The Iconography of Time in
The Winter's Tale

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Résumé: Bien que les spectateurs modernes connaissent le personage du Temps, ils ignorent en général les détails de son apparence, ainsi que les mises en scène du Temps dans les spectacles publiques, le drame et l'art de l'Angleterre à l'époque de Shakespeare. En restituant l'aspect visuel du Père Temps dans Le Conte d'hiver, nous pouvons comprendre la gamme de symbolisme communiqué par ce personage et mieux apprécier sa signification pour la pièce shakespearienne.

Probably no personification was more familiar to Jacobean playgoers than the figure whom Shakespeare brings to the stage in The Winter's Tale: Time. His presence is in keeping with the special attention Shakespeare gives to visual effects in the late plays, when he increasingly creates characters out of mythological figures, and when his company has available the resources of the indoor Blackfriars theater as well as the Globe. Father Time is not unfamiliar to modern audiences accustomed to seeing his image at New Year's celebrations. But we have largely lost the visual language of Shakespeare's culture, the symbolism that was the common property of his contemporaries. As a result, a modern playgoer is almost certainly unaware of the specifics of Time's appearance and of the contexts in which Time typically appeared in Elizabethan England. Fortunately, we have at hand sufficient materials to reconstruct what playgoers saw when Time walked onto Shakespeare's stage. That is, by using prints, paintings, and other artistic representations contemporary with Shakespeare, as well as evidence furnished by pageantry and drama, we are able to reconstruct the visual appearance of Time. By so doing and thereby coming to understand the range of symbolism

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conveyed by this figure, we can more fully appreciate the meaning of the spectacle, both for the ensuing dramatic action and for the entire play.

I

In Renaissance pageantry and art, personified Time is unremarkable: bald and bearded, he could be taken for almost any other aged man wearing classical robes. The features belonging to Time are chiefly three; they are specified by Thomas Dekker in Troia-Nova Triumphans, London Triumphing, the lord mayor’s pageant for 29 October 1612, and by Thomas Middleton in The Triumphs of Truth, the pageant for 29 October 1613, as scythe, hourglass, and wings.\(^1\) The scythe represents the destructive effects of transience; the hourglass is the visual metaphor of time’s passage; and the wings suggest our psychological sense of time’s rapidity. Despite the near ubiquity of these three accoutrements in Elizabethan-Jacobean England, they constitute a marked departure from classical representations. In antiquity time was conceived as “the divine principle of eternal and inexhaustible creativeness,” a concept symbolized by the ouroboros, a snake swallowing its tail.\(^2\) This motif survives in some depictions of Petrarch’s Triumphs, where the ouroboros is held by Time, and in certain other pictures where it encircles Time’s arm, as on the engraved title page of Jean Chaumeau’s Histoire de Berry (Lyons, 1566).\(^3\) The ancients also conceived of time as kairos, “the brief decisive moment which marks a turning-point in the life of human beings,” and they represented this concept by a youth holding a balance.\(^4\) Personified Time in the Renaissance conveys the same sense of opportunity when he wears a forelock, meant to be seized by the aspirant at an auspicious moment,\(^5\) as he does on the title page of Lapis Philosophicus (Oxford, 1599) by John Case.\(^6\) Shakespeare evokes this sense of timeliness when Antonio, in Much Ado about Nothing, says, “he meant to take the present time by the top [i.e., the forelock]” (1.2.14–15).\(^7\)

As Erwin Panofsky has demonstrated, Time gained the hourglass, scythe (or sickle), and other symbols through a confusion: “the Greek expression for time, Chronos, was very similar to the name of Kronos (the Roman Saturn), oldest and most formidable of the gods.”\(^8\) Even in the ancient world the confusion is apparent. Cicero, for example, writes that “Saturn’s Greek name is Kronos, which is the same as chronos, a space of time.”\(^9\) An illustration in Vincenzo Cartari’s Le Vere e nove imagini de gli dei della antichi (1615) demonstrates the conflation: Saturn and Father Time stand side by side, both old and bearded.\(^10\) They could be identical twins,
except that Saturn holds a sickle (used to castrate his father) and a staff, while Time has wings and a winged crown.

The confusion between these two is also manifest in Ben Jonson’s *Hymenaei*, a masque performed 5 January 1606, where a marginal note claims that “Truth is feigned to be the daughter of Saturn, who indeed with the ancients was no other than Time, and so his name alludes, *Kronos*.” From this conflation Time became particularly identified with destruction and death. For instance, a character in *Respublica*, performed at the Christmas revels of 1553–54, calls Time “An auncient turner of houses upside downe, / and a comon consumer of cytie and towne” (ll. 1301–2). In Fulke Greville’s *Mustapha*, a closet drama written about 1595, Eternity tells personified Time: “your scithe mortall must to harme incline” (3rd act chorus, l. 142). Artists gave powerful form to the concept. A painting by Frans Francken II depicts a group of men fighting two personifications: Death aims several arrows at the combatants, while winged Time, hourglass atop his head, wields his scythe against them. More than any other single work, Petrarch’s *Triumphs* gave impetus to the concept of Time as destroyer. Personified in such a triumph, Time may possess a grotesque quality, as, for example, in Philips Galle’s print after Pieter Bruegel: Time rides in his vehicle while devouring a child, a clear sign of the confusion with ancient Kronos, or Saturn, who ate his offspring in order to forestall a prophecy that his children would overthrow him. Shakespeare alludes to the destructive nature of Time in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, when the prince speaks of “cormorant devouring Time” (1.1.4), and in *Measure for Measure*, when the duke cites “the tooth of time” (5.1.12). Time’s formidable teeth are the subject of Henry Peacham’s reminiscence: “I have seene time drawne by a painter standing upon an old ruine, winged, and with iron teeth.”

Depictions of Time exude a mood of melancholy, befitting a personification who presides over so much destruction and death. “How slowly does sad Time his feathers move!” writes Spenser in his *Epithalamion*. In *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly*, a masque performed 3 February 1611, Ben Jonson writes of “agèd Time” with “weary limbs” (ll. 312–13). And in Middleton’s *The World Tossed at Tennis*, apparently intended for performance as a masque, then revised for performance at a Bankside playhouse in 1620, a character observes, “See, Time himself comes weeping.” Time replies, “Who has more cause?” (l. 309), and he goes on to catalogue the toll of mutability. Michiel Coxcie, in a sixteenth-century print, depicts Time sitting dejectedly amid the ruin of classical buildings: old and bearded, Time has an hourglass and a crutch. Although never part of Time’s iconography
in antiquity, the crutch became common in the Renaissance, due to the conflation of Time and ancient Saturn. Time may even have two crutches, as he does in some illustrations of Petrarch’s *Triumphs*.20 In all of these pictures, the crutch symbolizes both advanced age and debility. A crutch may also, however, suggest Time’s seeming slowness: in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Claudio conveys his anxiety by saying, “Time goes on crutches till love have all his rites” (2.1.357–58).

II

In view of Time’s identification with mutability and death, Shakespeare’s personification in *The Winter’s Tale* may, as Robert M. Adam suggests, enter “in toga and sandals, with the shaggy locks and fierce scythe that he inherited from his cannibalistic predecessor Saturn/Chronos.”21 And yet Shakespeare’s Father Time makes no mention of a scythe. J. H. P. Pafford surmises that “as many emblematic figures of Time do not carry a scythe Shakespeare’s Time may not have had one.”22 Given the dramatic context, however, there would be nothing inappropriate about Time’s appearance with the implement for reaping. After all, the playgoers have just witnessed Antigonus pursued by a bear (3.3.58 s.d.), and in the same scene the Clown reports seeing the Sicilian ship go down at sea. Discovering the infant Perdita, the Shepherd reflects on the conjunction of death and life when he tells the Clown, “thou met’st with things dying, I with things new-born” (113–14).

With greater confidence, we can say that Shakespeare’s Time is old (4.1.10) and so probably bearded. He also has “wings” (4), symbolizing the swift passage of time. The personification, moreover, holds an hourglass. By employing this hand prop, Shakespeare’s figure resembles Time in other Elizabethan plays and pageants. For instance, at Harefield place in 1602, the queen witnessed a pageant featuring Time, who had blonde hair, wore a green robe, and carried an hourglass; there Time pays a conventional compliment, telling the queen that as long as he attends her, “my glasse runnes not: indeed it hathe bine stopt a longe time.”23 In *The Thracian Wonder*, a comedy performed ca. 1590–1600, Time makes a brief appearance, and although he spends only moments onstage and says not a word, he does perform an action: *Enter Time with an hourglass, sets it down, and exit* (1.3.15 s.d.).24 In Anthony Munday’s *Chruso-thriambos*, *The Triumphs of Gold*, the lord mayor’s pageant of 29 October 1611, Time has a somewhat larger role. Equipped with his ubiquitous hourglass, Munday’s Time turns it over,
saying, "As thus I turne my glasse to times of old, / So tune thine eares to what must now be told."25

Shakespeare’s Time resembles these other figures to the extent that he carries the same hourglass and he speaks in a way that evokes the personification of Elizabethan and Jacobean pageantry. That is, Time’s is not a supple blank verse, like that of other characters in The Winter’s Tale, but a stiffer poetry spoken in rhyme. So different is the speech of Time from the speech of other characters that Shakespeareans, especially earlier in the twentieth century, supposed that a less accomplished collaborator must have been responsible for the lines.

Having identified the physical features of Time, we need to ask what Shakespeare achieves by bringing the personification on stage. Erwin Panofsky suggests that the words defining Time’s function in the play are these: “I slide / O’er sixteen years” (4.1.5–6). Panofsky comments, “Sometimes the figure of Father Time is used as a mere device to indicate the lapse of months, years, or centuries, as in Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale.”26 Yet Shakespeareans have not been satisfied by this characterization of Time’s role. Pafford, for instance, argues that Time has a significance that transcends the brief scene in which he addresses the playgoers: “Time’s speech is not an interpolation but an integral part of the play.”27 If so, what does Time contribute? Pafford suggests that Time "gives information," and indeed he does. But this alone cannot account for Time’s presence on stage, for as Nevill Coghill demonstrates, the points Time cites — that sixteen years have elapsed, that Leontes "shuts himself" away in penitence, and that we are about to see Perdita and Florizel — “are clearly made in the scene immediately following.”28 If conveying information were his sole raison d’être, Time would be unnecessary. Shakespeare could simply have moved from the scene of Perdita’s discovery by the Shepherd to the colloquy between Camillo and Polixenes about “the penitent King” (4.2.6–7) and “a daughter of most rare note” (41–42).

In assessing Time’s purpose, let us consider the one prop we are certain he carries — an hourglass: “I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing / As you had slept between” (4.1.16–17). By upending the device, Father Time marks the chief division of the dramatic action: we are about to move from a world of anxiety, suffering, and death to one of exuberance, joy, and new life. Paradoxically, this sharp transition masks an underlying similarity between the two halves of the play. William Blissett, who notes that The Winter’s Tale “is almost unique in the canon for its bilateral symmetry,” enumerates some of the parallels:
in the first half Leontes offends and Polixenes is in a state of innocence, in the second Polixenes takes offense and Leontes is in a state of penitence; in the first, Camillo flees, Perdita is rejected, Paulina protests, and Hermione lies hidden as if in death; in the second, Camillo returns, Perdita is received, Paulina restores, and Hermione stands risen as if from death.²⁹

Because the two halves of Time's hourglass look identical, Ernest Schanzer observes, "it may not be fanciful to think that this fact enhances our sense of the similarity of the shape and structure of the two halves of The Winter's Tale."³⁰

The hourglass held in Father Time's hands has another and more specific implication for the king who has so cruelly treated his family, precipitating the death of his son, the abandonment of his daughter, and the sequestration of his wife. By his behavior, Leontes has violated humane impulses, codes of decorum, standards of civilized conduct. His is a display of imprudence and intemperance on an outrageous scale. In view of this excess, it is significant that the cardinal virtue of temperance was associated with devices for timekeeping in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. Lynn White points out, for instance, that manuscripts of L'Épitre d'Othéa (ca. 1400) are "embellished with pictures of Temperance adjusting a large mechanical clock" and that in a treatise of the virtues ca. 1470 personified Temperance has a clock on her head.³¹ The very word temperance seems to derive, ultimately, from the Latin tempus. Shakespeare makes the connection explicit when Hamlet defends himself against his mother's charge of "ecstasy": "Ecstasy? / My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time, / And makes as healthful music" (3.4.139–41). In another of his plays Shakespeare describes a character's intemperance by means of a clock. When King Richard II says, "now hath time made me his numb'ring clock" (5.5.50), he is not only expressing his own sense of victimization but also, implicitly, conceding his past intemperance.

The association between temperance and time is not limited to mechanical clocks. Lynn White notes that a fresco in the Palazzo Publico, Siena, depicts Temperance in the 1350s with "our earliest picture anywhere of a sandglass."³² Similarly, Cornelis Matsys, in a mid-sixteenth-century print, depicts personified Temperance holding an hourglass (Illustration 1).³³ That device, in the hands of Shakespeare's Father Time, is a silent signal that, so far as Leontes is concerned, temperate behavior and sound judgment will characterize future action.
Figure 1: Temperance holding an hourglass. A print by Cornelis Matsys (c. 1510–c. 1557. © Copyright The British Museum.
Inga-Stina Ewbank has suggested that Shakespeare’s personified character may have been inspired by the prose romance on which he based his play, Robert Greene’s _Pandosto The Triumph of Time_ (1592), whose full title continues, *Wherein is discovered by a pleasant Historie, that although by the meanes of sinister fortune, Truth may be concealed, yet by Time in spight of fortune it is most manifestly revealed._34 A Latin tag follows: _Temporis filia veritas._35 That proverbial saying had a special resonance for an English audience, since Queen Mary had chosen it “for her personal device, for the legend on her crest, on the State seal of her reign, on her coins.”36 Given the queen’s adoption of the adage, it seems appropriate that in _Respublica_, written during the first year of Mary’s reign, Verity, called “the daugther of Tyme” (I. 1699), hands malefactors over to Justice and Nemesis/Mary (ll. 1798–1801). Queen Elizabeth, moreover, witnessed an incident in her coronation procession that gave a characteristically Protestant application to the dictum: from a hollow place or cave “issued one personage whose name was _Tyme_, apparaylled as an olde man with a sythe in his hande, havynge wynges artificiallye made, leadinge a personage of lesser stature then himselfe, whiche was fyneely and well apparaylled, all cladde in whyte silke, and directelye over her head was set her name and tylte in latin and Englyshe, _Temporis filia_, the daughter of Tyme.”37 As Elizabeth looked on, Truth delivered the book she held, the Bible in English. The young queen then demonstrated her Protestant allegiance by her handling of the book: “she as soone as she had received the booke, kyssed it, and with both her handes held up the same, and so laid it upon her brest, with great thankes to the citie.”38

Thomas Dekker adopted this tableau in _The Whore of Babylon_, written in the early years of King James’s reign (performed ca. 1606). In a dumb show at the beginning of the play, Dekker dramatizes Time’s role as revealer of truth: a curtain is drawn, “discovering Truth in sad abiliments; uncrowned: her haire disheveld, and sleeping on a rock: _Time_ (her father) attired likewise in black, and al his properties (as sithe, howreglass and wings) of the same cullor, using all meanes to waken _Truth_, but not being able to doe it, he sits by her and mourns.”39 There follows a funeral procession (for Queen Mary), consisting of counselors, pensioners, and ladies. With the beginning of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, “Truth suddenly awakens, and beholding this sight, shews (with her father) arguments of joy, and _Exeunt_, returning presently: Time being shifted into light cullors, his properties likewise altred into silver,
and *Truth* crowned.” In *The Winter’s Tale*, Time does not change costume, of course, nor does personified Truth make an on-stage appearance. But the dramatic action involves the revelation of the true identity of a daughter, lost for a long time to her father and mother. The dialogue, too, evokes the progression of truth through time. Near the end of the play, when one Gentleman inquires, “Has the King found his heir?”, another answers, “Most true, if ever truth were pregnant by circumstance” (5.2.29–31). In the last scene, as she reveals to Leontes the statue of his wife and thus the truth about Hermione’s fate, Paulina says, “’Tis time” (5.3.99).

**IV**

A corollary of truth’s revelation is the righting of wrongs: ideally, justice may be achieved when the actual course of events becomes known. In *Respublica*, the villainous Avarice reports of Time, “manie of my frendes hathe he brought to paine and smarte” (I. 1304). In *The Trial of Treasure*, performed ca. 1565, Time announces, “Time is the touchstone the just for to try.”¹¹ In *A Larum for London*, performed in the 1590s, Time, who speaks the prologue and epilogue, says that he has “searcht the worlds corrupt enormities” (I. 4).¹² In *As You Like It*, performed in 1599, Rosalind says, “Time is the old justice that examines all such offenders” (4.1.199–200). And in Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*, “Time’s glory is . . . To unmask falschool, and bring truth to light . . . To wrong the wronger till he render right” (ll. 939–43). Time even holds the scales of justice in Gilles Corrozet’s emblem book, *Hecatomgraphie* (1540).¹³

In keeping with his punitive role, Time may bear a whip of the kind that Hamlet cites (3.1.69). Such a whip takes visual form on the title page (Illustration 2) of Giovanni Andrea Gilio’s *Topica Poetica* (Venice, 1580). In a print by Maarten van Heemskerck, Time is the charioteer who, whip in hand, drives the chariot of the world.¹⁴ A mural by Paolo Veronese in the Villa Barbaro, Maser, puts a scourge in Time’s hand.¹⁵ And a stage direction in *The Sun’s Darling* by Ford and Dekker, performed in 1624 and later revised, represents Time wielding his instrument of correction: *Enter Time with a whip, whipping Follie before him* (1.1.85 s.d.).¹⁶

In *The Winter’s Tale* much misdoing needs to be righted: Leontes must make amends for the ill treatment of his wife; his hostility toward Polixenes must be replaced by friendship forged anew; and, most important, he must welcome back and cherish the daughter he condemned to death. As the last act of the drama begins, it seems that all this is possible. After all, sixteen
Illustration 2: Winged Time, with an hourglass atop his head, holding a whip. A woodcut from the title page of Giovanni Andrea Gilio’s *Topica Poetica* (Venice, 1580). By permission of the British Library. (BL 638.g.2.)
years earlier, when he learned of the deaths of wife and child, Leontes vowed to do penance: “Once a day I’ll visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (3.2.238–40). Some things, though, can never be undone, however long the passage of time. Leontes’ penitence cannot erase the sixteen years of suffering for a separated husband and wife; when they are reunited, Hermione’s wrinkled face will epitomize their loss of precious time together. Nor can a guilty king’s contrition restore to a father and mother those years when their daughter came of age in a foreign land. And Leontes’ penitence cannot undo the death of Mamillius, who will never know rebirth in this world.

*The Winter’s Tale*, then, dramatizes the double dimension of time, its capacity to chastise and destroy as well as reveal and restore. If Father Time’s presence on stage signals the capacity of time to console the afflicted and sort out the depredations of the past, he also symbolizes the destructive effects of transience. The self-description of Shakespeare’s character is succinct: “I, that please some, try all, both joy and terror / Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error” (4.1.1–2). This dual aspect is brilliantly realized in a print by Hieronymus Wierix (Illustration 3). Father Time holds in his hands two objects with a melancholy significance: his scythe, symbolic of destruction and death, and a mirror, which he holds up to a couple who see the skeletal figure of Death reflected behind their images.47 Something with a very different significance, however, decorates Time’s form: fruit literally adorns his head, symbolizing his capacity to bring events to benign fruition.

**V**

Shakespeare is hardly unique in creating Father Time, a character whose role in numerous entertainments and plays varies from perfunctory to crucial. We have already noted the figure’s appearance in a late Elizabethan pageant, a Jacobean pageant by Anthony Munday, and *The Thracian Wonder*. Time also appears in *A Larum for London*, where he speaks both the prologue and epilogue. What distinguishes Shakespeare’s treatment from these others is the prominence and placement of the personified character in the dramatic action. In contrast to *A Larum for London*, Time in *The Winter’s Tale* appears in the very midst of the play; his speech becomes the hinge on which the play turns. When he upends his hourglass, as we have seen, he calls attention to the structural division of the play and to the contrasting nature of the action that is to ensue. By giving Time a voice, moreover, Shakespeare makes the
Illustration 3: Time, with fruit on his head, holds a scythe and a mirror. Engraving by Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619). © Copyright The British Museum.
personage more engaging and compelling than the wordless figure of *The Thracian Wonder*. In a fairly lengthy speech of thirty-two lines, Shakespeare’s Time delineates his twofold effect. Unlike the personification of the pageants, Shakespeare’s Time is not exclusively benign: he evokes “both joy and terror”; he can both “plant and o’erwhelm” (4.1.9). In short, Shakespeare’s Time provides the verbal counterpart of his iconography.

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**Notes**


5. See Frederick Kiefer, *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1983), chap. 7, for a discussion of opportunity in Renaissance iconography and drama.


8. Panofsky, p. 73.


Fulke Greville's other plays, is a closet drama. Bullough suggests that it "may have been first written by 1595" (p. 58). Interestingly, Time in *Mustapha* is female: "Daughter of Heaven am I" (3rd act chorus, l. 25).


33. The face between the breasts of Matsys’s Temperance is a symbol belonging to virtue. Maarten van Heemskerck gives such a symbol to Fortitude in a drawing dated 1556; the photographic archive at the Warburg Institute, London, has a copy (Netherl. Art Inst. no. 2926). Similarly, Raphael places such a face on the chest of Prudence (reproduced by James Beck, *Raphael: The Stanza della Segnatura* [New York: Braziller, 1993], p. 70). Giorgio Vasari does the same with Justice (reproduced by Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], fig. 91). All such symbols probably derive from statues of Pallas Athena/Minerva in the ancient world.


40. Plutarch, in *The Philosophie, commonlie called the Morals*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1603), asks why Saturn is sometimes called “the father of Truth,” and answers in a way that aligns truth with time: “Is it for that (as some philosophers deeme) they are of opinion that Saturne is Time? And Time you know well findeth out and revealeth the Truth. Or, because as the poets fable, men lived under Saturnes reign in the golden age: and if the life of man was then most just and righteous, it followeth consequently that there was much truth in the world” (p. 854).


42. *A Larum for London, 1602*, ed. W. W. Greg, Malone Society Reprints (1913; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1985), sig. A⁴. In his prologue, Time refers to his “hoary scalpe” (l. 5) and his “feathers” (l. 10), indicating that he is white-haired and winged.


44. Reproduced by Veldman, part 2, fig. 482/1.


47. In “Time and His ‘Glass’ in *The Winter’s Tale*,” Raymond J. Rundus notes that “in some of the popular devices of the period Time had as an attribute a mirror in which Death was
reflected, either behind a human figure or behind Time himself, indicating the relentless intrusion of the future and its attendant decay upon the vitality of the present" (Shakespeare Quarterly 25 [1974]: 124–25).