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## Codex Atlanticus

Carol Hanley

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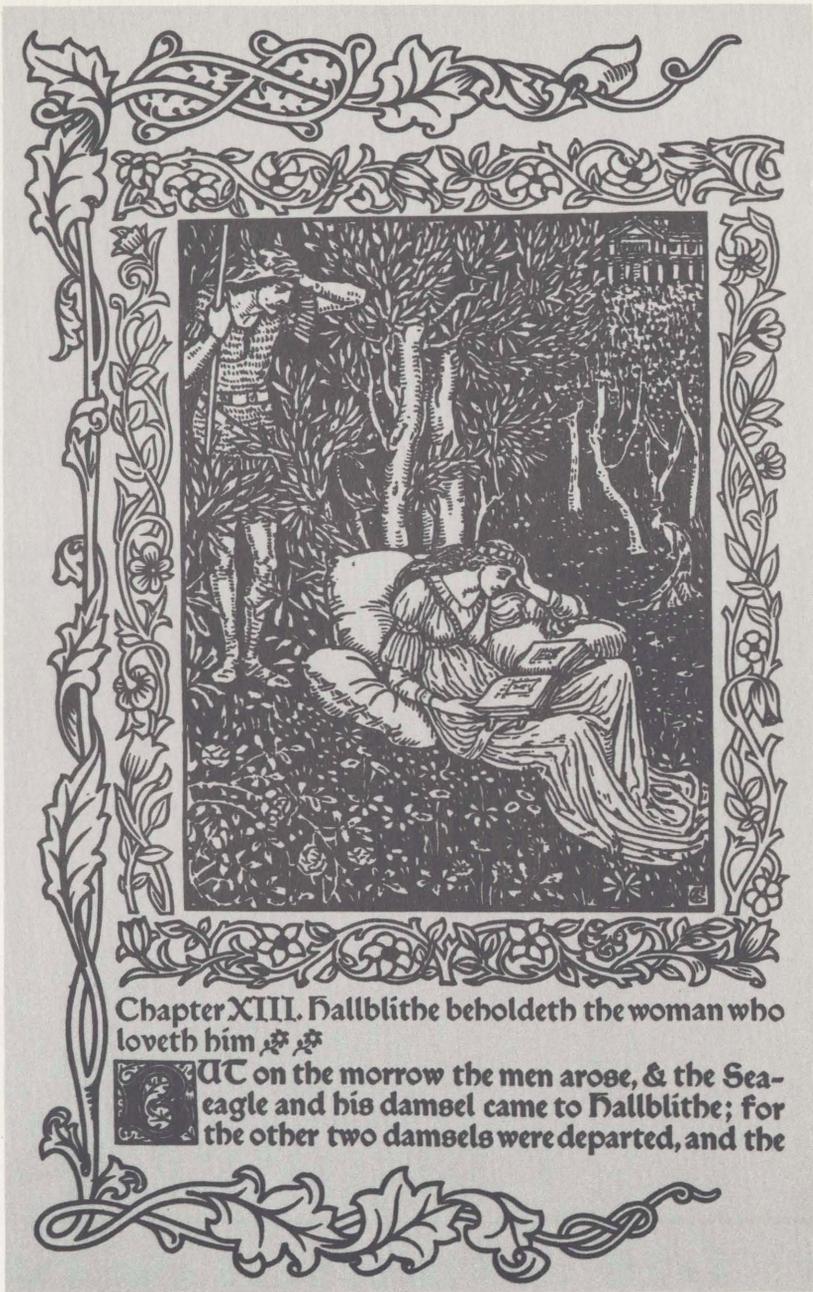
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Chapter XIII. Hallblithe beholdeth the woman who loveth him ❀ ❀

**W**AT on the morrow the men arose, & the Sea-eagle and his damsel came to Hallblithe; for the other two damsels were departed, and the

William Morris, *The Glittering Plain*, p. 84.

# THE COURIER

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## Codex Atlanticus

by Carol Hanley

The gift of the *Codex Atlanticus* to the George Arents Research Library by the Class of 1912 and Chester Soling is a generous gesture of scholastic importance. Publishers are the Johnson Reprint Corporation, a subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Centro Editoriale Giunti, of Florence.

The *Codex* is a collation of sections from many of Leonardo Da Vinci's notebooks, compiled by Pompeo Leoni, a sixteenth century sculptor who came to acquire them through the descendants of Leonardo's devoted disciple, Francesco Melzi. It is unfortunate that Melzi did little by way of organizing and editing the notebooks, so long in his possession, or took no steps to preserve this rich legacy for posterity. Upon his death in 1570, his treasures were sold at random by his family. It is also unfortunate that Melzi himself did not undertake to write the memoirs of his relationship of twelve years with Leonardo. Perhaps if he had, a clearer picture of the man would have emerged from the many details which Melzi could have provided, instead of the veil of scholastic conjecturing and factual gaps through which we now know him.

According to a French document in the *Cabinet de L'Amateur* (1863, pp. 61-63) the Melzi heirs sold thirteen of Leonardo's notebooks to Pompeo Leoni (whose father was a pupil of Michelangelo), a sculptor in the service of King Philip II of Spain.<sup>1</sup> He wished to purchase these notebooks for Philip who was interested in art and fond of such curiosities, as the notebooks were no doubt considered. In the seventeenth century, c.1622, Galeaz Arconati bought the *Codex Atlanticus*, as it was called because of its vast subject range, from Polidoro Calchi, Leoni's heir, for 300 ducats. He retained the volumes, refusing to sell them even though many generous offers were made to him. Since 1636, the *Codex Atlanticus* has been a part of the Ambrosian Library in Milan. "The explicit deed of gift may be seen, translated into French in the *Cabinet de L'Amateur*, 1861, pp. 53-59."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Background information for this section was obtained from J. P. Richter's *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1970, Vol. II, pp. 480-81.

<sup>2</sup>Richter, Vol. II, p. 481.

The notebooks of Leonardo were arranged into this massive scrapbook of twelve volumes by Leoni while he was in Spain towards the end of the sixteenth century, probably the last decade.<sup>3</sup> He dismembered Leonardo's notebooks in an attempt to put these widely diversified volumes into some kind of subject order. But, as Kenneth Clark writes of them in his *Leonardo Da Vinci*, "[They] are like the result of a Chinese examination in which, as we are told, the examinee is placed in a room alone and asked to write down all he knows; and in part they are little more than commonplace books — selections from his reading. . .".<sup>4</sup> With that as a consideration it gives us an idea of the complex maze of the man's thoughts which probably confronted Leoni in his self-appointed position as editor of these volumes. Besides that, and that alone would make one feel rather hesitant to undertake a project of such magnitude, there is the consideration of Leonardo's vivid imagination. One wonders at Leoni's thoughts about his various inventions and scientific experiments which cover a wide technical area for Leonardo's time. Unfortunately, we do not know much about Leoni himself or the extent of his educational background.

To further complicate matters in Leoni's undertaking, there is Leonardo's use of mirror script. To scholars of all ages this has presented difficulties in understanding the notebooks and is the basis of interesting theories about Leonardo's temperament which have become part of the legend surrounding his mysterious and enigmatic personality. One of the most intriguing is that this manner of writing is characteristic of a secretive individual who wishes to guard his ideas and accumulative knowledge from other men's eyes. This assumption, however, seems far from the truth. Leonardo often lamented the disorganized state of his notebooks, and it was a great trial to him that he never had enough time to work them out of their deplorable state of confusion.<sup>5</sup> Being left handed may have made this script more comfortable. It probably suited his highly individualized experimental approach towards all facets of his work. He was a man of complex amusements and this perhaps was one of them.

The subjects encompassed by the *Codex* deal primarily with Leonardo's interest in the sciences. They include designs for military weapons, defense techniques for fortresses, many mechanical and geometric drawings, scientific experiments, questions and theories on weather conditions, architectural plans and designs, and many of his inventions. But the *Codex* is not devoid of

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<sup>3</sup>In his Introduction to *Leonardo Da Vinci Fragments at Windsor Castle From the Codex Atlanticus*, London, Phaidon Press Ltd., 1957, p. 11, Carlo Pedretti offers between 1582 and 1590 as the possible dates for Leoni's acquiring the notebooks from the Melzi family.

<sup>4</sup>Clark, Kenneth, *Leonardo Da Vinci*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1958, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Clark, p. 65. Also see, Pamela Taylor, *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, New York, Plume Books, 1971, p. 10.

his artistic pursuits. Among the myriad of subjects scattered throughout the notebooks — prophecies, jokes, fables, miscellaneous writings — are many important passages of the *Trattato della Pittura*, one of the most important literary works ever done by Leonardo. The *Trattato* was the only literary work of Leonardo's which Melzi attempted to edit from the gleanings of various non-conjunctive manuscripts. It is not found in its entirety in any one manuscript or notebook. To this day it is not in any specific order, yet manages in its confusion to cover a wide area in the philosophy of painting and of technique in the Renaissance. The writing of a treatise of this type was not an unusual occurrence during this period, for many eminent painters and intellectuals proffered all-encompassing theories about the many facets of art. Leonardo codified rules for the artist, in the overall areas of: 1) the nature of painting, 2) the science of painting, 3) studio practice, and gives his personal feelings on diverse aspects of being a painter and indication of his personal tastes.<sup>6</sup> Leonardo devoted almost as many words to his treatise and the subject of painting as he applied brush strokes to create his paintings. We have Melzi's initiative to thank for the saving of this important document, for it is through his devoted efforts in meticulously going through the notebooks that the *Trattato* comes to light at all.

The *Codex Atlanticus* originally had another volume of drawings assembled by Pompeo Leoni which is now part of the Windsor Castle collection. According to Carlo Pedretti's provenance of the Windsor volume it was separated from the major collection upon Leoni's death. Don Juan d'Espina acquired two of the original volumes and though he would not sell them during his lifetime, they are noted by Constantine Huyghens in the British Royal Collection in 1690.<sup>7</sup>

The enigma and mystery surrounding Leonardo today is probably the same as that noted by his contemporaries. He was a solitary figure, enveloped in the realm of his own imagination of which his notebooks present an accurate image.

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<sup>6</sup>Clark, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup>Pedretti, p. 28. For further information on the problem of the drawings at Windsor Castle see A. H. Scott-Elliot, "The Pompeo Leoni Volume of Leonardo Drawings at Windsor," *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. XCVIII, pp. 11-17.