

## Simona Cohen

### **Tempus Edax Rerum, Time and Demise of Human Achievement in Renaissance Allegory**

The concept of Time, unlike that of Death, was not personified in Christian art before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The sense of temporal flux was transmitted in medieval moralistic themes relating to man's fate, such as the *Wheel of fortune* or the *Triumph of Death*, and rarely in the classically derived Kairos-Occasio. Artists began to personify Time in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, in illustrations to Petrarch's *Trionfo del Tempo*, written almost 100 years earlier, but their painted image of Time did not derive from Petrarch's text. The development of this image and its conflation with the iconography of Death is the theme of this paper.

Petrarch wrote the series of six *Trionfi* in various stages of his life, between 1340 and 1374. Following the *Trionfo dell'Amore* and the *Trionfo della Castità* Petrarch wrote his *Trionfo della Morte*, mourning the death of Laura in the plague of 1348. The *Trionfo della Fama* was fourth in the series of *Trionfi* but, in mid life, as Petrarch felt time was escaping, it gained new value. His writings increasingly dwelt on the destructive power of time and his sense of being swept by its flow towards death. This paper concentrates on the iconographic development of illustrations to the *Trionfo del Tempo* and the *Trionfo della Morte*, in order to demonstrate the interrelation of concepts and their visual portrayal.

In his study of *Father Time*, Panofsky claimed that the early *Trionfo del Tempo* illustrations portrayed "the mighty relentless destroyer imagined by Petrarch" and that the prototype for this figure was the classical deity Kronos-Saturn. It will be shown that neither of these assumptions is correct. Petrarch assigned to Time various characteristics but no real physiognomy. In Florentine illustrations of the 1440s and 50s an essential conception of time was first given anthropomorphic form as an aged man with wings and crutches borne on a chariot led by two stags, often carrying a world globe or armillary sphere and framed by *putti* carrying the four elements. Petrarch's concept of Time as a powerful destroyer was not expressed by illustrators before the sixteenth century. Furthermore, the early figure of an decrepit old man bent over his crutches or carrying an hourglass did not express Petrarch's concept and was not based on a classical prototype.

In the *Trionfo della Morte* Petrarch described "*una donna involta in veste negra*" (a woman shrouded in a dress of black) to personify Death. The feminine form of *La morte* suggests a woman, but Petrarch's illustrators were familiar with fourteenth century prototypes for both female and male gendered variants of the theme. The earliest attribute of Death in the *Trionfo* illustrations was the scythe that had traditionally defined the metaphor of Death as a reaper.

The transition of the Time image from a passive, benign figure to an ominous figure devouring his children first appeared in 1468 but was repeated in print only in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although the iconography was adopted from the traditional image of Saturn, the idea was based on the literary metaphor *Tempus edax rerum*.

In the fifteenth century the association of time imagery with books and other attributes of scholarship alluded to the humanist's awareness of time, but in the later 1400s most illustrators preferred to demonstrate the effects of time either through cyclic images that emphasized cosmic regeneration or landscapes with ruins that illustrated the corruption and decay of civilization.

The earliest visual conflation of Time and Death in *Trionfi* illustrations was represented by the hourglass motif, previously associated with Temperance to indicate that measurement and utilization of time was a virtue. In the fifteenth century, Time made its debut with an hourglass, while Temperance adopted a mechanical clock. The regularity of clockwork became a simile for the regularity of man's body and spirit when ruled by reason, but the hourglass illustrated the brevity of one's life and coincided with religious and secular

orientations towards a practical approach to time. Renaissance Time also inherited his scythe from the mythological tradition of Kronos-Saturn, who was both a god of agriculture and a potent destroyer. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the analogy between Time and Death and the interchangeability of their attributes constituted an inevitable conflation of two separate, albeit parallel, evolutions. Petrarch repeatedly paired Time, as a destroyer, with Death in his final chapter, the *Trionfo dell'Eternità*.

In Italian illustrations of the mid 16<sup>th</sup> c. Time was transformed into a virile made nude. In view of his close association with Death, it is not surprising to find the image of Time invading the Garden of Eden or violently threatening the achievements and very existence of man.