

BLESSED PETS: ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE
AND THE *HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI*

D.M.R. Bentley

“When writing letters in Italian,” observes Randolph Hughes of Renaissance humanists in his lavish edition of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *Lucrezia Borgia: The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tabeldei*, they “frequently dropped into Latin phrases; the diarists often did this too,”

and in the well-known *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a Macaronic prose fantasy published in 1499, not only was the basic Italian much latinized, but bits of Greek and even of Hebrew were interspersed here and there in the text. Swinburne doubtless had this species of composition in mind; in making Tebaldeo’s *Chronicle* linguistically hybrid he was bringing it into conformity with a tradition; and this was to secure an additional effect of realism. (146)

While Hughes merely situates *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tabeldei* (as Swinburne himself entitled his unfinished story) in one of the stylistic contexts of the Italian Renaissance,¹ Mario Praz is more specific about the influence of the book on Swinburne, asserting in “Some Foreign Imitators of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,” that “a long description of Lucrezia Borgia naked on her ‘couch-bed’ in *The Chronicle*” (47) is “unmistakably reminiscent of the *Hypnerotomachia*” (21). Praz’s assertion, which he later reinforced by citing his essay in the revised edition of *The Romantic Agony*, brings with it the likelihood that the *Hypnerotomachia* specifically, rather than the “tradition” to which Hughes adverts, was the model for the “linguistic hybrid[ity]” of *The Chronicle*. Following the trail signposted by Hughes and Praz reveals that the influence of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* on *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tabeldei* was in fact greater than either scholar recognized.

According to Hughes, *The Chronicle* rose from the ashes of a play about Lucretia Borgia and her immediate family that Swinburne conceived after reading Victor Hugo’s drama *Lucrèce Borgia* while still at Eton and abandoned in the early 1860s after reading Alexandre Dumas père’s “Les Borgia,