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Timon of Athens has often been regarded by critics as an unfinished play. One of the most influential articles about this quality of the play is Una Ellis-Fermor's "Timon of Athens: An Unfinished Play" of 1942. Even a more recent critic such as Maurice Charney does not completely discard this idea. In his 1993 essay in *All of Shakespeare*, Charney argues Timon's contradictory epitaph to be a dramatic flaw and also states that the Alcibiades subplot "definitely need(s) work."¹ It is often observed that the double plots in the play do not seem to have as clear a link as those in *King Lear*. He also claims that "Timon is so neatly divided between excessive love and excessive hatred of mankind that he doesn't seem tragic at all."² While such a critic as G. Wilson Knight highly praises Timon, most critics seem to be baffled by Timon's seeming lack of tragic posture. To understand the tragedy of Timon to the fullest, this paper will explore the relation between an individual and society in the play.

To start with, it is worth considering what sort of society this "Athens" is. No one can fail to see the power of money in this society: Timon frees Ventidius, who is imprisoned due to his inability to pay his debts. Timon's servant, Lucilius is only allowed to marry once he is endowed with a certain amount of money. The Old Athenian says "I am a man / That from my first have been inclin'd to thrift" (1.1.120-121).³ It

is as if his life's worth were equivalent to the amount of money that he has saved. In 3.2, Lucius declines Timon's request for money, stating that he has purchased 'a little part' (3.2.46). According to G. R. Hibbard, this means he has paid for a title.⁴ These examples all suggest that a person's value is equivalent to the money he possesses.

This Athens contains many sets of masters and servants, perhaps more than any other Shakespeare play.⁵ Though Shakespeare does not specify many characters' names in this play, most of them are designated as a master or a servant. The only person who is not involved in this employer-employee relationship seems to be Apemantus. Whether or not they appear on the stage, the play portrays at least eleven masters and seventeen servants. In this society, ethical ideals cannot replace the social role which a person is supposed to play. Katharine Eisaman Maus points out that

throughout *Timon*, low-ranking characters — having less to gain from greed — display an acute sense of gratitude and obligation sadly lacking in their "betters." . . . in 3.4, the usurers' servants, talking among themselves, quite freely condemn the commands they are forced to carry out.⁶

It is true that Hortensius condemns his task, saying "I'm weary of this charge" (3.4.26). However, at the same time all the servants ruthlessly demand that Timon pay his debts, at which he exclaims "cleave me to the girdle Cut my heart in sums" (3.4.89-91). Whether or not they like it, they have no choice but to faithfully carry out their tasks. After all, the master-servant relationship is based on financial power, which is stronger than morals.

No doubt this venality is a principle in Athenian society. Athens is probably corrupt, as many critics remark. Robert S. Miola points out that Shakespeare makes use of contemporary notions of democratic Athens as vice ridden. Athens was notorious for “vanity, flattery, ingratitude, injustice, and instability.”⁷ However, even if it is corrupt, the contemporary audience could not freely criticize it. London society, for whom the play was written, and Athenian society, as it is represented, overlap somewhat. This is seen in Timon's speech where he asks the guests to dispense with formality and be seated: “Make not a City feast of it, to let the meat cool ere we can agree upon the first place” (3.6.66-67). As H. J. Oliver explains, this is an anachronistic statement, as “City feast” implies “a formal banquet such as would be given in the City (of London) with places allotted in order of precedence.”⁸ Timon uses this word just before his display of vehement anger towards the Athenian people at the mock feast. So perhaps the anachronism is deliberate.

The structure of 3.2 is also notable. Lucius and the Strangers deplore Lucullus' refusal to help Timon, though Lucius himself refuses Timon's demands in the end. G. R. Hibbard observes of the Strangers:

Their sole function is to offer a detached unbiased interpretation of what they witness . . . They are, in fact, the representatives of true humanity and of religion.⁹

Their standards of judgement are religious; and the verdict they pass at the end of the scene carries great weight, since they are disinterested detached observers, utterly without bias. They speak for, and also direct, the reactions of an audience or a reader.¹⁰

Kenneth Muir also points out the Strangers' virtues and states that their praise of Timon emphasises his "genuine" nobility.¹¹ We can, of course, take their speeches at face value, but it is worth noting the implication here. This scene has a sort of "Chinese-boxes" structure. The audience watches the Strangers, who condemn Lucius, who has just condemned Lucullus. The Strangers disapprove of Lucius' ingratitude, but there is nothing that suggests that they would behave any differently under similar circumstances. Rather, it is strongly implied that they would take the same action. Hearing the news of Lucullus' refusal, Lucius remarks:

For my own part, I must needs confess I have received some small kindness from him, . . . nothing comparing to his; yet had he mistook him, and sent to me, I should ne'er have denied his occasion so many talents. (3.2.18-23)

The First Stranger's remark later in the scene curiously resembles that of Lucius':

For mine own part,
I never tasted Timon in my life,
nor came any of his bounties over me,
To mark me for his friends. Yet I protest
For his right noble mind, illustrious virtue,
And honourable carriage
Had his necessity made use of me,
I would have put my wealth into donation. (78-85)

Both speeches begin with "for my/mine own part" and suggest the remoteness of the relationship, using conditional clauses following "yet" to portray a hypothetical situation in which they would be eager to help Timon. The original significance of "honourable" as an epithet to describe Timon is diluted to a certain extent by Lucius' earlier use of the word: "He [Timon] is . . . an honourable gentleman" (1-2). In this society, it is dubious how well such a respectful adjective such as "honourable" and the conditional clauses shown above describe the speakers' actual behaviour. Presented with this pattern in the scene, an audience could not necessarily react as Hibbard suggests. Interestingly, Shakespeare, himself a poet, implicates himself as a member of this venal society by placing a poet in the play who operates solely for his own profit. Any theatrical group, including the King's Men, is dependent on an income to subsist. This "Athens" is closer to Shakespeare's society (and probably our own) than Hibbard suggests. The audience, especially the contemporary one, is not allowed to criticize it freely, while it is represented as corrupt.

It is important to note that Athens is represented as a cruel, autonomous force, in which the individual is subsumed. As a mere cog in the wheel, the individual loses significance. As previously mentioned, many characters are unnamed. Their identities are encompassed in the speech prefixes, which indicate their social roles. A poet is nothing but a poet, and a jeweler is nothing but a jeweler. Similarly, a lord is just a lord. Certain names confusingly resemble each other in sound. In the list of *dramatis personae* we see a Lucius, Lucullus and Lucilius and a Philotus, Flavius, and Flaminus. Moreover, as some names are mentioned only once or twice, or given to less significant characters than the Poet and Painter, the function of a name to differentiate one

individual from another is certainly compromised. As for Timon's steward, while many recent editions such as the Penguin Shakespeare and the Oxford Complete Shakespeare call him "Flavius," the Arden Shakespeare preserves the Folio's speech-prefix, Stew(ard). We can certainly specify his name. His name is mentioned once in 1.2, but throughout the rest of the play he is nothing but a steward, even when Timon praises his loyalty:

Had I a steward
 So true, so just and now so comfortable?

 ... I do proclaim
 One honest man. Mistake me not, but one.
 No more, I pray — and he's a steward. (4.3.494-502)

The choice of the Arden editor seems appropriate in that the play emphasises his social role over his distinctiveness.

With the exception of the outsiders Timon, Alcibiades and Apemantus, Shakespeare goes to length to deprive Athenians of individuality. The named characters Lucullus, Lucius, Servilius stand out, compared with the other ungrateful characters, in that their denial of Timon takes place onstage. However, they disappear by the second feast, replaced by anonymous lords — Lord 1, Lord 2, and Lord 3. Ventidius, who is freed from prison in Act 1, does not appear in the second feast either. His refusal to help Timon is never represented onstage but merely recounted by the Third Servant.¹²

Characters such as Lord 1, Lord 2, and Lord 3 could easily have a more distinctive characterization onstage than in the text. However, the

script often requires them to speak their lines simultaneously.¹³
Instances of this abound throughout the play:

All Ladies. Most thankfully, my lord. (1.2.153)
All (Lords) So are we all. (169)
All Lords. O none so welcome. (216)
All Serv(ant). What are we, Apemantus? (2.2.65)
All Serv. Gramercies, good fool. How does your mistress. (71)
Some (Lords) What does his lordship mean?
Others I know not. (3.6.83-84)
Phry(nia), Timan(dra). Well, more gold. What then?
Believe't that we'll do anything for gold.
(4.3.151-152)
All (Bandits) We are not thieves, but men that much do want. (418)
Both (Senators) 'Tis most nobly spoken. (5.4.63)

These lines deprive these characters of the individuality that they might obtain by individual actors. The Folio refers to the ladies who dance in the first feast as Amazons in disguise: "Re-enter Cupid, with a masque of Ladies as Amazons" (1.2.126.S.D.). As a famously distinctive tribe, the reference may serve to highlight Athens' conformity.

None of the senators have names either. The character who instructs Caphis to visit Timon in 2.1 is, according to the Folio's speech prefix, "a Senator." However, we cannot know whether he is one of the "three Senators" (3.5.1.S.D.). Although the scene starts with the First Senator's "My lord, you have my voice to't" (3.5.1), in their exchange with Alcibiades, the Senators tacitly agrees with each other as if they were one. This stands in a striking contrast to Alcibiades's and his

friend's mode of expression. His friend is a person who opposes "his foe" when he sees "his reputation touch'd to death" and who "has made too much plenty with" his plenteous wounds received in the previous war (3.4.19-20,68). And Alcibiades asserts his individuality in defending such a person. He pleads for his friend, emphasizing not only his friend's military merits but also his own:

Alcib. Take *my* deserts to his, and join 'em both;

And for *I* know your reverend ages love

Security, I'll pawn *my* victories, all

My honour to you, upon his good returns

First Sen. *We* are for law; he dies: urge it no more,

On height of *our* displeasure. . .

Alcib. Must it be so? It must not be.

My lords, *I* do beseech you know *me*.

(3.5.80-91, italics mine)

In the second half of the scene, there is also the marked contrast between Alcibiades' frequent use of the first person singular and the senators' use of the first person plural. One who claims his individuality is banished in this society, and it is significant that the troublesome friend is referred to simply as "he."

Throughout the play, individuality is blurred, and society is represented as autonomous being. A fact often ignored in stage productions, "Senator 1" does not necessarily represent one person.¹⁴ In 5.4 Alcibiades addresses the senators accusingly, taking them for the senators who banished him: "till now, myself and such / As slept within the shadow of your power . . ." (5.4.5-7). This is contrary to the "new"

second Senator's statement, "Nor are they living / Who were the motives that you first went out" (26-27). So we cannot be sure whether "Lord 1" always represents the same person. In any case, Shakespeare represents the society as a distinct entity in which individuals are faceless and replaceable components.

Timon leaves his society, abhorring it and refusing to take the course later suggested by Apemantus: "Be thou a flatter now, and seek to thrive / By that which has undone thee. Hinge thy knee . . ." (4.3.212-215). His desire to cut himself off from society is symbolized by the action of taking off his clothes. Clothes represent social codes. A "cloak", for example, is mentioned in relation to the norms of public behaviour. Commanding his servant to visit Timon, a Senator tells him to "Get on your cloak" (2.2.15). A cloak is also mentioned when Flaminius and Lucullus meet. Lucullus asks "what hast thou there under thy cloak, pretty Flaminius" (3.1.13-15). The cloak may also serve to blur the distinction between individuals in a public place, as is seen in the stage direction: "Enter Steward in a cloak, muffled" (3.4.40.S.D.). A "cap" denotes courtly affectation. A Senator, imagining Timon's evasion, says "the cap / Plays in the right hand, thus" (2.1.18-19). Timon describes his guests as "Cap-and-knee slaves" (3.6.93-94), and the cap as a token of flattery is implied in Apemantus' "Hinge thy knee, / And let his very breath whom thou'lt observe / Blow off thy cap" (4.3.213-215).

The end of the mock feast most clearly and perhaps most ironically reveals the relationship between clothes and social codes. This feast completely ignores propriety in that the guests are not entertained but harassed, and at the end the Lords' confusion reflects the social disruption.

Third Lord. Push, did you see my cap?

Fourth Lord I have lost my gown.

First Lord He's but a mad lord ...Did you see my jewel?

Third Lord Did you see my cap?

Second Lord Here 'tis.

Fourth Lord Here lies my gown. (3.6.104-112)

Timon's action of undressing himself, thus, initiates his severance from society. However, it is important to consider whether he succeeds. According to Gail Paster:

By moving out to an isolated cave, Timon remains the most expressive symbol of his city Timon's cave becomes an imaginative symbol not only of his own misanthropic isolation but also of the underlying realities in the city he had left behind, realities that Athens itself must confront in the face of destruction by Alcibiades.¹⁵

Whether or not the cave is so symbolic, she is perceptive in drawing attention to Timon's relationship to the city in the last two acts. For Timon still seems to retain his relation to the society in some respects.

Ironically, in spite of his attempt to seclude from the society, his digging for a root leads him to find gold, which only has value in a social context. He distributes it to the people who pass by, apparently uninterested in it, but his action stems from his former attitude towards money. When Phrynia and Timandra ask for money, he says "More whore, more mischief first; I have given you earnest" (4.3.169-170). Likewise, he commands the Bandits to commit misdeeds, dispensing

money: "There is more gold. Cut throats" (448). At the end of the same scene, the Steward is told "Go, live rich and happy, / But condition'd: thou shalt build from men; / Hate all, curse all ..." (529-536). It is notable that he employs the financial terms "earnest" and "condition'd." He is paying them to fulfill his requests. This all signifies that he has not separated himself from society in a monetary sense.

Hibbard mentions Timon's relationship with Athens during the period of his self-imposed exile: "his body may be in the woods, but his heart and mind are still in Athens . . . The great curses that he utters, filled with bitterness and loathing, are the expressions of a thwarted love for man that feeds upon itself."¹⁶ He also states that the following curse shows his "profound reverence and affection" towards the principles of civilized living¹⁷:

Piety and fear,
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
Domestic awe, night-rest and neighbourhood,
Instruction, manners, mysteries and trades,
Degrees, observances, customs and laws,
Decline to your confounding contraries,
And yet confusion live. (4.1.15-21)

Now Timon represents himself as an embodiment of the city. The link between an individual and society is also implied in the episode with Flavius. Timon instructs Flavius to shun society, saying "thus condition'd: thou shalt build from men. . . . Ne'er see thou man, and let me ne'er see thee" (4.3.529-531, 541), but seven lines later we learn he has encountered suitors: the Painter says, "'Tis said he gave unto his

steward a mighty sum" (5.1.7-8). No one can do what Timon attempts to do. The Poet, the Painter, the Bandits and Flavius, who seek out Timon in the woods, all go back to Athens. Timon's anthropomorphic terms suggest that even animals are as interdependent as humans: "If thou wert the lion, the fox would beguile thee; if thou wert the lamb, the fox would eat thee; if thou wert the fox, the lion would suspect thee, when peradventure thou wert accus'd by the ass; if thou wert the ass..." (4.3.329-345).

Timon imprecates curses on the characters whom he meets in the woods, and the stage is flooded with curses especially when Apemantus appears. Timon repeatedly tells him to leave. However, at the same time he seems to enjoy Apemantus' presence to an extent. While he remains generally passive in his exchange with Alcibiades, he counters Apemantus' curses with his own curses, Apemantus' cynicism with his own cynicism. Furthermore, their exchange, despite its total disregard for social norms, probably establishes a certain dialogue as anti-dialogue. In fact, Timon contributes to continuity of the dialogue, by asking questions.

Tim. Why dost thou seek me out?

Apem. To vex thee.

Tim. Always a villain's office, or a fool's.

Dost please thyself in't?

Apem. Ay.

Tim. What, a knave too? (4.3.238-240)

Apem. Where liest a nights, Timon?

Tim. Under that's above me.

Where feed'st thou a days, Apemantus? (294-295)

Tim. Who, without those means thou talk'st of, didst thou ever
know belov'd?

Ape. Myself.

Tim. I understand thee; thou hadst some means to keep a dog.
(314-318)

Tim. What wouldst thou do with the world, Apemantus, if it lay
in thy power?" (321-322)

Even though some of Timon's questions are prepared for his subsequent cynicism towards, or curses on Apemantus, they can also be incentives to sustain their dialogue.

We also see Timon's willingness to communicate with Apemantus in his manner of addressing him. Naming seems to be exclusive to Timon and Apemantus. Asked by Alcibiades "What is thy name," Timon says "I am Misanthropos" (4.3.52-54). Unlike in Act 1, neither Alcibiades nor Flavius is addressed by name during their respective visit. On the other hand, as is seen in the speeches cited above, Timon and Apemantus address each other by name. Timon entertains Apemantus' company to some degree though it is contrary to the spirit of misanthropy.

Language is as vital an element as money in a society. As long as Timon exchanges words with others, he cannot completely separate himself from society. As a malediction itself consists of words, a misanthrope is a contradiction in terms. Even at the moment of death, Timon still reveals the inherent conflict in misanthropy. He writes an epitaph, which is obviously an act of sending a signal to the living: he says to the senators "Come not to me again; but say to Athens, / Timon hath made his everlasting mansion / Upon the beached verge of the salt flood" (5.1.213-215). As a "misanthrope," he still tries to communicate

If thou wilt curse, thy father (the poor rag)
Must be thy subject, who in spite put stuff
To some she-beggar and compounded thee
Poor rogue hereditary. Hence, be gone.
If thou hadst been a knave and flatterer.

Apem. The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the
extremity of both ends. (4.3.204-206, 271-278, 301-302)

Whereas Timon fails in a capitalist society, Apemantus fails in a feudal society. Shakespeare creates two "misanthropes," the products of two societies, who undermine each other's misanthropy. A misanthrope is probably a contradictory existence in itself. Thus, Timon's tragedy lies in the fact that he cannot escape from society, no matter how vehement his disgust may be.

This theme is reinforced by the Alcibiades subplot. Many critics including G. Wilson Knight view the parallel plot as a means of highlighting Athenian ingratitude. According to Knight, "the theme of Alcibiades is close-woven with that of Timon, and both endure ingratitude from the Senate."²² Yet, also notable is the fact that both Timon and Alcibiades assume their virtues to be influential. Alcibiades cites his military contribution as a legitimate reason for the law to be made flexible, and Timon assumes that his liberality will secure friendship firm enough to help him in time of crisis. However, Alcibiades' military merits are ineffectual in the face of Athenian law, an integral element in this society. The ideals of the two men are defeated by such vital and concrete elements of society as money and law, which have more absolute power in a society than their ideals.

Alcibiades, unlike Timon, seems to control his situation at the end

of the play. But it is still open to question how far his situation has changed, compared with the one before banishment. Once more he wins respect as a result of his military prowess. However, he ends up unwittingly respecting and observing the law in the last scene, which rejects his request to exonerate his friend and subsequently banishes him:

not a man
 Shall pass his quarter or offend the stream
 Of regular justice in your city's bounds
 But shall be remedied to your public laws
 At heaviest answer. (5.4.59-63)

In raising a revolt, he may be radical, but he is in the end reabsorbed into the social system.

Timon of Athens examines the place of an individual within an autonomous, engulfing society. Timon's tragedy can be seen in the title itself. It is not "The Life of Timon" but rather "The Life of Timon of Athens" (italics mine). Timon firmly belongs to Athens after all. Whether or not one rejects society and its people, ultimately there is no escape. Here lies Timon's tragedy and perhaps that of humanity as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Maurice Charney, "Timon of Athens," *All of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 314.
- 2 Charney 318.
- 3 All citations from Shakespeare are from the Arden Shakespeare: H. J. Oliver, ed., *Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare (Surry: Meuthuen,

- 1959).
- 4 G. R. Hibbard, ed., *Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare, The New Penguin Shakespeare, Penguin Books Ltd., 1970, 187.
 - 5 Though *The Taming of the Shrew* contains many servants (at least fifteen), the number of the masters is only about five.
 - 6 Katharine Eisaman Maus, Introduction to *The Life of Timon of Athens*, The Norton Shakespeare, eds., Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) 2249.
 - 7 Robert S. Miola, "Timon in Shakespeare's Athens" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31.1 (1980) 22.
 - 8 Oliver 80.
 - 9 Hibbard 27.
 - 10 Hibbard 185.
 - 11 Kenneth Muir, "Timon of Athens," *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence* (London: Hutchinson Library, 1972) 192-193.
 - 12 Of course, these devices also serve to prevent Timon from gathering much sympathy from the audience.
 - 13 Some characters appear on the stage without any lines: in 1.1, "certain Senators" enter the stage (38. S.D.); Alcibiades' attendants, who are mentioned as "the rest" in the Folio, keep silent as well (246. S.D.); in 3.3, "another of Timon's friends" is onstage with Sempronius. This may also make the difference between characters onstage subtle.
 - 14 For instance, the production directed by Gregory Doran at Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1999 used the same two senators throughout the play. Gregory Doran, dir., *Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare, perf. Michael Pennington, The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 7 Aug. — 9 Oct. 1999.
 - 15 Gail Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985) 102.
 - 16 Hibbard 40.
 - 17 Hibbard 41.
 - 18 In this regard, Molière's *Le Misanthrope* differs from Shakespeare's play. In the final scene, the protagonist Alceste decides to seclude himself from society, but the difficulty of total seclusion is implied by Philinte's suggestion that they should hinder Alceste's attempt: "Come, madam, let us go and do all we can to persuade him to give up this foolish plan" (75) Molière does not go further into the matter of whether Alceste manages to separate himself from society. John Wood, trans., *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*, by Molière (Penguin Books, 1959).

- 19 Hibbard, 253.
- 20 See, for example, Paster 107 or Charney 200.
- 21 That he cannot be an "absolute" misanthrope by complete separation from the society is, in fact, implied to the audience in a dramatic sense even at the point when he leaves Athens. If Timon should meet no other character and die anonymously, he could be represented as an "absolute" or "true" misanthrope. However, this means either that he has to end up making a tremendously long soliloquy, or that, at least, the length of time of his presence onstage must be very limited. Therefore, even when Timon leaves Athens, the audience can easily anticipate that he will still encounter characters from Act 4 onward. Shakespeare seems to make use of the dramatic requirements to present the difficulty in becoming an "absolute" misanthrope.
- 22 G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; New York: Routledge, 1998) 215.

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