



From Narrative to Image: Petrarch's Book of Fortune in the Imagination of a German Humanist

The Sheridan Libraries is pleased to present this exhibition of three editions from its collections of the illustrated German version of Petrarch's *Remedies Against Fortune Fair and Foul*, on view at the George Peabody Library, Reading Room, October 22nd through 24th, 2004.

Curator: Dr. Leopoldine Prosperetti
Exhibition Staff: Sonja K. Jordan, Lena Warren, Martha Edgerton

History of the *De Remediis utriusque fortunae*

In 1360, Francesco Petrarca completed his *De Remediis utriusque fortunae*, a book of practical philosophy. Its 254 dialogues treat the effects of good and bad fortune on the human soul. Petrarch's *Book of Fortune* survives in at least 250 manuscripts, some illuminated handsomely. Printed editions are few suggesting that interest in the book had begun to wane just as book publishing took off. The exception was a German illustrated version published in Augsburg in 1532.

Artzney bayder Glück (Medicine Against Both Fortunes) matches each of Petrarch's dialogues with an illustration. The entire set of 260 original woodcuts were cut by The Petrarch Master, an artist widely believed to have been Hans Weiditz (fl. 1515-1522), who flourished in Augsburg during the reign of Emperor Maximilian I. The talented woodcutter, however, was not the true mastermind of the illustrations. That distinction goes to the great German humanist, Sebastian Brant (1458-1521), who initiated the project and provided visual specifications for each of the illustrations in the book. Fondly known as the German *Bilderbuch*, it remained in circulation for almost two centuries and in time intrigued Rubens and Goethe, evidence of its far-reaching cultural significance.

Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374)

Editions on exhibit:

Von Hülff und Rath in allem Anligen
Frankfurt: Bei Christoph Egenolff, 1551
4th edition

Hülff, Trost und Rath in allem Anligen der Menschen
Frankfurt am Mein, C. Egenolffs Erben, 1559
5th edition

De rebus memorandis
Getruckt zu Franckfort am Meyn: bey C. Egenolffs Erben, 1572



The Author in His Study 1551 Edition

Opened to the page showing the author-philosopher in happy seclusion in a little study in the corner of his garden, an abbreviated version of Petrarch's biography appears below. The image depicts the poet's purchase of a little house in a pleasant valley not far from Avignon. Scholars have observed that the "magister," though ostensibly representing Petrarch in his beloved Vacluse, is really a portrayal of Sebastian Brant in his house in Strasbourg.

Left page: The portrait is a remarkable act of authorial appropriation and a significant contribution to the iconography of "the scholar in his study." At stake here is the central belief of humanist piety, the duty of educated Christians to find refuge from the blows of fortune in literary repose. This principle led Petrarch to write the *De Remediis* and inspired Sebastian Brant to make it available as a book of conduct to humanists in the North.

On the right page is a suburban villa. Explanation for the iconography is provided in the last volume on display.



The Wheel of Fortune 1559 Edition

This is a powerful image in the context of the following paragraph from Petrarch's Preface:

... there is our ever present war with Fortune, in which only virtue can make us victorious- that very virtue we willingly and wittingly neglect. We are barehanded weaklings engaged in an unequal fight with an implacable foe, who throws us up and down as if we had no weight, whirls us around, and plays with us, so that defeat would be easier to bear than such continued mockery.

In this image of perpetual war, Fortune is exemplified by the ascent and descent of rulers clinging to the implacable Wheel of Fortune. In some editions, the Wheel is accompanied with titles that describe its various states:

*By the wheel I am turned
I am carried up high
Raised High I glorify
Descending I am mortified*

Only Virtue can displace the cruel antics of the almighty yet false, Fortune.



Everything Comes from Strife 1572 Edition

These two images are advertised as “visible explanations” (Augenscheinliche Erklärungen) of Petrarch’s preface to the second book of his *De Remediis*. And that is exactly what they are: visual commentaries on Petrarch’s concept of the universe as a system kept in balance by the countervailing forces of the elements and the eternal warfare among the species. In an effort to assemble Petrarch’s long list of examples illustrating this state of affair, Sebastian Brant sketched two settings, one is a village by the sea, the other a suburban villa in the woods. Each setting is rich in imagery and provided the needed gloss of credibility.

The two images are printed on the recto and verso of the same leaf in all these editions. As a result, we have provided a photocopy for the purpose of this comparison. The actual illustration appears as the right page of the first volume in this case.

On the left is a village, where residents and livestock enact their quarrelsome existence. Roads are filled with brawls of men, and barnyards teem with warring animals.

In the reproduction on the right, neither is the suburban villa immune from the noise of birds and small animals in the woods. In the end, its inhabitant is forcefully separated from his wife by Death, as if Death is the only way to extract oneself from the dissonance of universal odium.

The Contents of the Book

Petrarch conceived of his dialogues as little jars of medicine. In Book One he presents 122 conversations that treat Fortune's favorable turns: from good looks, to possessions and the trappings of military and political power. The 132 dialogues in book two address the burdens of misfortune: from being poor and persecuted, to losing family, friends, and eventually health and life itself. The dialogues are conducted by Joy, Hope, Fear, and Despair- the canonical figures for the passions of the soul- and the voice of Ratio or Reason. Joy and Hope glorify in their fortunate circumstances. Their triumphs need to be curbed. Fear and Despair suffer. Their misery needs consolation. Petrarch also composed two prefaces. The first is an eloquent treatise on how to ward off Fortune's double attacks. The second introduces the Book on Adversity and is an extended meditation on universal strife.

The material of Petrarch's book, though not at all new in the long tradition of wisdom literature, is rich in many different ways: as literature, as rhetoric, and as a lively exercise in moral philosophy. The German illustrated version poses a particularly intriguing problem. By what method was Petrarchan Wisdom transferred from the text to the picture? The six images convey the originality that the illustrator brought to this task.

The Woodcuts from Petrarch's *Remedies Against Both Kinds of Fortune*

Introduction

The inventions of Sebastian Brant and The Petrarch Master can be divided into three types. The first type illustrates the historical *exempla* that Petrarch mentions in the text. These images allow the viewer to witness the words and deeds of famous Greek and Roman men. The second type uses scenes of everyday life to visualize the human condition in good and bad times. They afford us a good view of the customs of the time. The final group consists of symbolic images, in which abstract ideas are represented by personifications or acted out in enigmatic scenes. These tend to convey the inner conflicts and psychological problems of early modern society.



Good Health (I, 3)

Health is the balance between the outer forces of the universe –the macrocosm- and the inner forces of the man – the microcosm. Countering the boast of being in the pink of health, Petrarch rejoins that good health is easily ambushed by a host of illnesses; it leads to the sweet poison of sexual desires; in fact, for some it would be better to be ill, than to be prey to illness. Maintaining one’s health is a balancing act, comparable to the chemistry of tempering a poison with an antidote to yield a beneficial cure. The relationship between body and soul counts, as we learn from the Roman poet Juvenal, “a healthy mind lives in a healthy body” (*mens sana in corpore sano*, x, 356).

To accompany this dialogue, Sebastian Brant and his illustrator show the “precarious equilibrium” of philosophical man. An ordinary citizen, wearing a cloth cap, purse, and a short mantle with wide sleeves, juggles the four elements. Unsteady on two spheres, one on land, the other on water, holding wind and fire, our balloon-walker takes his unstable position in the world. It shows Brant’s remarkable gift for inventing pictorial analogies to the key concepts of each dialogue.

All photographs reproduced from the 1572 edition.



A Keen Intellect (I, 7)

The image depicts the battle between useful discourse and weaving artful subtleties that are devoid of substance. Minerva, the goddess of Wisdom, is shown in a problematic situation with a spider's web, a token of the maiden Arachne who had challenged the goddess in a weaving contest and who, for her presumptiveness, was changed into a spider. In this dialogue, Joy is overly pleased with the gift of a quick mind. Petrarch agrees that a keen intellect when applied to the noble arts is a precious appurtenance of the mind (*pretiosa animi suppellex*). But pride in one's wit easily declines into weaving vacuous subtleties that collapse at the slightest touch. This is why Minerva despises the spider; creator of works whose subtlety and refinement reveal only their fragility and nothing more.

The image follows Ovid's familiar tale in the *Metamorphoses*. In this depiction, Minerva is compromised by the large web that almost entraps her, just as the owls, symbols of Pallas' wisdom are barely discernable in the fronds of the palm tree. The Petrarch Master has created a tapestry of a dense and intricate network of lines. Minerva's armor, the strands of her hair cascading down her back, her crown of laurels, all battle the geometric patterns of the web, while "sight" has difficulty discerning the story as it first sees only a tangle of cords and threads.



Memory (I, 8)

An Augsburg magistrate skilled in the art of memory and a dignified woman standing for True Wisdom invite a comparison between the laborious work of remembering a multiplicity of things, and the thirst for true Wisdom. The roundels encircling the orator repeat the mnemonic pictures that appear in contemporary manuals on the *Art of Memory*.

The dialogue is about memory and oblivion. The much-vaunted memory system of Simonides (inventor of the *ars memorativa*) is nothing but a dreary palace filled with smoky images. What good is it to remember the shame and suffering of the past? Multiplicity (*multiplex molestia*) is a distraction. Better to seek oblivion and to turn one's thoughts away from those horrible pictures, toward the remembrance of divine justice and God's mercy. Petrarch's weaving of antithetical statements, culminates in the exemplum of the Athenian statesman, Themistocles, who desired that Simonides teach him the memory system. Simonides replies that he prefers the art of forgetting. Cleverly, the inventor is hailed as the authority for oblivion. Brant picks up on Petrarch's antithesis, noting that the man who works so hard on a memory system, puts too much stock in what should be forgotten, and too little stock in what must be remembered.



Sadness and Misery (II, 93)

In the dialogue, Petrarch explores the paradox of human misery and the excellence of man, while the illustrator focuses on the plight of the sick in his native city. Misery can be caused by a number of calamities, but the most insidious among them is the one that has no obvious cause. Volumes have been written about the perplexities of the human condition, yet few authors have focused on what makes life happy and pleasant. This is because misery is omnipresent, whereas happiness is hidden.

Dealing with a richly ornamented treatise on how to overcome the human condition, Sebastian Brant limits himself to illustrating the human condition in all the miseries to be found in the typical European city of his time. The image follows the tradition of depicting the giving of alms as one of the Seven Works of Mercy. There is little in this picture to suggest the excellence of man that is the gist of Petrarch's consolation. It is a recapitulation of the theme of the human condition, but without Petrarch's remedy.



Lethargy of Mind (II, 109)

How is one to overcome the soul's lethargy? An allegory for the state of *torpor* and *sopor* (harmful sleep), a young man lies down for a nap. *Sopor* disguised as a disheveled woman holding a bellow, fans his restless sleep. Two mice crawl on the man's chest, adding to the uneasiness the image is intended to convey. A negative message, its antidote is to be found in the text.

Sorrow complains of lethargy. He lacks the will to undertake good works. Petrarch believes that two thoughts should spur a lazy fool into action: fear of losing time (which moves faster than the mind can measure) and the desire for virtue. Petrarch plays on *torpor* and *sopor*, a condition surfacing in the middle of the night that must be overcome in order to rise and say the divine office. Brant's image is a modern visualization of the sin of sloth. Known in the Middle Ages as *accidia*, it was one of the capital sins.



On Cramped Housing (II, 64)

Among the many historical examples used by Petrarch, this one stands out. Countering a complaint on living in cramped quarters, Petrarch offers an array of notable figures living in humble dwellings. Starting with King Evander who welcomed the great Hercules in a small palace and ending with brilliant generals living in tents, in this woodcut we have Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, who grew up in a shepherd's hut; Diogenes, the philosopher, who lived in a rolling barrel; and Hilarion, the Desert Father, who was content with a bower.

Romulus and Remus are behaving as mischievous young princes, spying on the philosopher. Diogenes shields his eyes from the sun. Hilarion is absorbed in his reading. A system of thickly patterned hatches reveals the materials of the humble dwellings to be straw, wood, willow, and foliage. Diogenes' bowl gleams in the sun. There is your antidote. A truly self-sufficient person, one who rejects the trappings of worldly comfort, is the recipient of the invisible gifts of Providence.