TIMON OF ATHENS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY
[VIBRANT VOICES]

DOES THE UNIQUE TONE OF TIMON OF ATHENS REFLECT A COLLABORATION BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE AND THOMAS MIDDLETON?

PROFESSOR JOHN JOWETT EXPLORES TWO DISTINCT WRITERS

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE REIGN OF KING JAMES saw Shakespeare writing at the height of his creative genius. Those same years also saw a young generation of dramatists generating the new kind of urban and satirical drama we now know as city comedy. It was a speciality of the boy actors performing at Blackfriars theatre and elsewhere, and the foremost practitioner was Thomas Middleton, himself a London citizen. Shakespeare evidently took note. Ending a long spell during which he had avoided collaborating with another dramatist, he joined with Middleton in writing Timon of Athens.

BACK TO ANCIENT GREECE City comedy certainly helps shape the play. Timon’s Athens is a city in which money and wine flow freely, a city of extravagant consumption – and therefore a city of crushing debt. Timon is the embodiment of both: in the first half of the play, fabulous in richness, magnificent in gift-giving, the magnet of friends; in the second half, the victim of debt, the hater of humanity, the houseless wretch surviving in the woods.

The bare lines of the story go back to ancient Greece. Aristophanes relates that Timon ‘withdrew from the world because he couldn’t abide bad men, after vomiting a thousand curses at them’. Middleton possibly knew the Greek dramatic dialogue, Timon the Misanthrope, composed by the Syrian satirist Lucian in the 2nd century AD, or, more likely, a recent work based on it. But Shakespeare’s attention would have been drawn to Timon as he read Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, the main source for his Roman plays. Plutarch says that Antonius (Mark Antony) ‘forsook his city and company of friends, and built him a house by the isle of Pharos...
and dwelt there as a man that banished himself from all men’s company, saying that he would lead Timon’s life’. Plutarch adds some anecdotes about Timon at home in Athens, where he feasted and mocked his friends. He records two versions of his epitaph, both of which are quoted in the play. Plutarch’s paired-up accounts of warriors who attacked their home city correlate Coriolanus and Timon’s friend, Alcibiades.

**AN EXISTENTIAL WORK**

Timon of Athens is built from these fragments. It is close in date of composition, and often in spirit, to *King Lear* – circa 1606. Timon’s vituperative language when he (she in this production) is taking refuge in the woods is as searing and high-flown as Lear’s, and at least as full of disgust at the human animal. But this play allows its protagonist no daughters, indeed no kindred at all. It is a pared-back and existential piece of work. Relationships lack real substance. Friends remain friends for only as long as Timon showers them with jewels, gold or horses.

Any rational being knows that such indiscriminate and excessive gift-giving simply cannot go on for ever. But Timon’s need to nurture and be nurtured blinds him to any such understanding. He is deaf to the warnings of his affable steward Flavius. The disaster unfolds with remorseless logic – though not without humour, as Timon’s desperate servants try to secure further loans from heartless creditors. Their failure precipitates Timon’s explosive retreat from humanity.

**A PLAY LIKE NO OTHER**

Where the play is not quite seamless, there is a disjunction between two authors. The harsh comedy of gift-giving, loans and debt is Middleton’s leading contribution to the play. Writing in the bitterly scathing comic spirit of Lucian and the Roman satirist
Petronius, he supplied the keynote banquet scene, developed the role of the steward responsible for Timon’s finances, and provided the vignettes in which Timon’s servants petition his creditors. But the play was probably Shakespeare’s idea in the first place. If he invited Middleton to bring in the element of city comedy, he himself took on the task of forging the play as a fiercely reductive version of tragedy. There’s no escape from it: when Timon is uttering his most offensive misanthropy, he is speaking Shakespeare’s words. Shakespeare’s Timon is a falling idealist, and then a fallen idealist. Having lost his faith in the ‘magic of bounty’, the power of money, he expresses a dystopian vision of human relationships grounded in aggression and hate. But the hate he wills in others is really his own. In the play’s moment of perfect irony, Timon, while he is digging in the woods to find edible roots, unearths a vast quantity of gold. Once again, he imagines that his visions can be brought to reality, but now he desires the utter destruction of Athens.

Clearly this is an experimental work, as nakedly schematic as Samuel Beckett, as ruthlessly analytic as Bertolt Brecht. The end is enigmatic. Timon anticipates his death by saying ‘My long sickness / Of health and living, / And nothing brings me all things.’ He dies offstage, pushing the play further into terra incognita. It might well fuse city comedy and Lear-like tragedy, but ultimately it corresponds with no other play. As a collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton, Timon of Athens is unique: an imperfect, vibrant and disturbing dialogue between two distinctive, contesting and complementary voices.

JOHN JOWETT is a Shakespeare scholar and editor. He is Professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham and Acting Director of the Shakespeare Institute.
Its uncompromising story deals with absolute generosity, absolute loss, and absolute isolation – and has always provoked strong reactions among audiences. Some see it as disturbingly without compassion, and without beauty. Others attribute its dark cynicism to Shakespeare’s collaborator, Thomas Middleton, who was better-known for satirising the worst sides of contemporary London. The comedy in *Timon of Athens* is certainly as daring as anything else on stage at the time, and its stark exposure of how money can taint human relationships seems hardly to have dated.

But the play also deals with the utterly human problem of love, and has a keenly observed character at its heart. What happens when love is intemperately bestowed, or inadequately returned? What are the costs – to ourselves, to others – when love becomes altogether too much? *Timon of Athens* puts pressure on these questions through a portrait of alienation every bit as intense as *King Lear* – which dates, like this play, from the later years of Shakespeare’s writing life, around 1606. But whereas King Lear’s suffering is partly redeemed, Timon’s remains stubbornly irredeemable.

**LOYALTY FOR SALE**

Timon begins the play generous to a fault, doling out money to a fawning crowd of flatterers. Timon insists that he (she in this production) gives without hesitation, quibble or doubt; and without looking for recognition or reward. As he says, speaking of his own resource of love, ‘I gave it freely ever.’ But can sheer generosity from any individual benefactor lead to happiness – not just for the few,
but for the many? Timon uses his largesse, in part, to purchase solutions to life’s most intractable problems. First he pays off Ventidius’ debts, buying his freedom. Then he supplies money for a missing dowry, enabling Lucilius to marry the woman he loves. Timon dismantles, through philanthropy, the impediments which hinder the free flow of life itself.

The play dares to wonder, in its first half, whether such extreme friendship—freely gifted—need not end in failure or abuse. The cash Timon dispenses, and the relationships it lubricates, are not inevitably degraded, then—or, at least, not at first. But when payback time comes, as it must, his friends do not in fact pay back. Timon’s enraged response to the abrupt dissolution of his imagined utopia suggests that his generosity, in fact, carried a hefty price tag. Loyalty was always up for sale in this brittle economy with uncertain gains. But what sort of return did Timon expect? The play coolly scrutinises the reasons why wealthy people sometimes feel compelled to help those most in need, and reveals the psychological fragility behind ostentatious acts of giving.

EXTREMITY OF BOTH ENDS

There was never any room for compromise in Timon’s drastic view of the world. As the character Apemantus says, ‘The middle of humanity thou never knew’st, but the extremity of both ends’. Timon is a sort of proto-Lear—fragile in mind, alarmingly capricious, abandoned by those who owe him most love, and brutally expelled from society. The woods outside Athens, where Timon exiles himself, echo Timon’s mental state in the same way the heath reflects Lear’s. Here, Timon digs in angrily, and spits back against the way things must inevitably be. His estate whittled away, he renounces the world completely—and confronts ungenerosity, mean-spiritedness and failure on their own brutal terms. The mock-banquet he thrusts at his flatterers persuades them that his mind is irretrievably lost: ‘Timon’s mad.’

His isolation is terrible partly because his colossal wealth (and now the humiliating lack of it) places him so far beyond the help of others—even his steward, Flavius. It is Flavius who seems most sensitive to Timon’s overspending, and Flavius who must pick up the pieces of his insolvency. But he cannot heal or redeem Timon—even if he sees, long before
Timon does, that his wild generosity will never be matched by others. As Timon lurches erratically from the mindset of supreme wealth to the mindset of abject poverty, the play unsparingly probes the particular degradations suffered by the wealthy when they are publicly stripped of power and influence.

**Reasonable Madness**

At the same time, Timon’s madness seems almost reasonable, stoked as it is by a world whose cruelties are beyond his control. And the savagery of his disillusionment seems in keeping with the depth of his initial, heightened, enthrallment to the idea of friendship, and its promise of mutual fulfilment. Apemantus knows from the start that Timon is self-cursed: ‘What a number of men eats Timon, and he sees ‘em not!’ Apemantus remains unrelentingly pessimistic about the possibilities of friendship, satirising Timon’s withdrawal by heapng cynicism upon cynicism. Meanwhile Timon keeps railing against Apemantus’ jaded view of humanity, even though it now resembles his own. Their acidic world views become closer and closer – but it is Apemantus who flourishes, somehow, on the hardness he finds in others, while Timon self-ruins.

**Timon’s Exile**

All the same, Timon is emboldened to take on the world in new ways once he has renounced it, achieving a kind of savage strength in exile. For this reason, and others, the play is not an allegory, but a radical experiment in character. Even the enigma of Timon’s final disappearance seems to suit him. Timon exiles himself not only from Athens, from friendship, and from comfort – but also, finally, from his own play. He does not so much deny himself the pathos of a tragic death, but instead refuses this convention along with everything else. As Apemantus says: ‘I wonder men dare trust themselves with men’.

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**Dr Katharine Craik** is a Reader in Shakespeare and Early Modern Literature at Oxford Brookes University and is currently editing a book, *Shakespeare and Emotion*, for Cambridge University Press.
Lady Timon, famous for her wealth and generosity, hosts an extravagant party for the distinguished citizens of Athens. Apemantus, a philosopher, and Alcibiades, a revolutionary, are among her guests. Timon showers her friends with gifts, unaware that she has fallen into serious debt. Her faithful steward, Flavius, struggles to make known the truth to her.

Timon’s creditors demand that their debts be paid. She turns to her friends for help, but they all refuse. Furious at their betrayal, Timon invites her friends to another banquet, where she serves up a horrifying surprise.

Disillusioned, Timon goes to live as a recluse in the forest outside the city. There, she discovers a buried chest full of gold. She is visited by Alcibiades, who tries to persuade Timon to join her fight against the city’s powerful elite, and by Apemantus, with whom she forms a fragile bond. Others come, seeking her newly discovered gold, but Timon tricks them and drives them all away.

Alcibiades’ forces have grown. The Athenian politicians, fearful of assault, decide to go to Timon and persuade her to return to the city. Flavius discovers Timon living in the forest. He appears not to recognise him. Judging him to be honest, she gives him the gold.

The Athenian politicians arrive in the forest and encounter Timon. She refuses to leave with them.

Alcibiades and her rebels ambush the Athenians. Flavius interrupts, announcing that Timon has committed suicide. Hearing the news, Alcibiades spares the Athenians and brokers an uneasy peace.

Production acknowledgements


The first performance of this production took place on 7 December 2018 at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Photography is not permitted during the performance. Mobile phones and watch alarms should be turned off or deposited in the cloakroom. Please remember, too, that coughing, whispering and fanning programmes spoils the performance for other members of the audience and can also be distracting to the actors.
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