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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).<sup>1</sup> While its subject has been discussed in terms mostly of Orphic allegory,<sup>2</sup> it is a mythical narrative (*istoria, poesia*) based on a poetic invention (*invenzione*) drawn from Euripides' tragicomedy of *Alcestis*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Figure 1. *The Hour Glass*: School of Giorgione. Phillips Collection, Inv. 0791. Oil on panel. 12 x 19.5 cm. Duncan Phillips, *The Phillips Collection Catalogue. A Museum of Modern Art and its Sources*. Washington, 1952. Frontispiece (Plate 1) 41.

<sup>2</sup> Terisio Pignatti. *Giorgione. Complete Edition*. trans. Clovis Whitfield. London: Phaidon, 1971. 131, 143, Plate 140; Robert C. Cafritz, Lawrence Gowing, David Rosand. *Places of Delight. The Pastoral Landscape*. Washington DC: The Phillips Collection In Association With the National Gallery of Art, 1988. Figure 32 ("The Hour Glass"), 56 ("...typological pairing, astrologer and musician"); Jaynie Anderson. *Giorgione. The Painter of 'Poetic Brevity.'* Including Catalogue Raisonné. Paris, New York: Flammarion, 1997. 119-120, 345 [1<sup>st</sup> French edition: *Giorgione. Peintre de la Brevité Poétique*, 1996]; W. S. Sheard. "The Widener Orpheus: Attribution, Type, Invention." In *Collaboration in Italian Art*. Eds. W. S. Sheard, J. J. Paoletti. New Haven and New York, 1978. 189-232.

<sup>3</sup> The 1494 Florentine *editio princeps* of Euripides (incomplete) by Ianus Lascaris does include *Alcestis*. The 1503 Venetian edition of all the plays (except *Electra*) was published in 2 volumes at the Aldine Press in Venice: *Euripidis tragoediae septendecim ex quibus quaedam habent commentaria, & sunt hae: Hecuba, Orestes, Phoenissae, Medea, Hippolytus, Alcestis, Andromache, Supplices, Iphigeneia in Aulide, Iphigeneia in Tauris, Rhesus, Troades, Bacchae, Cyclops, Heraclidae, Helena, Ion. Venetis: Apud Aldum, Februario, 1503*. 175. See F. W. Hall. *A Companion to Classical Texts*. Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1913. 234-235. The subject of *Alcestis* was common in ancient art. The relatively few modern painters of death of *Alcestis* include F. H. Füger (1751-1818) and P. Peyron (1744-1794).



Figure 1: *The Hour Glass* (Image: Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.)

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 braccio*. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> These images have been used to identify the musician as Orpheus, the mythical Thracian singer who could charm wild beasts,

<sup>4</sup> George Martin Richter. "Lost and Rediscovered Works by Giorgione." Part I. *Art in America*. 30 (1942): 142 (141-157): "A little-known picture, perhaps representing an Allegory of Time . . . with the beautiful sunset in the background . . . . If actually by Giorgione . . . [it] would belong to his earliest efforts."

<sup>5</sup> Anderson (1997) 120.

trees, and inhabitants of the underworld with his lyre, but came to a tragic end.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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*.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> A veiling a narrative might be confirmed for the

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson (1997) 119, 345.

<sup>7</sup> Angela Voss. *Father Time and Orpheus*. Oxford. Abzu Press, 2003.13, 17.

<sup>8</sup> The 1503 *editio princeps* of Euripides' plays was published in 2 volumes at the Aldine Press in Venice: *Euripidis tragoediae septendecim ex quibus quaedam habent commentaria, & sunt hae: Hecuba, Orestes, Phoenissae, Medea, Hippolytus, Alcestis, Andromache, Supplices, Iphigeneia in Aulide, Iphigeneia in Tauris, Rhesus, Troades, Bacchae, Cyclops, Heraclidae, Helena, Ion. Venetiis: Apud Aldum, Februario, 1503*. Modern paintings of the choice or death of Alcestis or her dying include those of F. H. Füger (1751-1818) and P. Peyron (1744-1794).

<sup>9</sup> Leon Battista Alberti. *Della Pittura*. Edizione critica a cura di Luigi Malle. Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1950. 105 (3. 54); Charles Dempsey. *The Portrayal of Love. Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*. Princeton UP, 1992. 25-30.

*Hourglass*, a poetic device discussed by Dante and Boccaccio.<sup>10</sup>

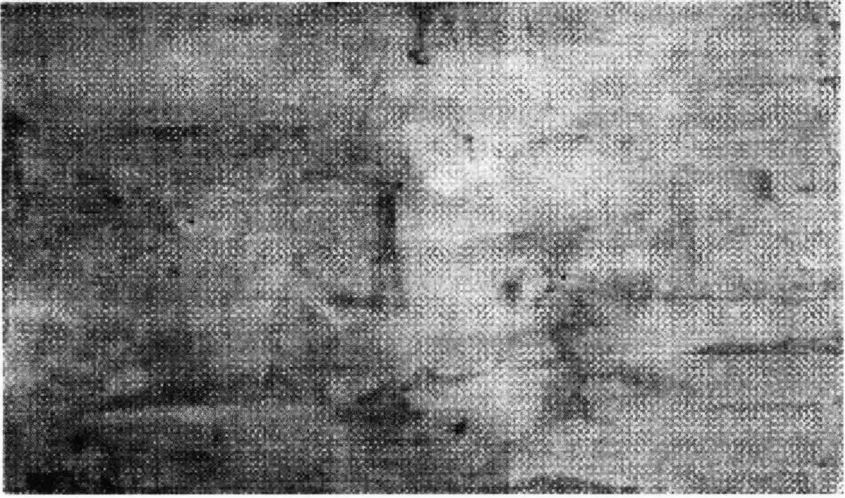


Figure 2: Infrared reflectograph of *The Hour Glass*  
(Image: The Phillips Collection / Anderson)

Time as harbinger of death<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> them, 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

<sup>10</sup> The 1503 *editio princeps* of Euripides' plays was published in 2 volumes at the Aldine Press in Venice: *Euripidis tragoediae septendecim ex quibus quaedam habent commentaria, & sunt hae: Hecuba, Orestes, Phoenissae, Medea, Hippolytus, Alcestis, Andromache, Supplices, Iphigeneia in Aulide, Iphigeneia in Tauris, Rhesus, Troades, Bacchae, Cyclops, Heraclidae, Helena, Ion.* Venetiis: Apud Aldum, Februario, 1503. Modern paintings of the choice or death of Alcestis or her dying include those of F. H. Füger (1751-1818) and P. Peyron (1744-1794).

<sup>11</sup> Leon Battista Alberti. *Della Pittura*. Edizione critica a cura di Luigi Malle. Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1950. 105 (3. 54); Charles Dempsey. *The Portrayal of Love. Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent*. Princeton UP, 1992. 25-30.

<sup>12</sup> Dante. *Convivio* 2. 1; Boccaccio. *Genealogie Deorum* 14. 7. Richard H. Lansing, Teodolinda Barolini. *The Dante Encyclopedia*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities. vol. 1836. New York, 2000. 26-34.

his slave Xanthias that the fastest way to Hades from Athens is from a tower in the Kerameikos.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 3. *Psyche Leaves for the Underworld*

"The Master of the Die." (Image: The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University)

Euripides' *Alcestis* dramatizes the devotion and self-sacrifice of Alcestis, wife of King Admetus of Pherae, who had agreed to die in

<sup>13</sup> Anderson (1997) 345.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 13:4 (AV). "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew

<sup>15</sup> Arist. *Frogs* 130-133

place of her husband<sup>16</sup> (Heracles will later wrestle her away from Death and restore her veiled and unrecognized to Admetus<sup>17</sup>). 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 *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 (*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 *The Hour Glass* reflects the details of the choral ode. Apollo in a trailing white robe sits playing his *lira*<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> G.A. 6. 17-19. See E. J. Kenney's text and commentary: *Apuleius. Cupid and Psyche*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. Psyche had earlier tidied up the shrine of Ceres, winning her tacit sympathy.

<sup>17</sup> "The Master of the Die" (flor. c. 1530 - c.1560) signed prints with a small die, or with a "BV". Suzanne Boorsch, ed. *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) *ad loc.* (Lat. *turris* is feminine).

<sup>18</sup> For advice to painters on literary *invenzione*, see Leon Battista Alberti [1404-1472]. *Della Pittura*. Edizione critica a cura di Luigi Malle. Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1950. 105 (3. 54). Latin version (ms) 1435; Italian 1436.

uses it as a metaphor for Alcestis' passion and *joie de vivre*.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 596

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<sup>19</sup> Produced in 438 BC. Modern text and commentary, A.M. Dale, ed. *Euripides Alcestis*. Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1954. For other interpretations of the play see *inter al.* John R. Wilson, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretation of Euripides' Alcestis*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall Spectrum Books, 1968; Elise P. Garrison. *Groaning Tears. Ethical and Dramatic Aspects of Suicide in Greek Drama*. Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1995. This writer's views of the play appeared as "When a God Contrives. Divine Providence in *Alcestis* and *Ajax*." *Dionysius* 10 (1986): 3-20. Also D. J. Conacher, ed.. *Alcestis*. English & Greek. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988. There is a painting of Alcestis as seen at the moment of her offer, by Friedrich Heinrich Füger (1751-1818) <<http://hsa.brown.edu/~maicar/Alcestis.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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' hēbaskēi kakon.* (1085)

Admetus responds from his new, Apollo-given self-knowledge (*Gnōthi 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.<sup>22</sup>

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 *innumerable 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):

*mihī Delphica*  
*lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam.*

<sup>21</sup> Kilpatrick (1986) note 18 below.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Aldington. *Euripides' Alcestis*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1930.



The poet can likewise confer fame on a beautiful mistress or great and virtuous friends.<sup>23</sup> 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!<sup>24</sup>

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

<sup>24</sup> This view of Alcestis' dramatic motivation is supported by a Platonic text familiar to Renaissance humanists, the *Symposium* (179b). For the working-out of Apollo's therapy, see Ross S. Kilpatrick. "When a God Contrives: Divine Providence in *Alcestis* and *Ajax*." *Dionysius* 10 (1986): 3-20. I also argue that the *Aldobrandini Wedding* fresco (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) in the Vatican is Euripidean in invention, representing the dying Alcestis in her chamber: "The Early Augustan *Aldobrandini Wedding* in the Vatican: A Quatercentenary Reappraisal (1601-2001)." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*. 47 (2002): 19-32.

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