

Some Autobiographical Aspects of Timon of Athens

by Warren Thomas Hope

‘Tis honor with most lands to be at odds. (3.5.124)

Timon of Athens has for a long time been considered a “problem play” or, as Coppelia Kahn has more recently put it, a “curious play.” In a way, the main problem with the play is its bitterness—its irony, misanthropy, and misogyny. These are often expressed in sadistic, sensual terms, making the play’s tone reveal an uncharacteristic opposite that dominates what is thought of as Shakespeare’s early plays. This is especially true with regard to comedies. As a result, *Timon* is thought to slide in with *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* among Shakespeare’s comedies and with *King Lear* and *Coriolanus* among the tragedies.

The play’s darkness is thought to indicate it is a late work and scholars generally date it from about 1600 to 1605. In addition, some scholars argue that the play is unfinished or the result of a collaboration, perhaps with Thomas Middleton. These problems rise in part because of the pseudoscience of Stratfordianism that traditional Shakespeare scholars feel bound by. At least some of these problems or curiosities can be removed by J. Thomas Looney’s circumstantial but scientific case for Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the actual man behind the pen name “William Shakespeare.”

It is a truism to say that all of Shakespeare’s characters come from him. If Hamlet, Falstaff, and Lear are mere words printed in ink on pages, they are nonetheless still alive in a way that their author no longer is. No one word compares Timon and Alcibiades, the two main characters in *Timon of Athens*,

the heroes of both the play's plot and subplot, with Shakespeare's most memorable and lasting characters, but they nonetheless come directly out of their author's life. They are both presented as single men with no female love interest, who exist as idealized versions of a nobleman and a military hero, respectively. Timon, the nobleman, is depicted as a "giver"—a patron of the arts, a purchaser of jewels, a giver of gifts, and exceedingly hospitable host, someone who seems convinced that his wealth is inexhaustible and is to be generously spread among those he sees as his friends and associates. His attitudes toward wealth and friendship serve to define what he thinks a nobleman should be. He argues that a "giver" cannot, or at least should not, be a "receiver," so he puts up the money to free a friend imprisoned for debt but refuses repayment—treating the money as a gift rather than a loan. This overt opposition to usury, to moneylending, is another of Timon's traits. Unfortunately, his extreme indifference to wealth and its value means that he runs out of it, having sold his lands and gone into debt to such an extent that he is ruined. He then asks his friends for money, and they all refuse despite having benefited for some time from his generosity. Embittered by this ingratitude, he exiles himself from Athens and takes a new name, turning himself from Timon into Misanthropos, a hater of mankind.

Alcibiades, on the other hand, has been of service to Athens primarily through his skill as a military man. He too is a kind of ideal because of his skill, dedication, and successful service. But if Timon expects or looks for no reward for his generosity, Alcibiades expects his fellow citizens or their governors to show appreciation for his service. He makes a case that a friend and fellow soldier of his should be forgiven by the Senate of Athens for a crime because of the friend's own service to the city. When this argument fails, Alcibiades argues that his request should be granted as a recognition of his own service. The Senate not only rejects this argument but banishes Alcibiades.

Two things join Timon and Alcibiades so that they represent two aspects of Oxford's career as a courtier. First, they both become disillusioned with their homeland, Athens—in this case, an historical Athens that seems a Romanized Elizabethan court with nobles and a Senate rather than the Periclean Democracy that would better suit to the time of the play. Both Timon and Alcibiades become enemies of Athens after having served it well. Second,

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*Act V, Scene 1:
“You are an alchemist, make gold of that:—Out, rascal dogs!”*

this change takes place in both cases through an extreme reaction to ingratitude—the lack of gratitude from Timon’s friends who benefited from his generosity and the lack of gratitude of the Senate for Alcibiades’ military service.

As I see it, Oxford in this play looks back on two alternate versions of careers he might have had. He was for a time most like Timon, famous for his generosity, his patronage of writers, players, musicians, and other friends and associates, even early in his career. When Flavius, Timon’s steward, finally convinces his master that his coffers are empty and he is in debt, Timon characteristically responds, “Let all my land be sold,” a direct echo of Oxford’s expressed view when he wished to continue his continental travels and he wrote Lord Burghley, his father-in-law and the Lord Treasurer, on how to raise money. Of course, in Timon’s case all his land had already been sold, so he had no way of repairing his situation or repaying his debts. I think of Oxford at two stages in his life, when he was more or less single, as being the basis for this reflection on one element of his career: on his return from the continent in 1576 when he separated from his wife at the age of 26; and in 1591 after Anne Cecil, his Countess, had died, and his three daughters were being raised by his former father-in-law, and he found himself basically broke and in debt. At both times he clearly experienced and felt ingratitude.

Even though Timon’s primary friends are given names, they are not highly distinguished and are at times referred to as “flattering Lords” or simply friends. My guess is it is not too far-fetched that they are three in number at least in part as a reminder of Oxford’s “friends” who became traitors he felt

compelled to denounce—Lord Henry Howard, Charles Arundel, and Francis Southwell. Oxford seems to have been moved to take on a pen name because of his extreme financial situation in 1591. Timon's taking Misanthropos as his name can be seen as a fictional equivalent of Oxford's masking himself with a name. He also must have felt ingratitude again in 1591. He'd devoted his wealth to the glory of Elizabeth's court by in effect financing, to a large extent, the English Renaissance, and the result should have been something far better than poverty and the need to remove himself from court, much as Timon took himself into exile, going outside the walls of Athens to live in the woods.

Oxford desired and contemplated a life as a military man throughout much of his life. He repeatedly expressed his frustration and disappointment in not being given opportunities to test himself on the field of battle. Eventually he was briefly given a command in the Low Countries in 1585, but was then soon replaced by his rival, the Earl of Leicester. Worse, a result of this change was for Leicester's nephew, Sir Philip Sidney, to take command of the Dutch city of Flushing. It is unclear how or why Oxford was replaced in this sudden and insulting way, but it seems clear he would have felt that it once again represented ingratitude. In his analysis of *Othello*, Dr. Bronson Feldman describes the play as Oxford's "farewell to arms" and dates it from about 1588. This experience and the giving up of the hope for a military career certainly could have contributed to the formation of the character of Alcibiades and the subplot of his going from the hero of Athens to the city's enemy, eventually retaking the city through his military prowess—a plot twist clearly related to Coriolanus turning against Rome and the looking to France, England's traditional enemy, for salvation, in *King Lear*.

It will be recalled that late in life Oxford apparently tried to influence the English succession by plotting, admittedly in an ineffectual way, to place a member of the Hastings family on the throne. It is characteristic of him that he would have preferred a member of the old English nobility to a Scot despite the wishes of Sir Robert Cecil and others.

The point should be made that there is a clear link in the play between Timon and Alcibiades so that it is justifiable to think of them as two versions of Oxford. It becomes clear that Timon was also of service to Athens as a soldier and his reputation was such that Senators come to visit him in exile to ask him to become a military leader and defend Athens from Alcibiades. Timon not only refuses this offer but gives money to Alcibiades to support his campaign against Athens. The transformation of two devoted servants of the state into enemies of it serves to suggest a critique of the nature of the Elizabethan state. The nature of this critique becomes openly expressed when Apemantus visits Timon in exile and says to him, "The commonwealth of Athens is become a forest of beasts."