

# ***The History of Timon of Athens*** 1605-6

Shakespeare

## OVERVIEW

*The History of Timon of Athens* was probably composed in 1605—1606; it seems to have been a collaboration between Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton. The play seems to have had a tenuous historical root in the character of one Timon of Phlius, a 'Greek philosopher' of the third century B.C.E. The personality of this semi-historical figure lies behind Shakespeare's transformation into the Timon of the present play; he becomes a patriot who had fought effectively for his country, and who had then turned into a super wealthy, super generous benefactor of his friends. (Who, unfortunately, were his fellow rich but not his fellow generous, and who left him sadly in the lurch.) In forming his conception of this character, Shakespeare seems to have drawn also on a novella from William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*—which had also given him the impetus for *All's Well that Ends Well*; as well as on Plutarch's *Lives* and Lucian's *Dialogues*. Thus we are looking, once more, at the genius of Shakespeare in transforming materials of chiefly scholarly interest into burning imaginations.

## CHARACTERS

**Timon** Timon is initially, in the play, one of the wealthiest fifth century B.C. Athenians, the master of a palatial home to which he regularly invites elite guests, showering them with gifts and loans, and making himself renowned for reckless (but gladly taken) assistances toward power and influence. A poet, a painter, a jeweler, and a merchant are among the regular attendees at Timon parties, and all, during these heydays of the master's wealth, benefit from his largesse, as does a variety of senators and business giants. (We are in a hazy mid-fifth century B.C. Athens, but the milieu reeks of Imperial Rome, and of the world filtered through from Plutarch's *Lives* and Lucian's *Dialogues*.) With total absence of foresight, however, Timon uses up his resources, turns naively to those to whom he has been a benefactor, finds himself spurned in his need, turns his back viciously upon mankind, and wraps up his life in a bitter misanthropic tomb full of hatred.

**Alcibiades** Alcibiades, a powerfully historical figure whom Shakespeare knew from North's translations of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, was (in historical reality) a golden figure of Athenian military brilliance and personal attraction, until by twists of fate he found himself an enemy of Athens itself, and ultimately viewed as a traitor to his homeland, fighting for Sparta. Alcibiades enters the present narrative as a virtual look alike to Timon, a bitter malcontent who curses Athens for banishing him, but over the course of the play Alcibiades grows into a more humane vision of his city, and its weaknesses, and though seasoned and skeptical of the human, in the end he makes humane (if unsuccessful) gestures to Timon himself, urging him to return to a less bitter compromise with the human condition.

**Apemantus.** Dubbed 'a churlish philosopher,' in the character list for the play, Apemantus is throughout the story a shadow double to Timon, always in the negative, consummately misanthropic, taunting Timon, as the latter approaches his end, for refusing to make cynical compromises with society for his own ends. Apemantus finally leaves the furious Timon, as they vie for the most vicious epithets with which to calumniate one another. It is striking that, although these two bitter mouths cannot make peace with one another, they cannot agree on the best way to express their contempt for humans.

## STORY

**Banquet.** The story opens on a characteristic banquet atmosphere at the home of Timon, who has gathered around him the elite of the city—not only Senators but also craftsmen and artists—to all of whom Timon proves exultantly generous. Not only does he lavish his wealth on his already prosperous guests, but he helps out those who find themselves in need, like the nobleman, Ventidius, who, according to report, needs bail money to get him out of jail, and whom Timon takes care of, or—another instance—

Timon stands guarantor for a bride price which his servant must have, to satisfy the demands of his future parents-in-law. For extravagance of generosity blended with pure investment in pleasure one might want to think back to Mine Host, the great lascivious feast giver of Petronius' *Satyricon*.

**Moral.** As the old wisdom goes—the ant and the grasshopper, etc.—one's extravagances catch up with one, and the case applies in spades to Timon. For a long time, his steward has been telling him that the end of the road is in sight, and that his wealth has vanished. Timon does not believe this, and in his heart he has confidence that he will prevail no matter what happens. He feels that his own instinctive generosity will infect those to whom he has been more than generous. He has soon to test this feeling, for he is soon to learn how his beneficiaries will react, to a request for financial aid. Sending his steward and other employees through town, to request financial favors from some of the chief of his beneficiaries, Timon begins to learn the bitter truth, that none of these individuals is ready to repay Timon for past favors—each has a complex private excuse. Timon begins to see the writing on the wall. He is beginning to sink. (He still knows how to express his rage, directly in the face of former 'friends': he invites two of the most fulsome to dinner, serves them stones and warm water, throws the water in their faces, and pelts them with the stones.) But how far he has spiraled downward he has no idea, for he now begins to receive visits from creditors demanding money from him for purchases made in the past. These people are in the money lending business, and have no interest at all in the personal side of their transactions. They want from him the money which he absolutely does not have.

**Downfall.** Clearly Timon has run into a downward spiral, from which he cannot recover. The positive feeling he had about humanity, and its openness to reciprocate kindness, vanishes, and he realizes his former friends will be of no use to him. It is at this point that the man of great but naïve heart realizes that he can no longer rely on, or continue to love humanity.; that cruel god, money, has come into Timon's life, acting as Karl Marx observed, to blight human relationships and rigidify the life of society. There is no way back for Timon, whose path, after fruitless and bitter encounters with Apeimantus—who keeps reappearing—and Alcibiades, who is growing noticeably more human-friendly—leads into the woods, then into a cave near the sea, where he will leave his corpse and his epitaph for followers to see, memorials to one whom even death could not dissuade from hatred of his fellows.

## THEMES

**Expenditure** Timon has, from the outset of the play, a passion to give and share. He does not do this to divide social wealth among the haves and have-nots, although among his beneficiaries are occasional social victims, the disadvantaged. He is simply enthralled by the pleasure of giving, to whomever he likes that he likes. That this joy in giving itself is intoxicating Timon adequately expresses. But he falls victim to the natural law that to give without receiving is self-destructive. The potlatch cultures of the American north west are infused by the desire to excel in the giving game. But they know that the natural basis of their desire is the rhythm of giving and receiving, which ties them to their beneficiaries in the way Timon would have liked to be tied.

**Hatred** Timon, as we see from the outset, is not a hating person. If not a loving person exactly, rather a compulsively giving person, he is only gradually induced into hatred, and reaches perhaps the crucial acting out stage in inviting two guests to whom he serves lukewarm water and stones—stones he throws at the diners. These two individuals become symbols of Timon's turning point into an overt hater of mankind. The Timon who gravitates from that point to a root eater in a cave, and from there to his bitter epitaphed tomb by the sea, is what of hatred can replace naïve hopes of generosity among one's fellow humans.

**Greed.** Timon's wealth consuming 'friends,' from the early actions of the play, are not consumed by greed in a voracious, Charles Dickens' sense of the word, but are simply ready to take what they can get, and to keep coming back for more, like surprised motorists who discover, days after playing the lottery, that they have a couple of million, and quite naturally turn around and head for the same Kum n Go, to try again. Timon's inability to see his friends in that light is the beginning of his downfall. The only effective defense against greed, apparently, is a clear eyed recognition of what this dangerous monster is.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Timon

**Character** Timon is the main character in this play, which sees him fall from wealthy and influential host, with, it is intimated, a distinguished past, in which he has used his military might to save the city, to a condition of self-imposed barbaric pre-humanity, chewing roots from the ground, and cursing anyone who comes near him. We ask ourselves why this fall occurs? Are the gods unfriendly to our man, and out to punish him, as at times we suspect is the case with the Biblical Job? Or more likely and in contemporary terms, has Timon simply opened inside himself a kind of compulsive behavior-cycle which unrealistically calculates the intentions and attitudes of the other? Has he found a way actually to provoke the destructive responses of 'the other?'

**Parallels.** Job has been mentioned, a figure disfigured by his own sense of being targeted by God. Timon's hatreds increasingly assume the guise of 'divine punishment,' pushing him forward as a scapegoat figure. The resemblance to King Lear, of course, strikes us for what it tells about Shakespeare's ranges of dealing with aging. Lear and Timon both fulminate against the injustices and ingratiitudes of mankind, but Lear with a cosmic passion, Timon with an increasingly narcissistic violence. One might also want to contrast Timon with Sophocles' Oedipus, in *Oedipus at Colonus*; a figure who goes through a self-made hell, in life, but who emerges oddly purified in the groves of Colonus.

### Illustrative moments

**Generous** 'This gentleman of mine hath served me long...' says Timon, of his servant who wishes dowry money, so he can wed the woman he loves. Timon is glad to help out a faithful servant

**Open** At the arrival of Alcibiades, in the course of Timon's banquet, Timon is open and welcoming, and presses the military men to join them all in their feast. The Timon we know first is like that: ready and friendly.

**Naïve** 'O you gods, think I, what need we have any friends, if we should ne'er have need of 'em?' Timon is at the beginning of his discovery that his friends will actually desert him, when it comes to repaying Timon's generosity to them.

**Vicious** Timon's words upon throwing water in the faces of the two false friends he has invited to dinner.

'May you a better feast never behold,  
You knot of mouth-friends! Smoke and lukewarm water  
Is your perfection...'

**Closed** Timon in deep retreat, addressing the faithful servant who comes to commiserate with him in the wilderness.

'I have forgot all men...  
Then if thou grant'st thou'rt a man, I have forgot thee.'

### Discussion questions

Do you see a comparison between Lear and Timon of Athens? What figure seems to come from deeper in Shakespeare's imagination? (This would be another way of asking which of these characters is more humanly deep.) Both figures distill around fury at ingratitude, Lear at the ingratitude of his daughters, Timon at the ingratitude of his one-time friends, who had sucked up his fortune but will now not lend him a dime. Lear is embittered into madness, Timon into a savage new sense of the tight-fisted employment of money. Which destiny is nobler, Lear's or Timon's; which character's destiny teaches us the most about how to live well?

What does the sub tale of Alcibiades add to our understanding of the character of Timon? Does the soldier deal better than Timon with humiliation? Why does Timon not sympathize with the fate of Alcibiades? Is it because he has refused to sympathize with any human being, and has even declared war on himself?

Where does Shakespeare go for his plots? That is, what kind of sources—Plutarch, Lucian—does he transform to make his plays? What kind of material could he have assembled about Timon of Athens—an almost unknown piece of apocryphal history? How does he transmute these fragmentary figures into live energy?