

“A KIND OF *NEW RENAISSANCE*”:
EDWARD BURNE-JONES, WILLIAM MORRIS, AND
THE *HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI*

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On 18 August 1866 William Allingham, who had invited Edward Burne-Jones and his family to join him for a holiday at Lymington on the south coast of England, noted that, although “Ned does not paint down here..., he occupies himself, when in the mood, with designs for the Big Book of Stories in Verse by [William] Morris [*The Earthly Paradise*], and has done several from Cupid and Psyche; also pilgrims going to Rome, and others,” adding: “he founds his style in ... old Woodcuts, especially those in [Francesco Colonna’s] *Hypnerotomachia*, of which he has a fine copy. His work in general, and that of Morris too, might perhaps be called a kind of *New Renaissance*” (140). In her account of this passage in her 1975 biography of Burne-Jones, Penelope Fitzgerald speculates that his “fine copy” of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* “was probably supplied by Morris’s new friend Frederick Ellis, a dealer in manuscripts and rare books” and, in due course, the publisher of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), to whose shop in London Morris had taken him some “two years earlier” (107-08). “What edition ... of it Ned had remains a puzzle,” writes Fitzgerald, surmising that, because Morris was “a great bibliophile,” Burne-Jones “could hardly have been allowed to take a copy of the original Aldine Press edition of 1499 on a seaside holiday” (108). In fact, the “puzzle” has since been solved: Burne-Jones’s copy of the *Hypnerotomachia* is held by the Houghton Library at Harvard University; it is a “fine copy” of the original Aldine Press edition of 1499. An inscription on its flyleaf reads, “Edward Burne-Jones from William Morris, Red House, Upton, Kent.”¹ Although the book was Morris’s gift to Burne-Jones, Morris also had access to a copy of the nearly identical second edition of 1545,² and, as will be argued here, drew upon the *Hypnerotomachia* in the summer of 1869 to write “The Story of Acontius and Cydippe,” one of the last tales in *The Earthly Paradise* to be completed. An examination of the presence of the *Hypnerotomachia* in works by Burne-Jones and Morris promises to broaden and add specificity to our existing understanding of how