

“DELIGHTFUL MANIA”:
AUBREY BEARDSLEY
AND THE *HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI*

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“As a mere comment on the admirations of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, Beardsley is invaluable,” observes Robert Ross in *Aubrey Beardsley* (1909):

he sums up all the delightful mania, all that is best in modern appreciation – Greek vases, Italian primitives, the “Hypnerotomachia,” Chinese porcelain, Japanese Kakemonos, Renaissance friezes, old French and English furniture, rare enamels, mediaeval illumination, the *débonnaire* masters of the eighteenth century, the English pre-Raphaelites. (53)

Notable for its singular specificity in this list of the “delightful mania” and “modern appreciations” reflected in Beardsley’s work is Ross’s reference to the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a book that, as has been shown elsewhere,¹ had considerable influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, not least on his mentor, Edward Burne-Jones, whom he first met on 12 July 1891 (see Beardsley, *Letters* 21-22). Not for over thirty years after the appearance of Ross’s biography did his association of Beardsley with the *Hypnerotomachia* resurface, now with some scholarly precision, in Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony* (1933), where Beardsley’s indebtedness to the book is seen as twofold: the “precious style” of his unfinished novel *The Story of Venus and Tannhauser* “resemble[es] that of the *Hypnerotomachia*” and “Beardsley’s drawings derive ... not merely ornamental *motifs* but actual technical suggestions” from the book’s “famous illustrations” (342). Despite Praz’s comments, Beardsley scholars have been slow to recognize his numerous debts to the *Hypnerotomachia*: to take two prominent examples, in Brian Reade’s *Aubrey Beardsley* (1967) only one drawing is linked to the *Hypnerotomachia*, and in Linda Gertner Zatlín’s magisterial *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné* (2016) it is mentioned in connection with only three of well over a thousand works.