An Illustrative Narration of Hypnerotomachia Poliphili Through Gardens of the Renaissance

Honors Thesis
Presented to the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Landscape Architecture
of Cornell University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Research Honors Program
by
Yasamin G Bahador-zadeh
May 2007
Peter J. Trowbridge
Abstract:

The Silent Theatre; Symbolism in Gardens of Renaissance

Yasamin G. Bahador-Zadeh

Under the supervision of Peter J. Trowbridge
Department of Landscape Architecture

In many historical eras, gardens have been created to convey ideas that more than just an immediate intention to give pleasure. Almost all great civilizations have produced designs for gardens, pools and fountains that have gone beyond the practical needs and creation of aesthetically pleasing sights and sounds. This thesis studies the symbolism used in most gardens of the 16th century, inspired by the book Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, written in 1499 by Francesco Colonna. The title of the Hypnerotomachya Poliphili is compounded of three Greek words, Hypnos (sleep), Eros (love), and Mache (strife). The sleep of Poliphilo, the narrator and protagonist, is the occasion for the erotic dream that comprises the entire novel. In the process of finding his lover, the protagonist explains how he adores architecture and gardens, wanders around old graveyards and delights in sculptures. This thesis narrates the novel, Hypnerotomachya Poliphili, through photographs of Italian gardens designed as stages on which the story of Poliphilo takes place. One walks around the gardens of the renaissance and sees the episodes of the story quietly performed through the fountains, sculptures and the design and the layout of the gardens.
ITALIAN GARDENS OF THE RENAISSANCE

INTRODUCTION

Historical gardens have been created to convey ideas more than just an immediate intention to give pleasure by means of plants, paths, shady arbors, statuary and scents. Nearly, all great civilizations have produced designs for gardens that have gone beyond the practical needs to grow plants for food, fuel, medicine, flavoring and enhancing culinary achievements, or for decoration. The need for sheltering plants within walls or capturing sunlight in the most advantageous ways, have contributed to the development of walled gardens. The need for water and well prepared soil to grow vegetation in a garden setting has inspired hydraulic developments. While the advancement of hydraulics enable water supplies for gardens to be controlled, the design of pools and fountains offered possibilities for creating reflecting surfaces, aesthetically pleasing sights and sounds and even cool microclimates that made the conditions for an enjoyable outdoor living. Prospects reverse spatial and climatic conditions within sections of a garden, changing of colors and scents, mysteries, arbors and enclosures and even the labyrinthine complexities of the maze enabled the designer of gardens to combine architecture, horticulture, engineering, aesthetics, symbolism, allusions, mathematics and geometry, and scientific experiment within their designs.

This introduction will examine how the designs of Italian gardens of the Renaissance have been affected by elements such as the environment in which they were designed, whether it is the social context or the natural landscape, the architectural and philosophical trends of the epoch or the formality and design of the gardens of the period. The body of the thesis will study the symbolism used in most gardens of the 16th century, inspired by the book Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, written in 1499 by Francesco Colonna.

BACKGROUND

Italy came out of the dark ages as a group of independent states ruled by princes who owed loyalty to the Pope and relentlessly fought and struggled among themselves. However, opposition to the Papal political authority has always been present and therefore, promoted a certain freedom of thought in theology and morals especially in places like Venice where the cities became one of most cosmopolitan and liberal. Venice also became the birthplace of Colonna’s book on a dream, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, in which he constantly admires the classics and the exotics. During the 15th century the revival of humanism took over the intellectual life and it was not considered incompatible with the church.

Frederick II, in contrary to the ruthlessness of the church in the defense of its existing theology, moved without restraint within the Sicilian society which was based on four civilizations of Italian, German, Byzantine and Muslim, and liberally promoted the arts and sciences and founded the first university.

It is also believed that greatest of all discoveries were initiated by man, who found himself a mixture of noble and ignoble, and eventually regarded himself as the center of the universe.

Man’s eye, started to look outward and see the physical world and to find it good, in contrast to how it previously looked inward upon an eternal world. Symbolism changed to worldliness, and in order to enhance the new pleasures such as view, the house was extended into the open air. The links of these defined outdoor spaces were as important as were the internal hallways. Views of
the countryside were part of design. Shapes created were meant to respond to the intellectual mind in search of order and serenity, giving status to man.

In search for the classical orders and architectural form, Roman ruins were observed with a new attention and inspired both religious and domestic architecture. The focus was on rediscovery of the mathematical proportion. The harmonic relation between geometry and music established by the Greeks, appeared as the universal law that lay behind all things. Proportion was absolute, stable and finite and the climax of renaissance search for perfection.

Man made the garden to dignify himself and found peace in its proportions. Therefore, crucial was the form. The garden has become a setting for pleasure and philosophical thought.

Sympathy between man and garden was as important as the sympathy of garden and the countryside. The psychological purpose of garden was pure contentment to the owner, with elements of not only pleasure, but also, enhancement of one's intellectual mind. Poliphilo's dream collects so many elements that in the following centuries shape the European taste and aristocratic culture. The passion for ancient architecture and creating a new style based on Roman models was woven in the European taste and aristocratic culture through threads gathered by Colonna in Poliphilo's dream. His influence was surely direct in the formal gardens of France and Italy, designed within the next two centuries after the book was published. Visitors were enchanted by the combination of stone, water, topiary and also flowering plants. There are instances at which Hypnerotomachia seems to be directly quoted, as in the Fountain of the Sleeping Nymph in Villa D'Este (fig.1 & 2), the Grotto of the Boboli Gardens, and some monstrous sculptures in the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, and the canals and the marble colonnade of Versailles.
Gardens were considered as part of the house, an extra room surrounded by nature, a salon with unlimited light and air, as if it belonged to the country side. In other words, the garden was a mutual ground at which the two met. There is definitely sympathy between the scale house, the garden and the surrounding landscape. Villa Torlonia, Frascati, is the child of the vast grandeur of the roman compagna; where as Florentine gardens are more intimate and personal in response to the smaller scale landscape of Tuscany.

The idea was that the garden should merge not into but from its surroundings. Sites were mainly on hillsides, because of the climate and views; with descending terraces as an outward thrust of the house were carved out of the ground and in harmony with it. Materials were permanent rather than ephemeral. Stone, water and evergreens were the main contents. Flowers played a little part. A perfect example is at Villa Lante, Bagnaia, where the stream of garden pours from the woods, floods into the calm of formality in the square water garden below. Although it is all man made, the aim is to convey the idea of moving from organic to very structured geometry (fig. 3). Lines of gardens become less defined as they leave the house, like Villa Rapsoni, where water ripples spreading from the center, die gradually in the surrounding.

Fig. 3 The transition between organic (natural) to formal and geometrical at Villa Lante.
Landscape design was lifted into the sublime at Villa Lante, by Vignola, where the architecture is subordinating to an ancient idea of cosmology. The search was for perfection in divine harmony between man and universe. As Perugino and Raphael, brought the ideals of Classical Space composition to climax in painting, Vignola did in Landscape Architecture. The centripetal temple in Perugino’s painting of Christ giving the keys to St. Peter (fig.4) is repeated by the centripetal water gardens at Villa Lante at Bagnaia (fig.5). Villa Lante was an exercise in geometry. Vignola translated ideas into architecture and then projected them into the landscape; a house divided in two square parts.

Villa D’Este at Tivoli, designed by Pirro Ligorio is based on the ancient Roman Temple of Fortune at Praeneste, which is also described by Francesco Colonna in his book of Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. The transition between gardens and the landscape is clearly defined; overall is the sense of Roman domination of landscape. North-west is the central vista which looks across the Tiber river of Rome to the Sabatina Mountains. The upper terrace is terminated by the triumphal arch that looks towards Rome. The water organ with its reflecting fish pools and the terrace of the hundred fountains which lavishly echo the sound of water through the garden, are a conduit from the River Aniente. The most important asset to the peace of any of the gardens is the presence of sympathy and harmony. Whether it’s the balance with nature surrounding or the building which it surrounds. The designs and the elements in the gardens are not only inspired by philosophy and intellectualism of antiquity but also stimulate the mind of modern man.

Fig. 4 Perugino’s Christ Giving the Key

Fig. 5 Villa Lante, by Vignola
HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI

THE TRIFE OF LOVE A DREAM
POLIPHILO ENTERS THE WOODS.

POLIPHILO BEGINS HIS HYPNE-ROTOMACHIA BY DESCRIBING THE TIME AND SEASON AT WHICH HE SEEMED TO FIND HIMSELF IN A DREAM ON A CALM AND SILENT SHORE, WILD AND DESERTED. THEREAFTER HE ENTERED UNEXPECTEDLY AND WITH GREAT FEAR INTO A DENSE AND PATHLESS FOREST.
POLIOHILO SEARCHES FOR THE SOURCE OF THE MUSIC.

POLIPHILO, FEARING DANGER IN THE DARK WOOD, MADE A PRAYER TO JUPITER AND CAME OUT ANXIOUS AND THIRSTY, WANTING TO REFRESH HIMSELF WITH WATER, HE HEARD A SWEET SINGING WHICH HE FOLLOWED, NEGLECTING TO DRINK, AND BECAME STILL MORE FRIGHTENED.
POLIPHILO DREAMS
WITHIN A DREAM.

POLIPHILO TELLS THAT HE
SEEMED TO SLEEP AGAIN, AND
TO FIND HIMSELF SOMEWHERE
ELSE IN A DREAM. HE WAS IN A
VALLEY, BLOCKED AT THE END
BY A MARVELOUS ENCLOSURE
WITH A MIGHTY AND ADMIRABLE
PYRAMID AND A TALL
OBELISK ABOVE IT. HE STUDIED
THIS CAREFULLY, WITH DILIGENCE
AND ENJOYMENT.
POLIPHILUS DESCRIBES COLOSSAL BUILDING

AFTER POLIPHILUS HAS DESCRIBED PART OF THE IMMENSE STRUCTURE AND THE VAST PYRAMID WITH THE WONDERFUL OBELISK, IN THE NEXT CHAPTER HE DESCRIBES SOME GREAT AND MARVELOUS WORKS, NOTABLY A HORSE, A RECLINING COLOSSUS, AND AN ELEPHANT, AND ESPECIALLY AN ELEGANT PORTAL.
POLIPHILO MEASURES IT AND DEMONSTRATES ITS SYMMETRY.

AFTER POLIPHILO HAS SUFFICIENTLY DESCRIBED THE GREAT PORTAL AND ITS MEASUREMENTS, THERE FOLLOWS HIS BEST DESCRIPTION OF ITS FINE AND SKILLED ORNAMENTATION AND OF ITS REMARKABLE COMPOSITION.
POLIPHILUS ENCOUNTERS THE DRAGON.

AFTER ENTERING THE PORTAL WHICH HE HAS DESCRIBED, POLPHILO SAW AGAIN WITH GREAT PLEASURE THE WONDERFUL ORNAMENTATION OF ITS ENTRANCE. WISHING TO GO BACK AGAIN HE SAW A MONSTEROUS DRAGON, AND WAS INCREDIBLY FRIGHTENED, TOOK FLIGHT THROUGH UNDERGROUND PLACES. IN THE END HE FOUND THE EXIT HE HOPED FOR, AND ARRIVED AT A PLEASANT SITE.
POLIPHILO MEETS THE NYMPHS.

POLIPHILO DESCRIBES THE AMENITIES OF THE LAND HE HAD DISCOVERED AND ENTERED, IN WHICH HE FOUND ON HIS WANDERINGS AN EXQUISITE AND REMARKABLE FOUNTAIN; AND HOW HE SAW FIVE MERRY MAIDENS APPROACHING HIM, WHO MUCH SURPRISED AT HIS INVITED HIM TO JOIN THEM AT THEIR RECREATIONS.
POLIPHILO BATHES WITH THE FIVE NYMPHS.

POLIPHILO CAPTIVATED AND REASSURED BY THE FIVE NYMPHS, WENT WITH THEM TO THE NOVELTY OF THE FOUNTAIN AND ALSO OVER THE AJOINING. HE WAS THEN LED TO QUEEN ELEUTERYLIDA, AND SAW SOME EXCELLENT THINGS ON THE WAY THERE AND IN THE PALACE, INCLUDING A REMARKABLE FOUNTAIN.
POLIPHILO MEETS THE QUEEN, FREEDOM.

POLIPHILE REACHES 3 GATES.

POLIPHILE CONTINUES BY TELLING OF THE ELEGANT BALLET IN THE FORM OF A GAME THAT WAS GIVEN AFTER THE BANQUET AND HOW THE QUEEN ENTRUSTED HIM TO TWO NOBLE GIRLS WHO LED HIM TO LOOK AT GREAT AND DELIGHTFUL THINGS AND SPEAKING PLAINLY TO HIM RESOLVED CERTAIN DOUBTS. FINALLY THEY REACHED THE THREE PORTALS, AND HE REMAINED IN THE MIDDLE ONE AMONG THE AMOROUS NYMPHS.
POLIPHILO DISCOVERS
A BEAUTIFUL NYMPH.

AS HE WAS LEFT ALL ALONE
AND DESERTED BY THE LAS-
CIVIOUS GIRLS, AN ELEGANT
NYMPH CAME TO MEET HIM.
POLIPHILO DESCRIBES AMO-
ROUSLY HER BEAUTY AND
GARMENTS.
POLIPHILLO IS PRESENTED WITH AN ICHNITED TORCH.

THE BEAUTIFUL NYMPH REACHES POLIPHILLO, AND, CARRYING A TORCH IN HER LEFT HAND AND TAKING HIM WITH THE OTHER, INVITES HIM TO GO WITH HER. POLIPHILLO BEGINS TO GROW WARM WITH A TENDER LOVE AND HIS FEELINGS CATCH FIRE.
POLIPHILO DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE NYMPH POLIA.

POLIA, STILL UNKNOWN TO HER LOVER POLIPHILO REASSURES HIM WITH HER COURTESY AND FRIENDLINESS, WHILE HER MARVELOUS BEAUTY TURNS HIS MIND TO LOVE. THEY ARE PRESENT TOGETHER AT THE TRIUMPHS WHERE HE IS DELIGHTED TO SEE INNUMERABLE YOUTHS AND GIRLS IN THEIR FESTIVITIES.
POLIPHILO DESCRIBES THE TRIUMPHAL PROCESSIONS.

In the place described, Poliphilo sees the four triumphant six-yoked chariots, all made from various gemstones and precious jewels, among the crowd of blessed youths reverently praising Jupiter Most High.
POLIPHILO DECLARES HIS LOVE.

THE NYMPH ELOQUENTLY EXPLAINS TO POLIPHILO THE CROWD OF YOUNG LOVERS AND DIVINE, AMOROUS GIRLS, AND TELLS HIM ABOUT THOSE WHO WERE LOVED BY THE GODS, AND HE SEES THE CHOIRS OF THE DIVINE POETS SINGING.
MORE TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION.

THE NYMPH, HAVING SUITABLY EXPLAINED TO HER POLIPHilo THE TRIUMPHAL MYSTERIES AND THE DIVINE LOVE, INVITES HIM TO GO FURTHER, WHERE HE IS ONCE MORE DELIGHTED TO SEE INNUMERABLE OTHER NYMPHS WITH THOSE WHOM THEY LOVE SO MUCH, ENJOYING A THOUSAND PLEASURES AMONG THE FLOWERS, THE COOL SHADOWS, THE FRESH BROOKS AND LIMPID SPRINGS; AND HOW POLIPHilo, AGITATED BY LOVE SO STRONGLY THAT HE WAS MADDENED, CALMED HIMSELF AGAIN THROUGH HOPE AND BY ADMIRING THE SWEET FACE OF HIS BEAUTIFUL NYMPH.
POLIA BECOMES POLIPHILo'S GUIDE

POLIA PIOUSLY OFFER UP THE
DOVES, FROM WHICH A LITTLE
SPIRIT FLIES OUT; THEN THE
HIGH PRIESTESS SPEAKS THE
ORATION TO DIVINE VENUS.
AFTER THAT, SHE SCATTERS THE
ROSES AND SACRIFICES THE
SWANS, FROM WHICH A ROSE
BUSH GROWS MIRACULOUSLY
WITH FRUITS AND FLOWERS.
AFTERWARDS THEY BECOME
HAPPLY UPON A RUINED TEM-
PLE, WHERE POLIA TELLS PO-
LIPHILO WHAT ITS RITE USED
TO BE AND PERSUADES HIM TO
GO AND EXAMINE MANY AN-
TIQUE EPITAPHS, FRIGHTENED,
HE RETURNS TO HER, RECOVERS
AND SITS DOWN. ADMIRING THE
IMMENSE BEAUTY OF POLIA, HE
BECOMES ALL INFLAMED WITH
LOVE.
POLIA LEADS POLIPHilo TO RUINS
AND EMBARK FOR THE ISLAND OF CYTHERA.

POLIA PERSUADES POLIPHilo TO GO AND LOOK AT THE ANCIENT EPISTHAPS IN THE RUINED TEMPLE. THERE POLIPHilo SEES MARVELLOUS THINGS, AND FINALLY READING OF THE RAPELESSLY LOST POLIA, AND RETURNS TO HER FULL OF FEAR. THEN THE GOD OF LOVE COMES AND INVITES THEM TO ENTER THE BOAT. CALLING ON ZEPHYRUS, THEY SAIL AWAY HAPPILY, AND THE SEA GOD PAY GREAT REVERENCE TO CUPIS.
THE NYMPH SINGS ON
THE BARGE. POLIA
JOINS IN.

POLI PHILO TELLS OF HOW
THE NYMPHS HAVING SHIPPED
THEIR OARS BEGAN TO SING
PLEASANTLY. AND AS POLIA
SANG WITH THEM, HE WAS
FILLED WITH THE GREAT
SWEETNESS OF LOVE.

POLIA AND POLI PHILO
ARRIVE AT THE ISLAND.

HAVING ARRIVED HAPPILY
THE MUCH DESIRED LACE,
POLI PHILO MAKES KNOWN ITS
NOBLE AMENITIES, SUITABLY
DESCRIBING ITS PLANTS, HERBS,
BIRDS AND INHABITANTS; BUT
FIRST THE FORM OF THE BOAT,
AND HOW AT LORD CUPID’S
DESEMBARKATION MANY GIFT-
BEARING NYMPHS SPEEDILY
PRESENTED THEMSELVES IN HIS
HONOR.

POLI PHILO DESCRIBES
THE ISLAND.

AFTER THEY HAVE DESEMB-
BARKED FROM THE BOAT, A
HOST OF NYMPHS CAME TO
MEET THEM WITH SUPERBLY
DECORATED TROPHIES. PO-
LI PHILO TELLS OF THE MYST-
ERIOUS WAY IN WHICH THEY
OFFERED THE DIVINE ORNAM-
MENTS TO WHICH CUPID WAS
SEATED ON THE TRIUMPHAL
VEHICLE AND POLIA AND
POLI PHILO FOLLOWED BOUND
TOGETHER; AND THEY CAME
WITH GREAT POMP TO THE
GATE OF THE MARVELLOUS
AMPHITHEATRE. HE DES-
CRIBES FULLY ITS EXTERIOR
AND INTERIORS.
POLIA AND POLIPHILO ENTER AN AMPHETH-EATRE.

POLIPHILO DESCRIBES THE WONDERFUL ARTIFICE OF THE VENUS'S FOUNTAIN IN THE CENTER OF THE THEATER, AND HOW THE CURTAIN WAS TORN AND HE SAW THE DIVINE MOTHER IN HER MAJESTY; AND SHE SILENCED THE SINGING NYMPHS, ASSIGNING THREE OF THEM TO POLIA, AND THREE TO HIM. THEN CUPID WOUNDED THEM WITH THE WATER OF THE FOUNTAIN, AND POLIPHILO WAS RECLOTHED, LASTLY, WHEN MARS ARRIVED THEY WERE GIVEN LEAVE TO DEPART.
POLIA AND POLIPHILO
ENTER THE GARDEN
AND THE FOUNTAIN.

POLIPHILO TELLS OF HOW,
UPON THE ARRIVAL OF THE
WARRIOR, HE LEFT THE THEA-
TER TOGETHER WITH THE
WHOLE COMPANY AND THE
OTHER NYMPHS. THEY CAME
to a sacred fountain,
WHERE THE NYMPHS TELL OF
THE TOMB OF ADONIS, AND OF
HOW THE GODDESS WOULD
COME THERE AT THE ANNI-
VERSARY TO PERFORM THE
HOLY RITES; AND THEN CEAS-
ing FROM THEIR SONGS AND
DANCES, PERSUADE POLIA TO
TELL OF HER ORIGINS AND OF
HOW SHE CAME TO LOVE.
POLIA BEGINS HER VERSION OF THE STORY.

POLIPHILO BEGINS THE SECOND BOOK OF HIS HYPNERTOMACHIA, IN WHICH POLIA AND HE TELL ALTERNATELY THE FULL STORY OF HOW THEY FELL IN LOVE, AND THEIR VARIOUS ADVENTURES. THERE THE DIVINE POLIA TELLS OF HER NOBLE AND ANCIENT ORIGINS, AND HOW THE CITY OF TREVISO WAS BUILT BY HER ANCESTORS; HOW SHE IS DESCENDED FROM THAT FAMILY OF LELIA; AND HOW WHILE SHE WAS NEEDLESS AND UNAWARE, HER BELOVED POLIPHILO FEEL IN LOVE WITH HER.