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LANDSCAPE WITH DEATH AND APOLLO

_The Hour Glass_ (School of Giorgione)
The Phillips Collection, Washington DC

Among the treasures of the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C. is a small (12 x 19.5 cm, oil on panel) Venetian painting from the early Cinquecento, currently catalogued as _The Hour Glass_ (formerly _The Astrologer_) and attributed to the boyhood (or school) of Giorgione (Figure 1). While its subject has been discussed in terms mostly of Orphic allegory, it is a mythical narrative (istoria, poesia) based on a poetic invention (invenzione) drawn from Euripides' tragicomedy of _Alcestis._

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Of its two central seated male figures, the one on the left holding the hourglass and dressed in a dark rose-coloured robe and cap clearly represents "Time," who directs the glass towards the other figure. The latter seems oblivious to the gesture: a garlanded musician in long white gown and sandals who is playing on a white lira da bracchio. The pair are discovered in the centre of a meadow bordered by shrubs and trees, and a substantial villa can be seen behind on the right. Between and right behind them in the middle distance is a lake with a tower and bridge placed on its far shore. Farther beyond at the foot of a snow-capped mountain lies a town, towards which a road crosses the bridge and winds to the left. The right slope of that same mountain meets the left slope of a second, framing a setting sun, parts of an alpine range that disappears into the mist.4

Who then is Time's counterpart, this nonchalant musician? The white robe, sandals, and garland are clues, as is a little buck seen emerging behind him. And in an underdrawing revealed by x-radiography (Figure 2) there was a second deer as well, a doe, but now painted over by the hour-glass.5 These images have been used to identify the musician as Orpheus, the mythical Thracian singer who could charm wild beasts,

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5 Anderson (1997) 120.
trees, and inhabitants of the underworld with his lyre, but came to a tragic end. The singer in this painting, however, disregards Time as he plays on. It could also be significant that the hourglass is aligned vertically with the tower. (In the underdrawing it also stood on a pedestal.)

Jaynie Anderson (1997) lists some earlier allegories attributed to the Hourglass: Father Time as harbinger of death, Chronos and Apollo as Time and Music, and "Orpheus, the musician, ... playing in defiance of the hourglass, indicating that by virtue of music he will survive death and time" (Sheard, 1978). Angela Voss (2001) sees an astrological allegory of "Father Time and Orpheus," associating it with Marsilio Ficino's astrological writings and translation of the Orphic Hymns:

Father Time and Orpheus carries a message of far greater import than the depiction of a popular myth. It is telling us that when Saturn and the Sun, the two orders of earth and heaven, meet in the diligence and desire of the Orphic singer, Saturn becomes transformed and reveals its hidden gold. It is telling us that the right music, played at the right time, can lead to the salvation of our soul.

Such hypothetical allegories do not seem to account for other aspects of the iconography of the Hourglass, the limitation that seems to require a different approach to its riddle. So let us attempt a literary hypothesis instead, which may also point to a verifiable allegory, and suppose that the unknown Venetian artist may have based the composition on a narrative invention from Euripides' tragicomedy Alcestis. Such an invenzione (istoria, poesia) could account not only for those two (possibly allegorical) figures, but also for the pastoral landscape extending behind them: the deer, sun, meadow, villa, tower, lake, mountains, and setting sun. The theory of invenzione for painters finds its classic commendation in the De pictura (1435) / Della pittura (1436) of Leon Battista Alberti. A veiling a narrative might be confirmed for the

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Hourglass, a poetic device discussed by Dante and Boccaccio.  

Time as harbinger of death is in fact supported by that alignment of the hour-glass with the tower, which suggests suicide. To cite three literary examples. In Luke’s gospel mention of the collapse of a tower that killed eighteen persons at Siloam leads to a discussion of retribution for sins. They, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? (Vulg:) “sicut illi decem et octo supra quos cecidit turris in Siloam et occidit eos putatis quia et ipsi debitores fuerunt praeter omnes homines habitantes in Hierusalem.” In Aristophanes’s Frogs Dionysus tells

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his slave Xanthias that the fastest way to Hades from Athens is from a tower in the Kerameikos. In Apuleius' tale of *Cupid and Psyche* (mythical centerpiece of *The Golden Ass*) Psyche is trying to escape the torments inflicted by her mother-in-law Venus and to find Cupid, but is delayed by her errand to Hades to fetch some of Proserpina's perfume for the jealous goddess. In despair she contemplates suicide from a tower along the way; but the tower breaks into speech with sympathy and advice for her. An engraving by the "Master of the Die" (Figure 3) shows Psyche receiving a pyxis for the perfume from Venus (right) and kindly advice from the feminine spirit of the tower (centre), and then descending (left) to Proserpina's palace.

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14 Luke 13:4 (AV)."Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew
15 Arist. *Frogs* 130-133
place of her husband\textsuperscript{16} (Hercules will later wrestle her away from Death and restore her veiled and unrecognized to Admetus\textsuperscript{17}). The Prologue (1-76) is partly an angry dialogue between Apollo (god of healing, prophecy, and music) and Thanatos (Death), who arrives to collect Alcestis. Apollo sides with Alcestis and Admetus, who treated the god with hospitality and respect while serving the sentence Zeus imposed for slaying his Cyclopes, that he work as a servant of Admetus (7-11). Foreknowing Admetus was fated to die, Apollo plied the Fates with wine for their concession that a member of his family might die in place of him (11b-14). Admetus' elderly parents refused, leaving just Alcestis. Joys of life and motherhood were dear to her, but she agreed (15-18). As the play opens, Alcestis and her servants are engaged in ritual preparations for her coming death. Apollo cannot remain in the presence of dying, but he lingers long enough to mock Death as \textit{hiereus thanontôn}, "Priest of the Dead" (25). Death rages at him (28-30), and when fair words prove vain Apollo predicts that someone will take his prize from him (64-71), i.e., Heracles, who will later describe his physical struggle for possession of Alcestis against Death to Admetus (1140). In one stasimon of the play (569-605), the chorus hymns that hospitable realm where Pythian Apollo of the Beautiful Lyre (\textit{Pythius Eulyras Apollôn}: 570) had watched over Admetus' flocks (573-574), piping them rustic mating songs (575-577). His presence had ensured a peaceable kingdom where dappled lynxes (575) and with a pride of tawny lions (580-581) rejoiced at the music, and a spotted fawn left its pine covert on slender ankles to dance with joy (583). Admetus' hearth was by the fair-flowing waters of Lake Boibe, with his realm extending to the misty country of the Molossians where the sun sets (588-596).

The iconography of \textit{The Hour Glass} reflects the details of the choral ode. Apollo in a trailing white robe sits playing his \textit{lira}\textsuperscript{18} as the little buck emerges behind him, charmed by the song. In the distance are the sloping mountains framing the sunset over Pherae and Lake Boebe (568-596). The sun is a symbol of Apollo of course, but Euripides also


\textsuperscript{17} "The Master of the Die" (flor. c. 1530 - c.1560) signed prints with a small die, or with a "BV". Suzanne Boorsch, ed. \textit{The Illustrated Bartsch 29} [formerly 15.2]. "Italian Masters of the Sixteenth Century." New York: Abaris Books, 1982. 218 (62-II [213]). Kenney’s commentary (1990) \textit{ad loc}. (Lat. turris is feminine).

uses it as a metaphor for Alcestis' passion and *joie de vivre*. The villa to the right belongs to Admetus. Here is that ode in the Aldington translation:

O house of a bountiful lord, 568
Ever open to numerous guests,
The God of Pytho,
Apollo of the beautiful lyre,
Deigned to dwell in you
And to live a shepherd in your lands!
On the slope of the hillsides
He played melodies of mating
On the Pipes of Pan to his herds. 577

And the dappled lynxes fed with them
In joy at your singing;
From the wooded vale of Orthrys
Came a yellow troop of lions;
To the sound of your lyre, O Phoebus,
Danced the dappled fawn
Moving on light feet
Beyond the high-crested pines,
Charmed by your sweet singing. 587

He dwells in a home most rich in flocks
By the lovely moving Boebian lake.
At the dark stabling-place of the Sun
He takes the sky of the Molossians
As a bourne to his ploughing of fields,
To the soils of his plains;
He bears sway
As far as the harbourless
Coast of the Aegean Sea,
As far as Pelion. 596

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20 The robe recalls ancient representations of *Apollo citharoedus*. 
The painter has transposed Euripides' encounter between Apollo and Death from the palace of Admetus to his pastures, evoking those years of respected servitude to him. The Time-Death equation finds literal confirmation in the final scene of the play, after Admetus has recognized the baseness of his accepting Alcestis' sacrifice and the consequences to him of losing her. When Heracles leads in the silent, veiled, living figure of Alcestis, he exacts a playful revenge on Admetus for a well-meaning deception of his guest, by teasing him into breaking his rash vow of celibacy, and taking the mysterious, strangely arousing woman into his house. Heracles offers him no remedy for his present grief except cold, rhetorical consolation:

"Time will heal your misery, though burning still."

_chronos malaxei, nun d' eth' hébaskei kakon._ (1085)

Admetus responds from his new, Apollo-given self-knowledge (_Gnôthi sauton_):

"You may well speak of Time – if Time be Death."

_chronon legois an, ei chronos to katthanein._ (1086)

In the Hourglass also Time is Death, the equation drawn (likely with humanist input) from the _Alcestis_, with the hostile dialogue in the prologue grafted into the pastoral landscape of the choral ode. The hourglass challenges in vain the providential power of Apollo to bless that noble couple with life, healing, and self-knowledge. Sacrifice, weakness, and grief are cancelled by Heracles' loyalty and strength.

In conclusion, then, let us return briefly to the allegory. It is certain that the robed musician in this little painting is not Orpheus but Apollo, who represents the power of Music over Time and Death. The _locus classicus_ for the theme is _Odes_ 3.30, where Horace declares that his verse and name will outlast bronzes and pyramids against weather and _innumerabilis annorum series et fuga temporum_ ("the measureless succession of years and flight of the seasons"). Part of the poet (_pars mei_) will escape death, _Libitina_ (6), and his praise with increase through Rome and Italy by generations to come (7b -14a). So Horace invites his muse Melpomene to crown his locks with Delphic laurel (15b -16):

_mihi Delphica
lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam._

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21 Kilpatrick (1986) note 18 below.
The poet can likewise confer fame on a beautiful mistress or great and virtuous friends. Which brings us back finally to Alcestis. In an earlier stasimon in the play, Euripides' chorus foresaw an enduring fame in lyric song for Alcestis (445-453):

- Often shall the Muses' servants
- Sing of you to the seven-toned
- Lyre-shell of the mountain tortoise,
- And praise you with mourning songs at Sparta
- When the circling season
- Brings back the month Carneius
- Under the nightlong upraised moon,
- And in bright glad Athens.
- Such a theme do you leave by your death
- For the music of singers!

Bibliography


23 Sheard (1978) 345: "Orpheus [sic] plays in defiance of the hourglass."

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