



## HISTORY OF MEDICINE

## The Four Seasons of Human Life

Francois Retief

*The Four Seasons of Human Life* (including CD rom Ed. by H F J Horstmanshoff, A M Luyendyk-Elshout, F G Schlesinger. Erasmus Publishing, Trent Collection, Duke University: Rotterdam/Durham, 2002. ISBN 90-5235-136-8. Eur. 85. Erasmus Publishing, Glashaven 14-A, 3011 X H, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

This handsome publication in coffee-table format, based on four anonymous engravings almost certainly dating from the Renaissance, is definitely not for casual reading. However, for the scholar interested in 17th century medicine and related (for that time) disciplines of alchemy and astrology, *The Four Seasons of Human Life* is a mine of authoritative information. It was compiled by a specialist team of 12 authors, covering *inter alia* the fields of medicine, art, medieval paleography, history, astronomy, botany and classical philology, mainly from the Universities of Leiden, Utrecht and Wageningen, the Netherlands, and Duke University, Durham, USA — but there were also significant contributions from the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (London), the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), the Rembrandt Paper Research Project (Amsterdam), the Boerhaave Museum (Leiden) and the University of Bologna (Italy).

The origin of the engravings is uncertain. There is suggestive evidence that many copies were originally printed but at present only one set exists, kept in the Trent Collection of Duke University, Durham, USA. The team of scholars who studied the engravings (exquisitely reproduced in the publication) were able to date their origin to the 17th century, mainly by identifying the paper as a particular French variety commonly used in Europe at that time. The copperplates from which the prints were produced must have been subjected to significant prior wear and tear, because the engravings have the characteristics of 'late impressions'. They came into the possession of a well-known British surgeon and collector of medical antiquities, Sir D'Arcy Power (probably at the turn of the 20th century) and upon his death they were auctioned at

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Sotheby's in London. Originally bought by local art dealers they were eventually acquired by the Trent family, who donated them to Duke University Medical Center Library in 1992. After the Wellcome Institute of Medical History, London, had identified the unsigned and undated prints as probably of Dutch origin, the curator of the Trent Collection brought them to the Boerhaave Museum in Leiden, from where the research project resulting in the present publication was launched.

On the four prints (approximately 35 x 45 cm each) the theme, 'Four Ages of Man', is clearly expressed by way of an abundance of illustrations, representing seasonal, astrological and medical motifs. Each print represents a season: *ver* (Latin for spring), *aestas* (summer), *autumnus* (autumn) and *hyems* (winter). Mounted on gray pasteboard each print is composed of multiple layers of paper, which can be folded back to reveal underlying illustrations. Several smaller circular paper discs can likewise be folded back for underlying information ('volvelles'). The CD rom that accompanies the publication enables one to view these different layers. Prints are also decorated with a very large collection of Latin words or phrases, written on trees, leaves, banners and other objects in the prints. These inscriptions vary from a total of 71 in *hyems* to 144 in *autumnus*. In a remarkable *tour de force* the authors managed to trace virtually all these inscriptions back to original sources, predominantly Latin translations of Graeco-Roman masters from Classical times. Two quotations are from the Bible, and one from Desiderius Erasmus. Prints show a similar basic composition, with centrally placed human figures of varying ages flanked by a pair of trees and set against a background reflecting the activities and plants of a specific season. In all the prints the people carry urinals. According to the authors this rather strange phenomenon probably has a dual significance, reflecting the medical importance of uroscopy in the Middle Ages, but also the eminent role of the contemporary science of alchemy. A urinal-like vessel was characteristically used by alchemists to heat impure substances which they hoped to convert into gold.

The print reflecting *ver* (spring, representing childhood) contains 4 children (aged 3 months to 4 years) and the goddess Minerva as a child. There is a volvelle in the right lower corner, decorated with a celestial map, and underneath showing the anatomy of the brain. In the left corner a sketch of the female reproductive organs was probably also originally covered by a volvelle flap. In all four prints the trees are lavishly covered in

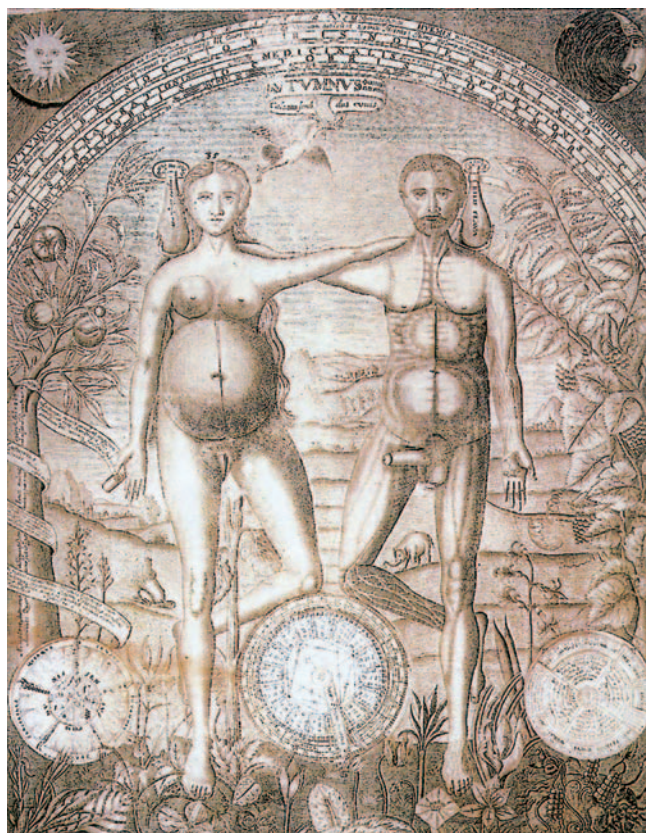


Fig. 1. *The month autumnus (autumn) representing adulthood.*

inscriptions, mostly from the Hippocratic Aphorisms — all of which are translated for the reader. These quotations presumably reflected contemporary views on clinical medicine.

In *aesta* (summer, representing adolescence) there are two figures, that of a woman (aged 18) and a young man. A huge basket containing a urine flask is placed between them, and from it a small human figure arises. The basket is multilayered, concealing illustrations of the urogenital tract. Hidden by a geographical map *volvelle* in the left corner are multilayered drawings of the heart and lungs, and under a similar celestial map *volvelle* in the right corner, are diagrams of the liver and pancreas.

The print *autumnus* (autumn, representing adulthood) (Fig. 1) shows a pregnant woman of 35 years and a virile man with an erection. Similar to the figures in other prints, both body images are multilayered with underlying diagrams of appropriate anatomical structures. Below the figures are three circular structures: an aspectarium (instrument used for calculating the critical days of an illness) and two *volvelles* representing a pregnancy calendar, and a scheme of Aristotelean origin that relates the five senses to a central 'sensus communis' (common sense) situated in the brain. The authors point out that this concept deviates significantly from Aristotle's postulates which placed common sense in the heart

and not the brain. A horoscope is placed underneath the pregnancy calendar, undoubtedly because of its vaunted value in medical diagnosis and prognosis.

The *hyems* print (winter, representing old age) shows an old woman (with blackened features suggesting melancholia) stepping in a grave, next to her companion (aged 49) with his back to the observer. In the grave the viable roots of an otherwise dead tree suggest the cyclical process of nature. Underneath a geographical map *volvelle* in the corner, the anatomy of the rectum is depicted. There is reason to believe that this last print had a different artist from the first three.

The authors speculate that the prints were designed for an important person by a knowledgeable and eccentric scholar, with a complicated learned message to convey. The theme 'Four Seasons of Human Life' was often depicted by artists of the 16th and 17th centuries, and there is some evidence that the prints were produced in England where copper engraving was much commoner than on the Continent. The engravings are technically of moderate quality. It is suggested that the human anatomy depicted represents a compromise between the idealised concepts of a scholar and the limitations imposed by a mediocre artist. The authors even suggest from which anatomy textbooks of the day the illustrations were copied. None of the sources postdate the middle of the 17th century — and no attention is paid to the 'anatomia reformata', the new anatomy following on Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood (1628). At the same time no gross anatomical anachronisms are included.

The detailed analysis of the close on 400 Latin inscriptions, their identification, translation and logical arrangement so that sense can be made of the classical quotations in particular, probably represents the outstanding contribution of this splendid publication. One notices that some of these references were accidentally omitted from the summaries on pp. 34 and 38 (inscriptions on the basket, nos. 69 - 83), but this is a minor defect. A chapter deals with art historical aspects and hermetic-alchemical symbolism in particular. Much of this will be lost on the modern reader, but one suspects that it meant much to a scholar in the heyday of alchemy. The suggestion that the backgrounds in the four prints represent Europe in *ver*, Asia in *aestas*, Africa in *autumnus* and America in *hyems* is perhaps not so convincing. The botanical detail, true to each season, is however excellent, and the symbolism attached to the birds on the prints, very interesting.

An excellent overview is given of astronomical but especially astrological features of the prints, with a discussion of the amalgamation of ancient views and 'modern' science appearing in the Renaissance during the 17th century. At the time there was still much confusion about the validity of Hippocratic concepts of relationships between bodily humors, seasons, the ages of man and origin of disease — the borders between 'rational medicine' and superstition, astrology and



science. Each of the prints contains ample evidence of zodiacal reasoning and the *autumnus* has a lunar aspectarium that enabled the medieval physician to accommodate the lunar influence on illness. The pregnancy volvelle in *autumnus* conceals a horoscope, the origin of which was traced to a Venetian publication of 1607. The left hand of the male figure in the same print shows several chiromantic symbols. Various schemes, tables and maps found on the prints thus show that the designer was deeply interested in and knowledgeable about cosmography and astrological medicine. The reproduced celestial hemispheres are based on sources printed in or shortly after 1592. This suggests that celestial and geographical information used was obtained from sources slightly earlier than the medical sources.

*The Four Seasons of Human Life* therefore affords us a glimpse into the medico-scientific world of a Renaissance scholar. The clinical medicine mentioned is still very much based on Graeco-Roman 'rational medicine', and Hippocrates rather than Galen. Perhaps surprisingly there are no contributions from the Golden Age of Islam. Post-Vesalian anatomy is prominently displayed, and updated to the early 17th century. There are no clear borders yet between scientific medicine (as we know it today) and the pseudo-sciences of alchemy, astrology, cosmography and chiromancy, and the designer scholar shows a fair grasp of them all. One asks oneself how wide his knowledgeable reader audience of the time would have been.