembo in 1490, which incorporated the dolphin and anchor mark.^x

However the *Poliphili* has some eighty instances of the device in different versions illustrating the measured progress of Poliphilo towards the consummation of his love.^{xi} It may be that this



reflected Aldus' interest in the device and culminated in his use of it as a printer's mark.

There are several other credible candidates for authorship who have pros and cons but we do not have time to go into them all at present.^{xii}

Symbolism

So what about the symbolism of the book. At the highest and simplest level, the *Poliphili* is a fantasy in the style of the romances of Boccaccio. The descriptions have their own interest but what is even more interesting is the underlying significance of Poliphilo's journey. I will talk about just a few of these, the dreams, the alchemical connection and the central theme of the book which naturally is "Love"

Dreams

Poliphilo's dreams are an example of a literary device which many contemporary writers took advantage of. The most famous instance is the Dante's *Commedia* itself in which the action is also set in a double dream.

Dreams are emphasized continually in contemporary literature from classical to medieval times to the Renaissance, in Chaucer, Langland, Bruno Latini, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Milton amongst others. These allegorical narratives were complemented throughout the period by numerous so-called dream books^{xiii} which purported to give advice and assistance in the interpretation of dreams.



The fact was that during the whole period from classical times up to the Renaissance, dreams and visions took on a much greater significance than they do today. The dream was regarded as a channel through which help could be obtained from God and the future foretold. The

Poliphili goes even further – the subtitle of the book is 'where all human things are but a dream.'

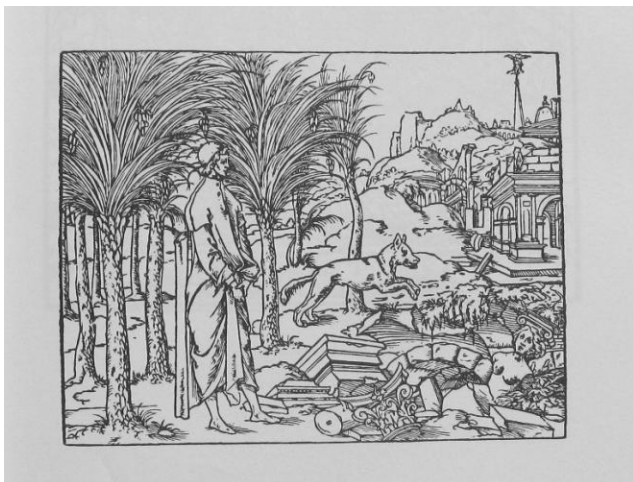


The device of the dream tells us, in the manner of the age, that what followed was an allegory. The shadowy, unrestrained and fanciful ambiance of the dream was a perfect setting for the idealized characters of the allegory and yet another reminder that the mysteries of life and the divine must be approached in ways other than by logic and reason.

Thus here is a turning point in the book. In the first part of his journey, Poliphilo has two companions Logistika, Logic and Thelemia, Desire. But here he abandons Logic, she turns away and he continues only with Desire.

Alchemy

Then we have the alchemical connection. There was a reprint of the Italian edition in 1545 which is actually much rarer than the first edition.



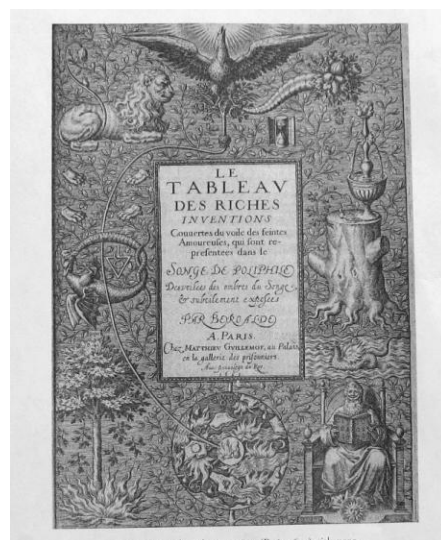
Then there were 4 French editions from 1546 to 1600. This was an abridged translation, for instance the first 300 words of the text were compressed into just 11, but at least the translator finished his job and this was the one which most people could and did subsequently read. The illustrations were recut by the famous French illustrator Jean Cousin who had a much better handle on perspective than the original illustrator.

There are attempts in these editions to interpret the book as an expression of alchemy. Here is the title page of the 1600 edition which shows alchemical symbols but none of these actually appear in the book.

This edition is subtitled a collection of steganography or secret writing a term invented in the late 15th century. And commentators have continued to echo this alchemical interpretation and Carl Jung himself has said that his interest in alchemy and the archetypes was sparked by a reading of the Poliphili.

And this incidentally is not the only direct modern influence of the book. TS Eliot must have read the Poliphili since POLIPHILLO is the first word of the first line of one of the earliest of his poems.^{xiv}

Another interpretation just published which I mention since it is by someone you may know, Frans Janssen of Amsterdam University. I don't think he is a member of the club but I met him on the Club Iter to London a couple of years ago. He recently published an article describing the 1600 edition of the Poliphili as a compendium of symbolic terms i.e. an Iconology since it has a long index of the allegorical terms referred to in the text.^{xv}



Love

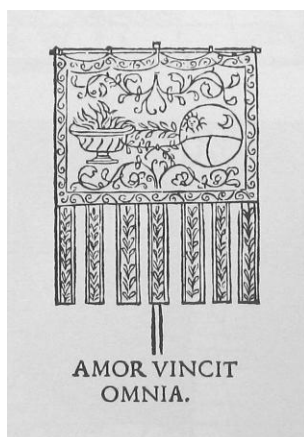
But obviously the principal theme of the book is love, love of Polia, love of architecture, the progression from physical human love towards love of God, the closeness of love and death, the conflict between the traditional courtly love of the troubadours and the genuine passion of Poliphilo for Polia. As it says here love is the mirror of all thing Love may have an abiding interest for us in the 21st century but in the Renaissance it was a subject of deeper philosophical significance. Let me briefly explain why.

In the very earliest times, most cases, no words existed for way to express abstractions was or Eros became the and a woman, in love, create a presumed that the universe One of the most ancient Greek created from a primordial egg early Greek poet Hesiod's says that: 'Day was born of Another early Greek supposed that love, correctly 'attraction', was the force which This notion was repeated right and indeed is what we believe what holds the universe the philosopher, Marsiglio 1469 put it that: 'Love may knot and link of the world.'^{xvi}



vocabulary was very simple; in abstract concepts and the only through personification. Cupid personification of love. A man child – it was therefore itself was similarly created. myths was that the world was and this is reflected in the account of creation in which he Night in sweet union of love.' philosopher, Empedocles viewed in its widest sense as held the universe together, through to the Renaissance today – attraction, gravity, is together. In the Renaissance, Ficino, in his book *De Amore* of rightly be called the eternal

Needless to say Plato also had something to say on the matter. In his *Symposium*, a work of supreme literary art and perhaps the single most influential philosophical work during the whole era, formulated the and divine love. Human love, he only good for the purpose of bestiality, it was through our human love that we can glimpse much greater pleasure of the love Christians would subsequently



The upshot of all this is that love, it was held together by love love. And if you feel you fall short certainly try and get as much as possible.

the relationship between human said, was vulgar and bestial, procreation, but, in spite of this experience of the pleasures of the much greater beauty, the of the Good (or God, as the say).

the universe was created by and the ultimate aim in life is on the spiritual side, you should practice with the physical side

This element of Platonism, was the subject of innumerable treatises, epics, allegories and the allegory of human love towards love of God. The allegories. Behind the façade of icons, emblems, symbols and Christian allegory.

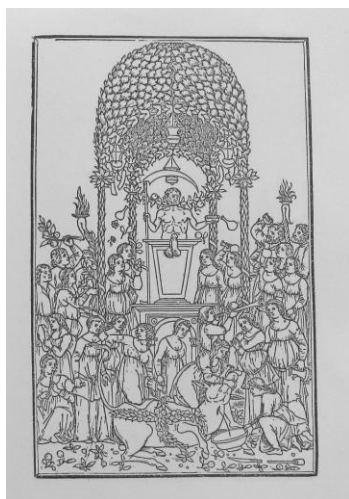
Here Poliphilo chooses the the way of Love rather than the world or the way of the gods.



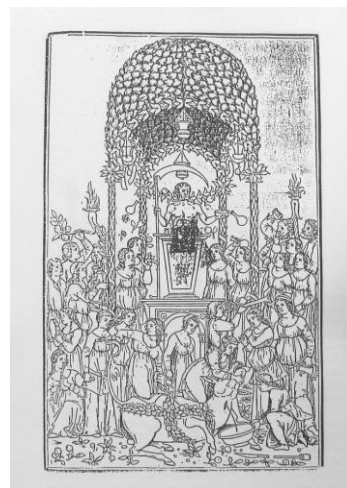
embodied in Christian theory, theological and philosophical other literary works where symbolized the progress *Poliphili* is one of these classical and mythological hieroglyphs, the book is a

middle way, the middle gate, entry to either the way of the

But at the beginning of the 16th century, the church had to confront Luther and the Reformation. There was no longer any place for the humanists of a century earlier who had been given wide latitude by the Church authorities in their praise and their adoption of classical culture.



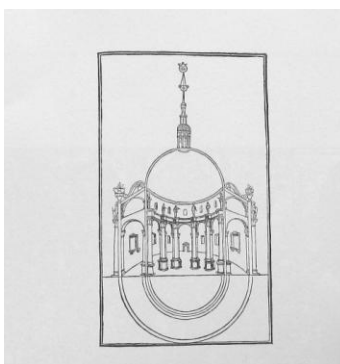
That's not to say incidentally that even in the 15th century there were no limits to freedom of expression and there was no censorship. This is the temple of Priapus in the *Poliphili*. There are very few copies of the book surviving in which this picture has not been defaced if that is the right word.



The *Poliphili* is an allegory of love but the allegory is given added poignancy by the story itself, by the intensity of the emotion that

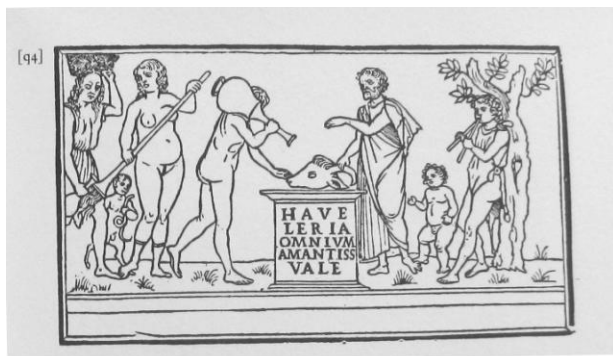
Poliphilo palpably demonstrates for Polia throughout the book, an emotion that was probably unrequited in real life because she had died of the plague and an emotion which is expressed in Poliphilo's desperate search for love in all its forms.

This desperation is evidenced in they are finally reunited in the Temple of Venus Phusioza. This picture showing a plan, a one. This incidentally is extraordinary learning of the extremely rare Greek word – the whole of Greek literature.



the name of the temple where middle of the story, the is actually rather a modern section and an elevation all in another indication of the author. Phusioza is an there are only 5 uses of it in And the author uses it in

exactly the right meaning. It describes something or someone who is dead and buried but is nevertheless capable of being brought back to life. Poliphilo was obviously thinking of his love of Polia.

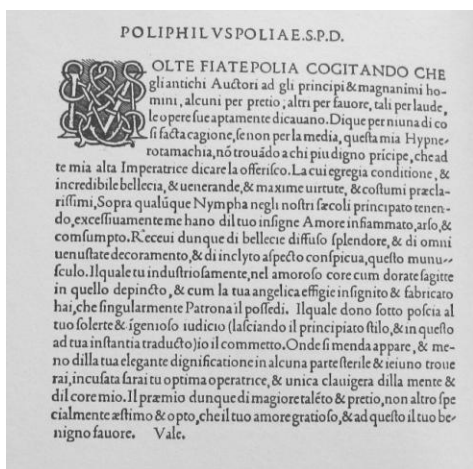
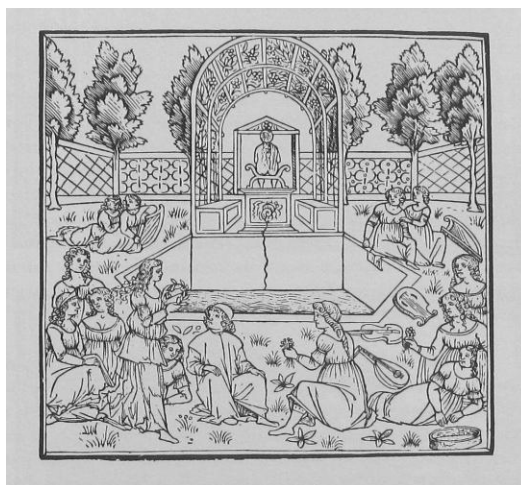


Here is another example - a picture of an epitaph. The very large Oxford Latin dictionary does not know what the word LERIA means but just cites the single reference in Latin literature to it which is by an obscure Roman historian Festus. I am told that it probably a calque or word borrowed from the Greek LEROI meaning foolish or frivolous. Thus I translate this epitaph as

meaning. "Hail, ('here lie the remains of' being understood) the foolishness of those most in love. Farewell." Again a cry by Poliphilo for the hopelessness of his love.

The point is emphasized once again in the author's use of the tomb of Adonis as the final monument in the book which the lovers visit after receiving the blessing of Venus. Adonis was originally the god who represented the death and rebirth of the seasons, of vegetation and the harvest. It represents, for the last time, the forlorn hope of Poliphilo for the return of his love for Polia.

One has to believe that, whatever the underlying symbolism of the book it could only have been inspired by genuine passion. This is part of the initial dedication by Poliphilo to Polia:



'Your noble station, your incredible beauty, your highly regarded virtue and your outstanding behavior, have inflamed me excessively with a noble love for you: I have burned and am consumed. O splendor of radiant beauty, ornament of all grace, famed for your glorious looks, receive this small gift, which you have industriously fashioned with golden arrows in this loving heart.'

Allegory or not the unknown author had written the most enigmatic masterpiece of the age as a passionate love letter.

Notes

ⁱ Helen Barolini *Aldus and his Dream Book* New York: Italica Press, 1992 91 calls it ‘the most glorious book of the Renaissance.’ and see also Redmont Burke *The Most Beautiful Book of the Fifteenth Century* Bulletin of the New York Public Library 58 Sept. 1954 410-28. William M. Ivins, Jr *The Aldine Hypnerotomachia Poliphili of 1499* in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 18, No. 11 Nov. 1923 249-252 calls it ‘the most perfect example ever produced of the joint endeavors of printer and illustrator.’

ⁱⁱ Suidas, the 10th Century encyclopaedist says that the real author of the *Batrachomyomachia* was Pigres of Caria in about 480BCE.

ⁱⁱⁱ A short list of books with similar titles to the *Poliphili* would include the *Aeluromyomachia* by Dassi published in 1549, the *Myrmicomymachiae* by Natale Conti of 1550; *Lerofilomachia* by Oddi a prose comedy in 5 acts published in 1578, another *Batrachomyomachia* by Jacob Balde in 1628, the *Melissomachia* of Verbiest in 1652, the *Georgarchontomachia* of Beronicius written in 1672 and a *Galeomyomachia*, the Battle of the Cats and Mice, c1494 by Prodromus.

^{iv} The book incorporates material from Perotti’s *Cornucopia* published in 1489 and from the *Aratea* of Germanicus which was published by Aldus in 1499 from a manuscript ‘recently discovered’ so it looks as if the author of the *Poliphili* was, at the least, revising his copy until the last moment before publication.

^v The first is the Florence edition of 1481 with commentary by Cristoforo Landino and the second is the unfinished series of drawings prepared by Botticelli in the 1490’s for his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici which is now in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin.

^{vi} A complete edition of the journal *Word & Image* (14 1/2 Jan-June 1998) is taken up with thirteen essays on ‘Garden and architectural dreamscapes in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*’

^{vii} Antony Blunt’s article is *The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili in Seventeenth Century France* in *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 1937-1938 117-137.

^{viii} *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* trans. Joscelyn Godwin Thames and Hudson 1999.

^{ix} The objects on the friezes are not hieroglyphs but sacrificial instruments and utensils used by the priests of the temple.

^x This description by Erasmus can be conveniently read in translation in Margaret Mann Phillips *Erasmus on his Times A shortened version of The Adages of Erasmus* Cambridge University Press 1967 3.

^{xi} For more on the candidacy of Aldus, see Leonard Schmeiser ‘s *Das Werk des Druckers. Untersuchungen zum Buch Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* Roesner, 2003

^{xii} Some of the other candidates for authorship have been promoted by the following commentators: Leon Battista Alberti by Kretuzulesco-Quaranta and separately by Liane Lefaivre; Felice Feliciano by Donati and Khomentovskaia; Lorenzo de Medici by Kretuzulesco-Quaranta; Niccolo Lelio Cosmico by Roswitha Stewring; Eliseo de Treviso by Parronchi and Scapecchi;

^{xiii} For instance, the *De Somniis* of Philo of Alexandria in the 1st century CE, the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus in the 3rd century, the *Dream Book of Daniel* and the *Dream Book of Joseph* both from the 12th Century.

^{xiv} TS Eliott’s poem is Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service.

^{xv} Frans Janssen’s article is in *Quarendo* 39, 2009 p. 26.

^{xvi} Marsiglio Ficino *De Amore* III, iii trans. by Sears Jayne in his *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium* Woodstock: Spring Publications, 1994 68.