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Book Reviews

A Tenth-Anniversary Appreciation of Joscelyn Godwin's Translation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife Of Love In A Dream*

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> Corso took the book as carefully as if he were being handed a newborn baby. It was an old volume bound in brown leather, decorated in gold, and in excellent condition.
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> "*La Hypnerotomachia di Poliphilo* by Colonna," he said. "You managed to get hold of it at last."
>
> "Three days ago. Venice, 1545. *In casa di figlivoli di Aldo*. One hundred and seventy woodcuts. Do you think that Swiss you mentioned would still be interested?"
>
> "I suppose so. Is the book complete?"
>
> "Of course. All but four of the woodcuts in this edition are reprints from the 1499 edition."
>
> "My client really wanted a first edition…"
>
> *The Club Dumas*
> Arturo Pérez-Reverte

In today's polemically charged battlefields of academe, rarely is a writer so pleasantly confronted with a situation whereby a text, publishing house, and translator are all so prestigious that one simply cannot fathom whom to begin to praise first. Perhaps an honest and egalitarian approach thus mandates that I should honour all three of the above, in no particular order. I simultaneously dare to hope that my brief appraisal of the complete English translation of the famous 1499 *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (*allegedly authored by the quattrocento Italian cleric Francesco Colonna—although this issue is still open to debate) will emphasize that

harmonious symbiotic relations between text, translator, and publisher can, and do, result in academic endeavours that are memorable, useful, and often surprisingly entertaining.

In 1999, Thames and Hudson released Colgate University musicologist Joscelyn Godwin's blessedly accessible English-language translation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a richly illustrated Italian Renaissance prose epic steeped in Pagan imagery and classical allusions (some famous, many obscure) that had hitherto not been translated in its entirety into English, although Godwin's introduction dutifully mentions certain French translations of the text and Sir Robert Dallington's partial English version of 1592 (viii-ix). Thames and Hudson fastidiously included reproductions of the original black and white woodcuts throughout the book, and Godwin's commentary on this epic in his informative *The Real Rule of Four* emphasizes that the original text was one of the very first printed books to be illustrated throughout with such woodcuts.[1] Certainly the illustrations are indispensable towards enhancing our appreciation of the protagonist Poliphilo's diverse adventures, encapsulated in his overarching romantic dream-quest for his beloved Polia. The appearance of Godwin's translation was heralded by Andrew Graham-Dixon's fair-minded compliment in the Daily Telegraph: "Joscelyn Godwin, whose translation is a masterpiece of clarity and scholarship has achieved something truly remarkable with this beautiful edition. It is unquestionably one of the publishing events not just of the year but of the century."[2] Readers of *The Real Rule of Four* will be struck by the resonant parallel between Graham-Dixon's assessment and Godwin's own succinct summation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili's* authorship: "There is the passion and the learning of a whole life in it, or rather of a whole century" (129). Five hundred years separate the objects of the compliments, but their essence remains inherently the same—a fact that honours both author and translator, but above all attests to the beautiful text's tenacious capacity for survival.

In a day and age when post-modern literature and critical theory have doused the curricula of universities ranging from California to Scandinavia, few students (and, even more sadly, few instructors) attempt to delve into the near-endless depths of great epic literature of the distant past. Many, like the legendary Helle who lost her balance on the golden ram, become casualties, only in their case they are casualties of "incomplete reading" as opposed to mythological tragedy. Even as I establish

1. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Real Rule of Four* (London: Disinformation, 2004), 18-19.
2. Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Of Art and Eros," *The Telegraph*, 18 December 1999, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4719334/Of-art-and-eros.html

this whimsical metaphor, I am reminded of Godwin's fine foreword to the pre-eminent esoterologist Antoine Faivre's *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy*,[3] where the musicologist's writing depicts the same sensitivity to myth, legend, and Pagan motif that is more than aptly demonstrated in his translation of the work currently under discussion. In his crucial introduction to the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Godwin claims that his translation "is not aimed so much at scholars, who can and should read the original, as to the wider circle of those who are touched by its sensibility" (xv). Valid though this point may be, it comes across as a trifle idealistic, especially since post-modernization appears to have ruthlessly dictated that only a handful of present-day scholars of Renaissance Studies are linguistically equipped to cope with the hefty demands placed on one by the Latin original, and even fewer are possessed of a genuine desire to appreciate the book in its original form. Yet ironically, this makes the Thames and Hudson translation particularly influential, since a far stronger, albeit less noble, case may be made for the widespread introduction of this version into the curricula of Renaissance Studies in general, and the English Renaissance in particular. This holds especially true for the United States, where both classical Greek and classical and medieval Latin alike need to be placed on academe's endangered species list!

What purpose, might one ask, can the English version of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* fulfill insofar as enhancing Renaissance curricula is concerned? The answer is not only astonishingly simple; it is vital towards a student's personal assessment of those literary, artistic, and historical forces that have helped shape literary canons over time. A true appreciation of Colonna's text is indispensable to the parallel study (generally in translation) of Greek, Roman, and Italian epics, as well as Spenserian and Miltonic originals. Honouring the special structure of the text—although it possesses a romantic-epic form, it is written in prose, not poetry—Godwin states that "it is absolutely unique, just as Homer's epic poems are unique, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Divine Comedy,* Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Proust's *A la Recherche de Temps Perdu*, or Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* (add or subtract as you please)."[4] To this list one must definitely add Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata,* and the text that provided much of the firm terrain for my own academic training: Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Numerous literary and intra-textual parallels exist between these epics,

3 Antoine Faivre, *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993)

4. Godwin, *The Real Rule of Four*, 133.

and texts and parallels alike have survived the (not always kind) tests of time in order to enter the annals of canonical literature. One particularly striking example that I choose to mention here is the manner in which the relationship between Britomart and her nurse, Glauce, in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, parallels Polia's dependence on her nurse, depicted in the latter part of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (409-412). The similarity is forceful enough that ingenuous students may automatically assume that Spenser was relying on Colonna's text for inspiration. In point of fact, Britomart's relationship with Glauce has been established by Spenserian William Nelson as being based on an episode from a Virgilian-style text titled *Ciris*. The main theme of this still-anonymous text is the relatively well-known mythological story of the wretched Scylla, who has a nurse named Carme in the story. To be sure there are differences between Spenser and Colonna's episodes: Polia's nurse warns her in no uncertain terms of the dangers inherent in rejecting true love, whereas Glauce simply allays Britomart's fears concerning passion by emphasizing that the feelings the knight of Chastity experiences are far healthier than the respective perverted passions of Myrrha, Biblis, and Pasiphae. Yet it is tantalizing to speculate that both Renaissance epics drew on (the earlier) *Ciris* for inspiration, and it is points like these that enable scholars and students in our post-modern world to link with antiquity via the endeavours of talented and committed translators such as Godwin.

Since a number of authors, most notably Godwin himself, but also others like Liane LeFaivre have repeatedly drawn one's attention to the architectural fantasies, rampant paganism, erotic imagery, and plethora of classical allusions crammed into this staggeringly wondrous text, I will simply point out that at times the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* appears to contain something for everyone. For instance, even chess-lovers (at least those who get enough time to lift their heads from their boards) will discover something of interest in this book. The lovely chess gamethat takes place after Queen Eleutherylida's royal banquet and holds Poliphilo spellbound underscores the versatility of both the text and its author's undeniable talent (119-120). While we are beholden to Thames and Hudson for assisting in the creation and dissemination of marvellous and erudite texts such as this one (as well as Godwin's equally arresting *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance*), perhaps it would be fundamentally fair to also add that no serious-minded scholar of Renaissance literature or art-history who acquires familiarity with this translation can underestimate his or her personal debt to Joscelyn Godwin.

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Additional Reviews

Peter Bramwell, *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction: The Green Man, Shamanism, Earth Mysteries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 240 pp., $80 (cloth).

Peter Bramwell's final sentence is perhaps the best way to begin this review: "A creatively critical dialogue between [modern Paganism and children's fiction] is what this book has observed and perhaps, I hope, extended" (190). *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction* succeeds in initiating a dialogue well worth extending beyond these pages, both for Pagan Studies and children's-literature scholars.

Working from the framework of critical linguistics which "regards language as a socially situated generator and vehicle of ideology and power relationships" (18), Bramwell's primary strength lies in his examination of the ideology of children's fiction with Pagan themes. In the first chapter, "Locating Paganism," Bramwell defines what is at stake: "how the language of children's literature with Pagan themes controls or liberates child characters and readers, often with regards to gender roles, and in some cases in the dynamics between human and divine beings" (18). Bramwell also offers Ronald Hutton's "four languages of Paganism" (18) as a conceptual terminology to which he will consistently return. This proves a useful way to organize and evaluate the children's fiction under discussion, as does Bramwell's explanation of and emphasis on Pagan chronotope, "a holistic outlook on time and space," (4) as represented in, for example, the Wheel of the Year.

Other strengths include a willingness to acknowledge and call into question underlying ideology and to address potentially "problematic and troubling" (20) aspects of both modern Paganism and the children's fiction he examines. He writes, for example, of "spiritual practices being stolen from indigenous cultures, decontextualised and watered down"