

## *Timon of Athens* in Its Elizabethan Audience

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This essay attempts to explain how Shakespeare is making use of the knowledge stocked in the mind of his audience and readers in *Timon of Athens*. Such knowledge is made up of three components: the knowledge of emblem books; that of myths; and that of the literary works previously publicized. In his plays, Shakespeare frequently invited his Elizabethan audience to use their knowledge of emblem books so as to experience visually, in mind, what were spoken on the stage. Such use of language was not peculiar to Shakespeare. The Renaissance is the period in which poetry and pictures were closely related to each other. Samuel Danial, for instance, was so much interested in pictorial art that he translated Giovio's emblem book in 1585.<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson was also interested in visual experience, so that he wrote many courtly masques with scenic spectacles. They are the men known as the rivals of Shakespeare. When we take such a trend into consideration, it is not difficult to think that Shakespeare used such words that helped his audience have visual experience hearing what were spoken. Since a performance is a way of communication, it is natural to think that Shakespeare chose the words that could be easily translated into pictures, the words that were readily associable with the scenes familiar to the audience, the pictures of emblem books. This essay discusses the meaning of some of the scenes in *Timon of Athens* by associating them to emblem

pictures. It also discusses how other stocked knowledge may help us understand the plot structure of the play and the meaning of some words.

Like many other Renaissance plays, *Timon of Athens* has two plots: the main plot develops around Timon's downfall and his transformation; the subplot develops around Alcibiades's banishment and his conquest of Athens. In the first three acts, the main plot develops, echoing the Passion.<sup>2</sup> Three of the motifs in this plot are exactly in parallel to the actions in the Passion. However, there is one motif in which the meaning of the action is alienated from its form: that is the motif of Timon's feast in Act I, Scene 2.

In Act I, Scene 2, Apemantus describes Timon's feast, alluding to the Last Supper:

It grieves me to  
See so many dip their meat in one man's blood.  
(I. 2. 39 - 40)<sup>3</sup>

There is one central figure. "One man" is Christ in the Last Supper and Timon in his feast. There are also people who drink the wine given by this one central figure. The outward actions, what we see, are in parallel, but their meanings are opposite. What the disciples got at the Supper was the promise of redemption. The main concern of the host and his guest of the Supper was spiritual. Meanwhile, Timon offers his wine as well as his food and gold so as to satisfy the secular need of his guests.

Predicting the betrayal of Timon's "friends," Apemantus again alludes to the Last Supper, Judas at the Supper:

The fellow that sits next him, now parts bread with  
him, pledges the breath of him in a divided draught, is the  
readiest man to kill him.  
(I. 2. 45 - 48)

This is exactly in parallel to the action in the Passion.

Act II, Scene 2 and Act III, Scene 4 are "baiting scenes."<sup>4</sup> In these scenes the servants who are sent by Timon's friends bait Timon, demanding him to repay his debts immediately. As they press him so hard that he loses his breath:

Give me breath

(II. 2. 38)

They have e'en put my breath from me, the salves

(III. 4. 104)

Emrys Jones explains these lines, writing, "Since breath is life, robbing him of his breath is a token killing."<sup>5</sup> If these scenes are the scenes of symbolic killing of Timon, they correspond to the trial scene and the Crucifixion in the Passion. The servants in Act IV, scene 2 remind us of the "disciples of the Christ meeting after the crucifixion."<sup>6</sup>

The Passion is providing the backbone of the main plot from Act I through III. However, the story of Christ is working as the foil to stress the difference between Christ and Timon. Timon is not "Christ-like" at all.<sup>7</sup> Christ never provided materials for his disciples, no gold. He never tried to buy friendship like Timon. Christ's death on the Cross was the first step towards the Resurrection, while the death of Timon as a Philanthropist at the end of Act III is the moment at which Timon as a Misanthrope was born. The former is an expression of infinite love, while the latter is an expression of infinite hatred. He does not dream to transform Athens into "an earthly paradise where it may find complete satisfaction in the intercommunion of heart with heart, and gift with gift."<sup>8</sup> In Act V, Scene 1, Timon speaks as follows:

Tell my friends,  
Tell Athens, in the sequence of degree  
From high to low throughout, that whoso please  
To stop affliction, let him take his haste,  
Come hither ere my tree hath felt the axe,  
And hang himself.

(V. 1. 205 – 10)

Timon is mocking the social order (“... in the sequence of degree / From high to low throughout ...”) and inviting all the Athenians to hang themselves like Judas, the archetypal betrayer.<sup>9</sup> Timon chooses to die as Timon Misanthrope.

From the epitaph that he carved on his gravestone, we learn again that he wanted others to remember him only as Timon Misanthrope. His hatred of men is expressed by the fact that he inscribed the epitaph in the characters that a soldier cannot understand.

What's on this tomb  
I cannot read.

(V. 3. 5 – 6)

Timon does not want ordinary people to understand his words. He wants to alienate himself from the community which is woven together by verbal communication.

The action of carving an epitaph on the grave stone reminds us of an emblem picture that depicts “a sculptor, with mallet and chisel, cutting a memorial of his wrongs in a block of marble.” (see the next page).

This suggests that Timon is thinking that his transformation into a misanthrope is a wrong doing. He does not like Timon Misanthrope himself. He hates himself and he hates others. Thus he is exactly opposite to Christ.

*Scribit in marmore laesus.*



**I**N marble harde our harmes wee alwayes graue,  
Bicause, wee still will beare the same in minde:  
In duste wee write the benefites wee haue,  
Where they are soone defaced with the winde.  
So, wronges wee houlde, and neuer will forgieue,  
And soone forget, that still with vs shoulde liue.

*Nec sibi,*

The main plot of *Timon of Athens* is in parallel with some of morality plays based on the story of the Prodigal Son. There are two types of morality plays on the story. There are plays that faithfully follow the story in the New Testament, and there are plays that are its complete adaptation. "The Comedy of Prodigal Son" (1593 or 1594) is an example of the former, and "Liberalitie and Prodigalitie" is an example of the latter. Timon's story is paralleling the latter type, without an happy ending.

*Timon of Athens* has a quality of morality plays.<sup>12</sup> The characters are the incarnations of abstract concepts. They have no individuality.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the play, we are invited by Painter to see a play in which a man of bounty named Timon slips off from the zenith of the Wheel of Forture to its nadir:

Painter: 'Tis common.

A thousand moral paintings I can show

That shall demonstrate these quick blows of  
Fortune's

More pregnantly than words. Yet you do well

To show Lord Timon that mean eyes have seen  
The foot above the head.

(I. 1. 92 – 97)

The conversation between Poet and Painter from line 53 through 97 is serving as the prologue for the following play-in-play the main character of which is Timon. He comes in immediately after the prologue ends on line 97.

When he comes into the stage, Timon says to the messenger from Ventidius as follows:

Noble Ventidius! Well,  
I am not of that feather to shake off  
My friend when he must need me.

(I. 1. 103 – 05)

G. R. Hibbard comments on *that feather*: “*of that feather to*: of such a kind as to. Compare ‘Birds of a feather flock together.’”<sup>14</sup> The primary meaning of the above lines is that Timon will not discard a friend of his because he and Timon belong to one body, one community of Athens.

Because Timon uses the feather imagery, these lines link him to Vanity in *Liberalitie and Prodigalitie*. In this morality play, Vanity comes in all in feathers in the first scene of the first act: “Enter Vanitie soluo, all in feathers.”<sup>15</sup> He meets Money, the son of Fortune, and hires him as a servant. As Vanity uses Money too often, Money wears off and runs away. By identifying Vanity with Timon, we can easily predict his course of life from the beginning of the play.

There is also a character called Prodigality in this morality play. He also hires Money as a servant. However, as he overuses Money, Money becomes sick and runs away. Prodigality tries to catch Money. At one point, he tries to climb up a ladder to catch Money

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and falls down: as "Fortune claps a halter about his neck, he breaketh the halter and fallēs."<sup>16</sup> A cliché of "The Prodigal Giving a Banquet" associates Timon with this Prodigality.



PLATE II. THE PRODIGAL GIVING A BANQUET

The main plot of *Timon of Athens* is thus in parallel to the story of Passion and that of *Liberalitie and Prodigalitie*. An emblem picture of Timon also helps us predict Timon's fortune from the beginning. That is a picture of Sambucus:

Miseria et Timon.  
Ad Hieron. Cardanum.



Sambucus, 1584.

Here we see Timon who has fallen from a pear tree. When we read the lines, "Yet you do well / To show Lord Timon that mean eyes have seen / The foot above the head" (I. 1. 95 - 97), we associate them to this emblem picture, one of "a thousand moral paintings" (I. 1. 93) and visualize his fall from the zenith to the nadir of the Wheel of Fortune in our mind.

The imagery of fluid suggests the mutability of Timon's fortune. As pointed out by Professor J. Philip Brockbank in his lecture,<sup>19</sup> the imagery of fluid is frequently used throughout the play. For example, in Act I, Scene 1, Jeweller describes the lustre of a jewel, using the fluid imagery: "Here is a *water*, look ye" (I. 1. 18). Or Poet describes the way in which his imagination works, using the fluid imagery:

Poet: A thing slipped idly from me.

Our poesy is as a gum which *oozes*  
From whence 'tis nourished. The fire i'th'flint  
Shows not till it be struck. Our gentle flame  
Provokes itself, and like the *current* flies  
Each bound it chafes.

(I. 1. 21 - 26)

My free *drift*

Halts not particularly, but moves itself  
In a wide *Sea* of tax.

(I. 1. 46 - 48)

Timon's bankruptcy is described as a shipwreck by his servants:

Third Servant: Leaked is our bark,

And we, poor mates, stand on the dying deck,  
Hearing the surges threat.

(IV. 2. 19 - 21)





Round the rim runs an inscription which may be translated: 'thus adorned, they are born into this mortal life. Life decaying, they glide like water away.'<sup>20</sup>

Henry Green points out this relation between water and the Wheel of Fortune in emblem books:

The inscription on the centre of the Wheel, *Rota vite que septima notatur*--"The wheel of life which seven times is noted:" on the outer rim, --*Est velut aqua labuntur deficiens ita, Sic ornati nascuntur in hac mortali vita*, --"It is as water so falling, they pass away."<sup>21</sup>

In Whitney, we see Fortune's wheel floating on the sea:<sup>22</sup>



The fluid imagery tantalizes us to associate Timon with Osiris, as using the Osiris myth, we can explain why Timon is compared to the sun: "He was wont to shine at seven" (III. 4. 10).<sup>23</sup> However,

this association is futile. The essential theme of the Osiris myth is that Osiris gained eternal life with the help of Isis. In "On Isis and Osiris" in *Moralia* by Plutarch, the generative power of Isis is the main theme. However, in *Timon of Athens* there is nothing that suggests such a positive power of nature as generativeness. On the contrary, the imagery of cannibalism and that of running water suggest the destructive power in nature.

Readers and the audience have their freedom to interpret what they read or see in their ways. That freedom is controlled subtly by what they already know, by the ways of thinking or imagining they are used to, by the ethos of their time. In *Timon of Athens*, what control the audience's imagination are the set images of Timon Misanthrope, Fortune, Vanity, and Prodigality. In this play, they do not serve to expand the individualities of characters. They remain as stereotypes. The words whose meaning fields overlap the meaning field of *water* suggest the inevitability of the change in Timon's fortune. In *Timon of Athens*, moralities, the story of the Passion, and emblem pictures are all working separately, each providing an imagery, types of characters, and plots. Whether that is a failure or a success is the business outside of interpretation.

#### NOTES

- 1 Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers; an Exposition of Their Similarities of Thought and Expression* (London: Trübner, 1870), p. 77.
- 2 Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 73.
- 3 William Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970). All the quotation of *Timon of Athens* are from this edition, and the underlines are added by the present writer.
- 4 Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare*, p. 68.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

- 6 G. Wilson Knight, *The Whell of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 235.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 9 Clifford Davidson comments on these lines as follows: "Quite in keeping with the presence of the Judas archetype in the play, Timon will later issue an invitation to his former friends and fellow Athenians to hang themselves on his tree before he cuts it down (V. 1. 204-211). Judases ought to end their lives like the archetypal betrayer, who is said to have 'hanged himself' (Matt. xxvii. 5)." -- "*Timon of Athens: the Iconography of False Friendship*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 43 (1980), p. 196.
- 10 Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, p. 456.
- 11 Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), rpt in *English Emblem Books*, ed. John Horden (Menston, Yorkshire: the Scholar Press, 1969), p. 183.
- 12 A. S. Collins writes, "... *Timon* is his [Shakespeare's] true morality play in the straight sense. It is the medieval morality play, only so much altered as to bring it very near to perfection." -- "*Timon of Athens: A Reconsideration*," *Review of English Studies* 22 (April 1946), p. 98.
- 13 A. S. Collins writes: "Look at the list of dramatic personae understandingly and the personal names almost vanish--it is only three flattering lords, one false friend, a selfish father, some senators, money-lenders and their servants, a faithful steward and some honest servants, a painter, a poet, a fool, two banditti ... Railing Envy ... Ideal Bounty and Friendship. Alcibiades alone is a man, a soldier, practical, sensual, yet a ture friend, but still barely individualized."--*Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 14 G. R. Hibbard, "Commentary," *The Life of Timon of Athens* by William Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 153.
- 15 *A Pleasant Comedie, Shewing the Contention between Liberalitie and Prodigalitie* (1602), rpt. the Malone Society, ed. W. W. Greg

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(London: the Oxford University Press; n. d.).

- 16 *Ibid.*, Act IV, Scene 4, 903, stage direction.
- 17 Max Geisberg, *Der Deutsche Einblatt-Holzschnitt* (Munich, 1930) No. 350-51. Reproduced in T. W. Craik, *The Tudor Interlude: Stage, Costume, and Acting* (London: Leicester University Press, 1962), between p. 48 and p. 49.
- 18 Reproduced in Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, p. 427.
- 19 J. Philip Brockbank, "Timon of Athens," Lecture presented during the summer course of the University of Birmingham at Stratford-upon-Avon, the 29th of July, 1982.
- 20 Samuel C. Chew, "This Strange Eventful History," *Joseph Quincy Adams: Memorial Studies*, ed. James G. McManaway et al. (Washington D. C.: the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), p. 167.
- 21 Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, p. 406 and p. 407.
- 22 Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems*, p. 181. Whitney's picture is the reproduction of Alciati's, p. 133.
- 23 M. C. Bradbrook discusses Timon as Solar man. See "Blackfriars: The Pageant of Timon of Athens," *Shakespeare the Craftsman: the Clark Lectures in 1968* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 155.