Can you repeat that?

_Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_: A recent acquisition by Special Collections

Susan Millard

With mounting excitement, we draw closer to the meeting place. Finally we are seated and the book is carefully unwrapped and placed in front of us. I take it into my hands and open the pages with ultimate care—there is a collective gasp.

The book in question is _Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_, an early printed book (known as incunabula) published in 1499 in Venice by the venerated printer Aldus Manutius. It was begun in 1467 and revised until its publication. The book has always been somewhat of a mystery and the attribution of Brother Francesco Colonna as the author is still the subject of much debate. Other candidates include the architect Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo de’ Medici, a different Francesco Colonna (this one a wealthy Roman governor) and even Aldus Manutius himself. Brother Colonna, a Dominican monk in the monastery of Santi Giovanni e Paolo (Saint John and Saint Paul) in Venice, is believed to be the author for several reasons: the acrostic formed by running together the first decorated letter of each chapter spells out ‘Brother Francesco Colonna has dearly loved Polia’ and Colonna was ordered to repay a sum provided by his religious order for the printing of a book—perhaps a contribution to the publishing of _Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_.

Equally mysterious is the identity of the illustrator. With around 170 woodcuts in the book, it is unfortunate that no attribution was assigned. Several contenders have been suggested, including Andrea Mantegna, Fra Giocondo, Vittore Carpaccio and Gentile Bellini. The quality of the woodcuts sets this book apart from other printed books of the time. Interestingly, Aldus Manutius is not known for publishing illustrated works, and this is the only book of his with significant illustration. Perhaps this was because Aldus did not meet the costs of publishing the book—these were paid by one Leonardo Crasso, who also owned the copyright. Aldus preferred to produce pocket-sized volumes of Classical Greek and Roman texts which could be carried around and read easily.
It is often said that the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is the most beautiful of all the incunabula, with the type and illustrations sitting perfectly on the page, drawing the eye to innovative design features such as the shaped text. The beautiful and clear font is also of note: Manutius’ punchcutter, the former goldsmith Francesco Griffo, recut for use in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* a typeface he had created for Pietro Bembo’s book *De Aetna Angelum Chalabrilem liber*. Now known as ‘Bembo’, this typeface is still in use today.

The book comes out of the Italian humanist movement of the early Renaissance. Manutius, from a wealthy family, was educated in the humanist style. The ideas in the text draw from the opening-up of thought in this period, as Leféivre eloquently puts it:

> Renaissance humanism is a long, enduring phenomenon which extends to our own time and perhaps onward for some time to come. By definition, it has no end. It was invented by free thinkers, a way of thinking in the making, open-ended, taking risks and looking forward in its attempt to formulate a better future without losing sight of those parts of the past that are worth preserving.  

The book did not sell well at the time, probably because sales were interrupted by the Second Italian War (1499–1504), during which Manutius even ceased business for several years.

The architectural detail of classical buildings and gardens in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is remarkable and is the reason why Alberti, a great architect, is thought by some to be the author. Scholars used the book for centuries as a reference text. There is a sense of overwhelming excitement in the descriptions of the locations and buildings. The language used is also notable—a hybrid of Tuscan dialect, Italian and Latin, with many words coined by the author, as well as Greek, Aramaic and some inscriptions in Hebrew and Arabic.

The story is a romance. The best-known English translation of the title is ‘The strife of love in a dream’. Poliphilo (meaning ‘friend of many things’) is searching in a dreamscape for his love Polia whose name, meaning ‘many things’, is an analogy of the text itself, in which Poliphilo is on a journey of discovery about the world, not just striving to ‘get the girl’. Polia, who has pledged herself to a life of chastity in return for surviving the plague, initially rejects Poliphilo’s advances. Luckily, their love is made possible by the intervention of Cupid and Venus.

The University of Melbourne Library negotiated with an American dealer to purchase the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* from a private source. The purchase would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the Ivy May Pendlebury Bequest. It is an important addition to the University of Melbourne’s already significant holdings of rare books.

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