

1985

Symbolic Landscape in The Triumph of Death: The Garden of Love and the Desert of Virtue

Penny Howell Jolly

Skidmore College, pjolly@skidmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/art_his_fac_schol



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jolly, Penny H. "Symbolic Landscape in The Triumph of Death: The Garden of Love and the Desert of Virtue." *Politeia: Studies in Medieval Thought*, XXI (1985): 27-42.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact jluc@skidmore.edu.

Symbolic Landscape in *The Triumph of Death*: The Garden of Love and the Desert of Virtue

PENNY HOWELL JOLLY

There is a remarkable series of frescoes which lines a corner section of the walls of the Camposanto in Pisa.¹ Painted by a group of artists in the mid-fourteenth century, the frescoes depict scenes which are appropriate within the funereal context of this cemetery structure. Four events confirm the death and rebirth of Christ: his *Crucifixion*, *Resurrection and Doubting of Thomas*, and *Ascension*. Three additional frescoes seem to reflect the earthly life and eventual fate of mankind: *The Triumph of Death* (Fig. 1), *Last Judgment* and *The Inferno*, and *The Anchorites in the Wilderness* (Fig. 2). Both sets of frescoes begin at the southeast corner of the Camposanto, those dealing with the life of Christ progressing on the east wall from right to left, and those dealing with mankind's fate moving along the south wall from left to right.

A considerable controversy has arisen over the last several decades concerning the authorship of the frescoes as well as their dating.² These problems have been heightened by the fact that the frescoes were badly burned in 1944 following a wartime bombing, and connoisseurs must now rely primarily upon photographs taken before that time. Old attributions to the stellar mid-Trecento painters Pietro Lorenzetti and Andrea and Nardo Orcagna are now mostly discarded in favor of lesser-known artists such as the Florentine Buonamico Buffalmacco or an anonymous Tuscan given the sobriquet "Master of the Triumph of Death." Even Millard Meiss' once-attractive thesis that Francesco Traini painted *The Triumph of Death* in the years immediately following the Black Death of the summer of 1348 is rarely ascribed to today.³ Not only does the attribution to Traini seem unlikely, but Meiss' brilliant iconographical arguments for dating the frescoes after the plague seem to have been wrong. Most scholars would now place the frescoes in the decades immediately *preceding* the Black Death rather than following it. While this does seem to be the consensus of Trecento scholars, it remains true that images within the painting would very logically appear to be reflections of the horrors of the 1348 plague and are closely allied in theme to the well-known account of the plague included in the opening of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, certainly written in the years immediately following the Black Death.

In any case, it is not my object here to offer new insights into the questions of attribution and dating of this series of frescoes. What I would like to explore is the meaning and purpose of the two most unusual paintings within the cycle, those commonly entitled *The Triumph of Death* and *The Anchorites in the*



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Wilderness. Why do these two scenes, which are not traditional images, appear in such monumental form, juxtaposed on either side of a *Last Judgment*? What are the literary and visual sources which the artist has drawn upon to create these unusual images? And finally, I wish to explore the use of symbolic landscapes in these frescoes, two of the earliest paintings which exhibit the return to monumental landscape painting in the late Gothic era.

It will be helpful to begin with a careful description of the first scene, *The Triumph of Death* (Fig. 1), which is the most complex compositionally and establishes all the themes which will be found and elaborated upon in the remaining two frescoes. Its monumental composition is divided into roughly four parts. Our attention is drawn to the lower right corner by the large figure of a female hag who wields a huge scythe (Fig. 3). She is Death, and she swoops toward a group of ten genteelly amorous ladies and gentlemen who sit within a lush garden. They play musical instruments and converse quietly, while one lady pats a lap dog and two male companions hold hunting falcons. A pair of cupids fly over their heads. Absorbed in themselves, these noble folk appear to be oblivious to the immediacy of their fate.

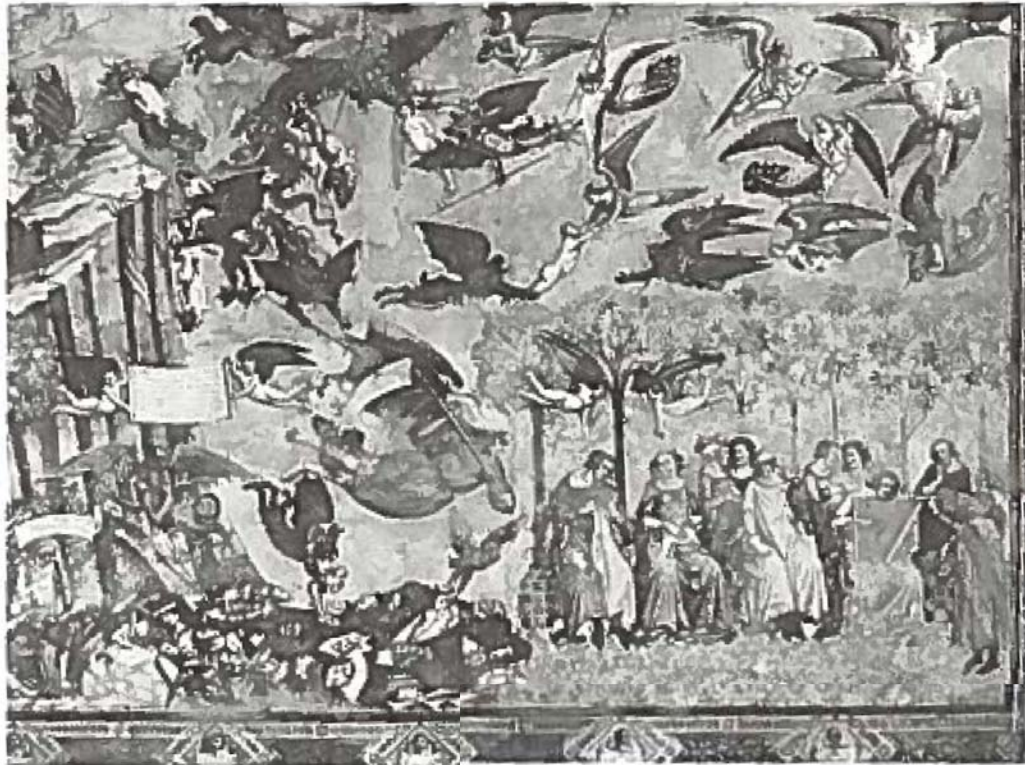


Fig. 3

The second part of the fresco consists of dead bodies, angels and devils who take their souls, and a group of elderly and sick cripples (Fig. 3). Ironically, these latter figures — located behind and below the figure of Death — try unsuccessfully to bring her attention to them. They crave the liberation from pain and suffering which Death could bring them, but the Grim Reaper ignores them in favor of the unsuspecting pleasure seekers in the garden. Directly below Death, at the bottom-most edge of the fresco and closest to our eye level, is

a pile of corpses of men and women from a variety of classes. We, the viewers, are reminded that no earthly being is immune from this, the ultimate fate of mortality. Angels and devils crowd around the bodies, pulling their souls — depicted as little naked people — from their mouths and carting them off to either the joys of Heaven or the fires of Hell. Those few angels who have claimed souls carry them off to the upper right of the fresco to join the angels and blessed in the image of Heaven in the adjacent fresco of the *Last Judgment*, while the winged devils fly their victims into a make-shift Hell in the firey landscape in the upper mid-section of the *Triumph*.

As we continue to move towards the left side of the fresco, two additional scenes are depicted. Below, we again see ten ladies and gentlemen accompanied by two striding servants and hunting dogs, this time enjoying the pleasures of



Fig. 4

equestrian adventures and the hunt (Fig. 4). Their frolics are interrupted, however, when they suddenly encounter three open coffins containing three bodies in different states of decomposition. The artist makes certain that we know that the stench is terrible: one of the noblemen covers his nose with his hand as he identifies the bodies. The first is that of a magistrate, bloated in death; the second, a king with a crown being consumed by snake-like worms; the third, an unrecognizable, skeletal figure who grins and looks down at the viewer. A hermit monk, St. Macarius, stands before the party of hunters and gestures towards the scroll he holds, suggesting that the inscription on it is intended for them.

This figure of the hermit Macarius and the winding path leading upwards behind him form the transition to the final section of this complex fresco, the

upper left-hand corner (Fig. 4.). In this quiet locale lives a series of anchorites, monks who have chosen the eremitical way of life. Sharing their craggy landscape with a variety of animals, one sits before a church and reads, while another milks a doe. These elderly hermits are leading a simple existence in the wilderness, where they can work and pray, fast, and feel close to God. The quiet isolation of their lives is clearly meant to contrast with the more chaotic mood of the rest of the fresco, created, for example, by the piles of rotting corpses, the firey landscape, the fighting angels and devils, and the disturbed hunting party. It is perhaps puzzling that the only other group which is similarly calm is that of the amorous couples in the garden in the diagonally opposite corner of the fresco. We shall see that this similarity — yet with opposition of location — is quite meaningful.

The fresco of *The Anchorites in the Wilderness* (Fig. 2), while full of figures and small structures, is ultimately easier to describe. The unknown artist has essentially taken the scene in the upper left corner of the *Triumph* fresco and expanded it into a larger wilderness landscape. Within this single fresco are juxtaposed episodes from the lives of numerous hermit saints, many of which are specifically identifiable.⁴ In the upper left area we see the two lions who volunteered to assist poor St. Anthony bury St. Paul, the first hermit. In the upper right area, St. Ilarione rides on his ass and confronts the terrible dragon of Epidauros. In the middle area, to the left of center, a hermit greets a woman who is actually the devil in disguise. Only the claw-like feet visible below her skirt allow us to recognize the true nature of this evil figure. We see a variety of stories which involve wild beasts that become tame for these holy men and women, miraculous appearances of food or water within hostile environments, and a series of devils who are outwitted by these simple followers of God. The specific themes here are not particularly mysterious, but a larger question does need to be posed. Why has this artist painted such a monumental depiction of scenes which have almost never before appeared in the history of art?

The interpretation of the *Triumph* fresco is complicated, but will also allow us to understand the *Anchorites*, for as we have seen, that fresco is essentially an expanded version of one of the four parts of the *Triumph*. We must begin by noting the overall pessimistic nature of the image. It is meant to be didactic, and speaks to an audience that is apparently needful of reminders, through both visual imagery and inscriptions. The latter are located on scrolls held by figures both within the painting itself and in its painted frame. We can begin with the area below Death. The figures there stress that Death comes to all, regardless of class, sex, or religious or secular status. Quite self-consciously the artist has depicted here corpses dressed in a variety of secular and ecclesiastical costumes, so that potentially each viewer would identify with some figure in the painting, and come to recognize the universality of death. The inscription in the frame immediately below this pile of bodies repeats these ideas, and addresses us directly as viewers and readers, using the Tuscan dialect of the fourteenth century rather than the less accessible Church Latin:

Note here, you that speak who are so kind, for that God wants birth and death to be for all. Therefore don't be a part of other cowardly people; as the others, you are also mortal.⁵

The inscription held by the two putti behind Death is similarly pessimistic:

Fencing with knowledge or richness, with nobility and, too, kindness, has no value in order to strike a blow to this one [Death]. Alas that you don't find yourself therefore against her, oh you reader, for there is no arguing. Now, not having your intellect expired, being there always ready, that it does not lead you to mortal sin.⁶

The secular notion that there is no arguing with Death is uttered, as is the Christian fear of dying while still in a state of sin. Yet those who *are* ready for death may not be immediately satisfied. The cripples behind Death beg for release ("Since prosperity has left us, Death, the medicine for all pains, come now to give us our last supper"), but she is unpredictable: one never knows where or when she will strike. What is predictable is that Death will come, and that one's fate in the afterlife will have been determined by one's actions in the earthly life.

The figures of the devils and angels, who are literally fighting over the souls of the dead, also are a reminder that this ostensibly secular image is still a part of the Christian world, and is found on the wall of a Christian burial ground. Each will be judged according to one's actions, and the fate in the afterlife determined. But again the note here is pessimistic. While ten devils have successfully collected damned souls to be dragged off to Hell, only five angels have found souls worthy of Heaven. There is a dispute regarding the fate of one soul, causing an angel and devil to fight over him — yet he wears the characteristic tonsure of a monk. Not even those who have taken the vow of holy orders can be certain of their eventual fate.

A viewer who has difficulty identifying with the morbid images we have just described, might prefer instead to metaphorically "join" the genteel ladies and lords who inhabit the garden in the lower right corner. They are clearly enjoying the pleasures of life. Several of the figures play musical instruments, two hold birds of prey, suggesting the pleasures of the hunt, a lady fondles a small dog in her lap, and two couples towards the back eye each other amorously. All are shaded by graceful and abundant orange trees, while two cupids holding inverted torches point downwards at the male and female seated at the left end of the bench. Both the immediate and long-term fate of this group is clear, however, for not only is Death about to cut them down, they will then burn in Hell.

It is the nature of the garden setting here which is the key symbolic element. Our basic choices regarding its nature are two: is this a garden of Paradise (Heaven) which would link these nobles with the Blessed immediately juxtaposed to them in the adjacent *Last Judgment* fresco; or, are they lovers within a secular Garden of Love? We shall see that the unknown artist of this *Triumph* fresco was very interested in traditions of symbolic landscapes, and that the setting of his fresco is an important vehicle for establishing the relative moral states of the figures within it. Let us explore briefly the development of symbolic landscapes in the earlier Middle Ages, in order to understand better the visual and literary sources for this fresco.

Already in the early Christian world of the first few centuries after the birth of Christ, the garden was used as an image for Paradise.⁷ Of course textual sources for this imagery included the Book of Genesis, where the *immortal* existence of Adam and Eve took place in the garden of Eden, and the various

apocryphal texts which described Paradise as a garden. When in the afterlife a person's soul went to Heaven, this was viewed as a return to the paradisiacal state, a return to the Garden of Eden. A second source regarding the physical makeup of Paradise was the very popular bucolic imagery of the Roman world, found in literature such as Virgil's *Eclogues* and in visual form in numerous frescoes at Pompeii and elsewhere.⁹ These bucolic works allowed harassed Romans to escape from the tension and drudgery of life, offering instead an idyllic existence free from cares and comforted by the proximity to nature. In the visual arts, such scenes are typically shown as a pleasant landscape with a shepherd or goatherd seated and surrounded by his flock, clearly enjoying the pleasures afforded by nature. Early Christian artists, creating for the first time images of Paradise as the setting for the afterlife, conflated these two sources: Judaeo-Christian religious texts and secular Roman art and literature. This led to the establishment of one of the very earliest types of imagery for Christ, that of Christ the Good Shepherd, and it is consistent with its paradisiacal significance that it is frequently found within a funerary context, e.g., in the catacombs. In these images Christ may be dressed as a simple shepherd boy in boots and short tunic, and typically he holds means of nourishment for his sheep: food and/or water. The sheep represent his followers, and are to be protected and nourished by him. Already in very early examples of this scene of reassurance — for Christianity was illegal until 312 A.D. and martyrdom and the immediacy of the afterlife was a possibility for many — the locale represented is a garden landscape with trees and birds. Thus Eden has become an idyllic Paradise garden where the flock of Christ will be tended and protected during the eternity of the afterlife.



Fig. 5

Throughout the Middle Ages gardens were used as images of Paradise, even though the specific type of Christ the Good Shepherd relatively rapidly lost favor and is rarely seen again after the fifth century. An example of a Paradise landscape can be seen in the early sixth century apse mosaic from the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe on the outskirts of Ravenna (Fig. 5).⁹ While the mortal remains of the martyr Apollinaris are buried under the altar, the mosaic above the altar depicts Apollinaris in the spiritual realm: he stands with arms upraised in the early Christian attitude of prayer. Trees, shrubs, flowers, and a variety of birds surround him in a lush, grassy landscape, while sheep — other members of Christ's flock in heaven — stand to either side. The huge cross above him refers to Christ's triumph over death following his martyrdom, and the gold sky further alludes to the fact that this is a divine setting rather than an earthly one. Apollinaris is here enjoying the pleasures of the afterlife in the Garden of Paradise.



Fig. 6

As we move later into the Middle Ages, artists lose interest in painting naturalistic landscapes, and so Paradise is often indicated by abbreviated symbols: perhaps a few palm trees, a gold sky, and the Four Rivers of Paradise issuing from a grassy slope or from the Fountain of Life. A Paradise image in the Carolingian *Godescalc Gospels* (Fig. 6) of 781-783 includes a large image of the Fountain of Life surrounded by the various birds and animals of Eden, but the "landscape" has become a collection of simple vines and shrubs, without even any groundline.¹¹

However, by the early fourteenth century, artists of the Late Gothic era once again turn their attentions to depicting naturalistic landscapes such as had not

been seen in Europe since the late Roman and early Christian periods. The Pisa frescoes are part of this renewed tradition of interest in spatial naturalism. But symbolic landscapes of the fourteenth century are not as simple as those of the early Christian period, for now there are several possibilities regarding the symbolic significance of this type of garden setting.

As is so often the case with symbols, a single image can have more than one connotation, and often the meanings will be surprisingly different, virtually opposites. So it is with garden symbolism. On the one hand, we have described a strong tradition found throughout the Middle Ages which associates a lush garden with Paradise; on the other hand, there becomes popular in the high Middle Ages a second tradition of the Garden of Love and/or Vanity, found in vernacular poetry and the chivalric literature of the period.¹² This second garden is a mundane one where earthly pleasures are enjoyed. Its sources similarly go back to the classical world, e.g., the writings of Ovid, and its type blossoms with medieval writers such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. What makes visual images of these gardens so difficult for art historians is the remarkable similarity between secular gardens of love (inhabited by men and women, birds and animals, food and drink) and religious images of the Virgin Mary in the garden of Paradise (similarly surrounded by male and female saints, birds and animals, food and drink). These images of Mary — a new, expanded version of the traditional Paradise garden — become popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and may actually be influenced by the secular love gardens. What we need to recognize, however, is that there appear to be two types of love garden images, and the division relates to the purpose of the artist and/or patron. Each example must be examined to determine whether the artist intended simply to depict a secular scene with some erotic overtones, such as would be appropriate for decoration of a wedding chest or other secular object, or whether he intended to create a moralizing condemnation of those who indulge in earthly pleasures.

That the garden shown in the Pisa *Triumph* is a moralizing garden of love and that its inhabitants will be condemned to damnation in the afterlife is confirmed by the two inscriptions in the frame immediately below this scene. For example, a skeleton found in the lower right part of the frame exhorts:

O soul, why, why, do you not consider that Death will tear from you that vesture in which you feel corporeal delight through the power of the five senses? For what will you have eternal torment, if you leave this world with mortal pleasure?¹³

The angel in the frame to the left questions:

Vain woman, why do you delight to go thus painted and adorned, so that you wish to please the world more than God? Ah, abandon it! What a judgment awaits you unless your heart incontinently turns to confess itself, often, of every sin.¹⁴

These texts condemn the vanities associated with the bodily pleasures that are perceived through the five senses, and warn of the judgment which will come to those who “please the world more than God.” Artists who depict gardens of love are generally careful to suggest the power of the senses, by

illustrating the workings of each. Here, for example, we have music making (hearing), the fragrance of the orange grove (smell), the petting of the lap dog (touch), and amorous glances (sight). Commonly such scenes include a table laden with food (taste), although this artist has omitted that detail here. The presence of the cupid figures may refer to their traditional association with love, for Cupid was the son of Venus, but even more significantly, such cupids can be associated with death and here do appear to be indicating to Death who her next victims should be.¹⁵ The lap dog held by one woman, while indicative of the sense of touch, additionally identifies the lady as one who, because of her vain interest in her own beauty, indulges in the sin of Luxury.¹⁶ Paul Watson has discussed the meaning of the Garden of Love at some length, and rightly concludes that this Pisan garden is a moralizing image, better termed a Garden of Vanity, which condemns its inhabitants because of their lack of concern for the holy existence.

The third section of the fresco includes the scene with the hunting party, and is clearly based on the French moralizing fable of the "Three Living and the Three Dead." Dating back to at least the second half of the thirteenth century,¹⁷ the fable reminds the noble riders through their encounter that they, too, will one day be dead. Like the imagery of the Garden of Love, this is an essentially secular tale, but it is often used in the Gothic period within a moralizing context and given Christian overtones. Here the Christian significance is made clear, for standing above the rotting corpses is the figure of St. Macarius. Holding a scroll with an inscription in his right hand and pointing at it with his left, he warns the hunting party to avoid pride and vanity, and follow instead the way of Christ:

If your mind will be well aware, keeping here your view attentive, your vainglory will be vanquished and you will see pride eliminated. And, again, you will realize this if you observe the law which is written.¹⁸

The meaning of the final section of this fresco, as well as of that of the nearby *Anchorites* fresco, becomes clear when we explore further the artist's use of symbolic landscape, and when we consider the attitude towards eremitic monks in the Late Gothic era. We have already seen how the image of a lush garden was equated throughout the Middle Ages with Paradise and the afterlife. Interestingly, however, the image of a wilderness is similarly significant within literature having to do with salvation, and, in fact, the wilderness was considered both as a way to Paradise and as an earthly *surrogate* for Paradise.

Literature concerning the meaning of the wilderness for the Christian is abundant, and sprang up in the early Christian Church alongside the more popular image of Paradise as a lush garden.¹⁹ The patristic writer St. Jerome (d. 420), for example, refers repeatedly to the wilderness as a refuge where the recluse can make a covenant with Christ and attain salvation. In his famous Epistle 22 to Eustochium, composed in Rome in 384 A.D., Jerome advises her to give up the worldly existence of civilized life, and isolate herself in the wilderness, "the country of the living."²⁰ He compares her dwelling in the desert with the Israelites' traversal of the wilderness, as they made their way to the promised land, the garden of Canaan. This stresses the idea of the wilderness as a place of transition from one state to another. In fact, Jerome himself was transported from a state of sin to one of ecstasy when he exiled himself in the

desert “because of my sins.” He describes to Eustochium this famous incident of his torment:

. . . in that lonely waste, scorched by the burning sun, which affords to hermits a savage dwelling-place, how often did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome! . . . Tears and groans were every day my portion; and if sleep ever overcame my resistance and fell upon my eyes, I bruised my restless bones against the naked earth. Of food and drink I will not speak. Hermits have nothing but cold water even when they are sick, and for them it is sinful luxury to partake of cooked dishes. But though in my fear of hell I had condemned myself to this prison-house, where my only companions were scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself surrounded by bands of dancing girls. My face was pale with fasting; but though my limbs were cold as ice my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me . . . Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert; and when I came upon some hollow valley or rough mountain or precipitous cliff, there I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh. There sometimes also — the Lord Himself is my witness — after many a tear and straining of my eyes to heaven, I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts. . . .²¹

Jerome's self-inflicted torment concludes with a taste of the hereafter: “I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts.” As he elsewhere writes, for him the desert is “the fairest city of all . . . [a] veritable paradise.”²² Jerome encounters God in the wilderness, and so begins to experience spiritually the joys of paradise while still on earth.

Jerome was not unique in his transformation of the physical discomfiture of the penitential wilderness — for Jerome went there to do self-inflicted penance for his sins — into a spiritual paradise on earth.²³ By Jerome's day, a new concept of private penance as a continuing process of cleansing reform replaced the official sacrament of public penance, which the early Church had believed to be an unrepeatable ritual.²⁴ The population of anchorites and cenobites in the wilderness grew as they sought to regain the purity of Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall. In the writings of men like Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) and Eucharis of Lyons (died c. 449), it is the ascete who, turning from the civilized world, battles with the demons of Satan in the desert in order to cleanse himself and experience on earth the joys of Paradise.²⁵ Thus Jerome's letter to Eustochium is but one manifestation of a growing desire among reform Christians to forsake the world and do battle in the wilderness. The desert caves or monastic cells in which the ascetes dwelled became for each a provisional paradise on earth.

I have described this early Christian view of penance in the wilderness in some detail because of the resurgence of monasticism in the later Middle Ages which revived these desires for the return to a pure, paradisiacal state of body and spirit through means of bodily mortification and isolation.²⁶ Thirteenth and fourteenth century writers, such as Fra Domenico Cavalca and Jacopo Passavanti, promoted the eremitical life as a means to salvation, and turned back to the early Christian writers as their sources. Jerome's role in this

resurgence was not small, for his eremitical texts were well-known, e.g., his *Vitae patrum*, of which more than five hundred manuscripts from the Middle Ages are extant, most from the twelfth century or later; his translation of the Rule of Pachomius, which helped establish the rules of Western monasticism; his life of St. Paul the Hermit, which already in the fifth century Palladius had incorporated into his *Paradise or Garden of the Holy Father*;²⁷ and his highly popular Epistle 22 to Eustochium, quoted above. By the fourteenth century in Italy, the ranks of various orders of Flagellants were swelling, and new orders were established, e.g., a variety of orders of Hieronymites (followers of Jerome) were founded in the area around Florence and Pisa, demonstrating again the importance of that saint for the eremitical movement.²⁸ Of course, the occurrence of the Black Death in the summer of 1348 only reinforced the popularity of these ascetic orders as the frightened population viewed this event as a judgment by God upon their sins.

We must view the presence of hermits in *The Triumph of Death* and *The Anchorites in the Wilderness* in light of these developments. These are the new heroes of the fourteenth century. They were preached about, one could read their legends in the newly revived literature, and in the visual arts one could see their adventures depicted with exciting detail and in monumental scale. They offer, in the Pisa frescoes, an example for the viewer of an alternate mode of existence to that of the noble folk in the Garden of Love.

The artist of the *Triumph*, in fact, has arranged his fresco to suggest the opposing nature of these two groups. It is not coincidental that the hermits are in the picture's upper right corner, its most sacred area.²⁹ These hermits will trade in their physically barren world for the spiritually richer world beyond it. The wilderness will be for them a cleansing experience, and will become a provisional paradise here on earth. What we can call their earthly "desert of virtue" will be replaced by the heavenly Garden of Paradise. The inscription in the frame to the left of this saintly group reassures us that this is the path to salvation:

Quiet holiness and pure solitude, how sweet you are to those who are familiar to you. The flesh will quickly mislead you. As much as they [the Hermits] are necessary, they hide in a wood, freeing themselves from the bitterness of the world.³⁰

The didactic tone of the inscription is repeated by the artist's comparison and contrast of the wilderness and the Garden of Love. That garden is located in the picture's lower left corner — its least sacred area, diagonally opposite the holy hermits. The fate of these pleasure-seeking inhabitants is clear: their earthly garden will be replaced by the tortures of Hell.

While the opposing fates of the hermits and the garden dwellers is clear, what will happen to the hunting party located to the picture's right side, but below — and symbolically inferior to, according to medieval rules of hierarchy — the good hermits? I believe that they are like us, the viewers. There is here an element of choice, suggested both by the inscriptions adjacent to them which were quoted above, and by the groups' intermediary location within the fresco. Their fate is not yet determined. Their encounter with the corpses and the advice offered them by St. Macarius is timely. Like the fresco's viewers, they can follow either example, that of the monks in the wilderness desert of virtue, or of the amorous

couples in the garden. The choice is theirs, but the consequence of each course of action is predetermined.

The unknown artist and his shop who worked on these frescoes created a startling sequence of images which both drew upon traditional imagery and expanded upon it. The central composition, the *Last Judgment* and *Inferno*, includes traditional themes in Christianity, handled in a traditional way except for the pessimistically large size of the *Inferno*. However, the other two frescoes, which have been the focus of this essay, are new compositions which are used at Pisa to reinforce the apocalyptic message of the *Last Judgment*. Turning to the new interest in both secular themes and in landscape painting of the early fourteenth century, the master artist has created a powerfully didactic image. He has taken the secular Garden of Love and created a moralizing image, and included a reference to the fable of the "Three Living and the Three Dead." Even more significantly, however, he has drawn upon the rich textual and visual traditions of symbolic landscape and juxtaposed for the viewer two possible courses of action, life in the desert of virtue, or in the garden of love.

- 1 Consult the extensive publication on them by Mario Bucci and Licia Bertolini, *Camposanto Monumentale di Pisa: Affreschi e Sinopie*, Pisa, 1960. More recent treatments of them include A. Smart, *The Dawn of Italian Painting*, Oxford, 1978, 116ff. and Paul Watson, *The Garden of Love in Tuscan Art of the Early Renaissance*, Philadelphia, 1979, 52ff., who include additional bibliography.
- 2 Bucci and Bertolini, 46ff., summarize earlier opinions, while Watson, 53, notes the more recent scholarly opinions.
- 3 M. Meiss, in his important book *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, Princeton, 1951, presents his thesis regarding the effects of the plague upon art and society in Tuscany, and wrote at length concerning the Pisa frescoes (see especially his Chapter Three).
- 4 An extensive recent discussion of this fresco, including earlier bibliography, is found in Ellen Callman, "Thebaid Studies," *Antichità Viva*, XIV, 1975, 3ff.. Consult I. Supino, *Il Camposanto di Pisa*, Florence, 1896, 98ff. for a careful identification of the figures.
- 5 The inscriptions found within the paintings are heavily repainted and fragmentary. S. Morpurgo, in "Epigrafi Volgari in Rima," *L'Arte*, II, 1899, 51-87, transcribed as much as was possible at that time, happily before the additional fire damage of 1944. In addition, he discovered a manuscript from the second half of the fourteenth century (Venice, Bibl. Marciano cod. it. 204.cl.IX) which is very closely related to the Pisa inscriptions, and which has been used to further clarify the partial and/or illegible texts. I will include for each text Morpurgo's transcription (based on both the fresco and the manuscript, although in some cases he presents several possibilities, and the reader will need to consult his 1899 article). Unless otherwise noted, the translations of the text are this author's responsibility, but they were carried out only with the extensive help of Giuseppe Faustini, for which I am extremely grateful. This text reads:

Nota qui, [tu] che di'che se'gentile:
 Poi che dio [vole] che sia comunale
 Lo nascere e 'l morire ad ogni gente,
 Non haver dunque L'altra gente a vile,
 Ché come l'arti così tu se'mortale . . . (Morpurgo, 57.)

- 6 Schermo di sàvere di ricchezza
 Di nobilità . . . ancor di prodessa

Val neente a' colpi di costei;
Ed anchor non si truova contra llei,
O lectore, neuno argomento.
Or non avere lo 'ntelletto spento
Di stare sempre sí apparecchiato
Che non ti giunga in mortal peccato. (Morpurgo 55.)

7 English translation from Smart, 116.

Poi che prosperitade ci à llasciati,
O Morte, medicina d'ongni pena,
Dè vienci a dare omai l'ultima cena! (Morpurgo, 61.)

8 Regarding this well-known concept, consult George A. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, New York, 1962, 10ff. and *ad passim*; Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, Cambridge, 1959, 64ff.; and J. Daniélou, "Terre et Paradis chez les pères de l'Englise," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXII, 1953, 433ff.

9 A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, Princeton, 1968, 35f..

10 For more information and bibliography regarding this mosaic, consult *Age of Spirituality*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann, New York, 1979, 562.

11 Paul Underwood, "The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 5, 1950, 43-138 discusses this image and other related ones in conjunction with Paradise imagery.

12 Regarding the origins and traditions of these secular gardens of love, consult Watson, especially 17ff. and Roberta Favis, *The garden of love in fifteenth century Netherlandish and German engravings*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1974, University Microfilms International, 1977.

13 English translation of first sentence from Watson, 54; second sentence by this author and Faustini.

O anima, perché perché non pensi
Che Morte ti torrà quel vestimento
In che tu senti corporal dilecto
Per la virtù de'suoi cinque sensi,
Col quale haverai eternal tormento
Se qui lo lassi con mortal dilecto? (Morpurgo, 56.)

14 English translation from Watson, 54.

Femina vana, perch'e ti delecti
D'andar cosi dipinta et adorna
Che Voi piacer al mondo più che a dio?
Ai lassiai che sententia tu ne aspecti,
Se incontenente il tuo cor non torna
Ad confessarsi spesso d'ogni rioi (Morpurgo, 56.)

15 Erwin Panofsky, "Blind Cupid," in his *Studies in Iconology*, New York, 1972 ed., 95-128 has discussed the transformation of the meaning of cupid figures in medieval art from one of love to death, particularly in cases where the cupid figure is blindfold. Originally, in this essay which was first published in 1939, he regarded the cupids in the Pisa fresco as "purely decorative" (p. 121), but he later corrects that position in his *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, New York, 1960, 149, where he sees them as sinister figures and companions to Death.

16 Watson, 56f..

17 See Francois Avril, *Manuscript Painting at the Court of France: The Fourteenth Century*, New York, 1978, 74.

18 The Marciano manuscript reads:

Se vostra mente serrà bene accorta
Tenendo qui la vostra vista fitta,
La vanagloria ci sarà sconficta
Et la superbia vederete morta.

Et voi serrete ancor di questa sorta!

Or observate la lege che v'è scripta. (Morpurgo, 57.)

- 19 For an extensive discussion of the vast literature on this subject, consult Williams, as cited in n. 8 above.
- 20 Jerome's letter, which was widely known and quoted throughout the Middle Ages, is found in J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, 221 vols., Paris, 1844-1864, vol. XXII, 394-425. This English translation is by F.A. Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1954, 55.
- 21 Wright, 67-69.
- 22 Epistle 2, as translated by Charles Mierow, *The Letters of St. Jerome*, "Ancient Christian Writers," XXXIII, London, 1963, 28.
- 23 Consult Williams, 38ff. and Ladner, 319ff..
- 24 Ladner, 309ff.. See, for a summary of opinions and bibliography on penance, as well as extant texts, J. McNeill and H.M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, New York, 1938, especially 3-43. While in the fourteenth century Jerome's exile in the desert would be described as "penance," in Jerome's own day it generally would not.
- 25 Read also John Cassian's fifth century description of the anchorites from his *Colloquia* (III), xviii, 6 and xix, 5, quoted in Williams, 41, where he extolls "that life which can only be compared to the bliss of angels." Eucharius describes the desert as being the "temple of God" in his *De laude eremi*, and Ambrose discusses the necessity of reversing Adam's expulsion from Paradise into the desert, by a cleansing in the desert as preparation for a return to Paradise. See Williams, 44f..
- 26 An excellent overview of this resurgence is found in Meiss, cited in n. 3 above.
- 27 In E.A.W. Budge, ed. and trans., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, Being Histories of the Anchorites . . . Compiled by Athanasius Archbishop of Alexandria: Palladius Bishop of Helenopolis: Saint Jerome and others*, London, 1907, I, 197-203.
- 28 M. Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of St. Jerome," *Pantheon*, 32, 1974, 134ff., discusses this development.
- 29 It was traditional in Western Christian art to consider the picture's right as the more sacred side, i.e., the side which would be to Christ's right if he were depicted within the scene. Thus the picture's right is always to the viewer's left. Of course this is not an absolute rule, but was widely observed.
- 30 Quieta sancta et pura solitudine,
 Quanto se'dolce ad quei che ti conoscono!
 Di carne o di demon' sollicitudine,
 Tanto più servono quanto più s'imboscano,
 Privi della mondana amaritudine. (Morpurgo, 61.)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1: Master of the Triumph of Death, *The Triumph of Death*, Pisa, Camposanto (Photo Alinari)
- Fig. 2: Master of the Triumph of Death, *The Anchorites in the Wilderness*, Pisa, Camposanto (Photo Alinari)
- Fig. 3: Detail of Fig. 1 (Photo: Brogi)
- Fig. 4: Detail of Fig. 1 (Photo: Brogi)
- Fig. 5: *Transfiguration with Saint Apollinaris*, mid-sixth century, Ravenna, Sant'Apollinare in Classe (Photo Alinari)
- Fig. 6: "The Fountain of Life," *Godescalc Gospels*, 781-783, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. n.a.lat.1203, fol. 3v (Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale).