

VISIONS OF LOVE: SIMEON SOLOMON  
AND THE *HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI*

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When Simeon Solomon met his “idol” Dante Gabriel Rossetti “early in 1858” and began working in Rossetti’s studio (Reynolds 7), he entered an artistic circle whose influence on his work was marked enough for it to be considered Pre-Raphaelite. Prior to meeting Rossetti, Solomon had made only a few drawings that show the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism, most notably *Faust and Marguerite* (1856) and *Eight Scenes from the Story of David and Jonathan* (1856), but he would soon become in all things Pre-Raphaelite.<sup>1</sup> *Love* (1858) and *The Death of Sir Galahad While Taking a Portion of the Holy Grail Administered by Joseph of Arimathea* (1857-59) are Pre-Raphaelite in manner and subject-matter, while *Nathan Reproving Daniel* (1859), *Babylon Hath Been a Golden Cup* (1859), *Erinna Taken from Sappho* (1865), *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love* (1865), and other works of the late 1850s and early 1860s are Pre-Raphaelite in manner but bespeak, by turns, Solomon’s Jewish heritage and his increasingly forthright homosexuality. *Portrait of Edward Burne-Jones* (1859) is an idealized portrait of the artist as a clear-eyed visionary, and *Dante’s First Meeting with Beatrice* (1859-63) is an homage to Rossetti that is so extreme in its imitativeness as to verge on parody. But did Solomon’s admiration of Rossetti and Burne-Jones include knowledge of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), the book that was arguably as important to the “New Renaissance” phase (Allingham 140) of Pre-Raphaelitism as was the *Morte D’Arthur* to its Oxford phase – and, moreover, identified by Rossetti as “the old Italian book ... that had the most important part in making him the particular kind of man and artist” he was (qtd in Fredeman 91).<sup>2</sup>

An assessment of Solomon’s knowledge of the *Hypnerotomachia* and the possible impact of its woodcuts and text on him must begin with the admission that there is no external evidence that he knew the book, only a strong likelihood based on the fact that it was very readily available in his artistic circle, which by the mid-1860s included not only Rossetti and Burne-Jones,