

NOTES TAKEN FROM VARIOUS SOURCES

Timon of Athens is a play by **William Shakespeare** about the fortunes of an Athenian named Timon (and probably influenced by the philosopher of the same name, as well), generally regarded as one of his most obscure and difficult works until recently. Originally grouped with the tragedies, it is generally considered such, but some scholars group it with the problem plays. "**Timon of Athens**" is believed to have first been performed between **1607 and 1608**, whereas the text is believed to have first been printed in **1623 as a part of the First Folio**.

ORIGIN: Timon of Athens may refer to a historical figure who lived during the era of the Peloponnesian War. Or, more likely, to Timon of Phlius (c. 320 BC – c. 230 BC) who was a Greek skeptic philosopher, a pupil of Pyrrho, and a celebrated writer of satirical poems called Silloi. He was born in Phlius, moved to Megara, and then he returned home and married. He next went to Elis with his wife, and heard Pyrrho, whose tenets he adopted. He also lived on the Hellespont, and taught at Chalcedon, before moving to Athens, where he lived until his death. His writings were said to have been very numerous. He composed poetry, tragedies, satirical dramas, and comedies, of which very little remains. His most famous composition was his Silloi, a satirical account of famous philosophers, living and dead, in hexameter verse. The Silloi has not survived intact, but it is mentioned and quoted by several ancient authors.

ANALYSES - In the past decades, several linguistic analyses of the text have all discovered apparent confirmation of the theory that **Middleton** wrote much of the play. It contains numerous words, phrases and punctuation choices that are common in the work of Middleton and rare in Shakespeare. These linguistic markers cluster in certain scenes, apparently indicating that the play is a collaboration between Middleton and Shakespeare, not a revision of one's work by the other. The evidence suggests that Middleton wrote around one third of the play, mostly the central scenes. The editor of the Oxford edition, **John Jowett**, states that Middleton wrote the banquet scene (Sc. 2), the central scenes with Timon's creditors and Alcibiades' confrontation with the senate, and most of the episodes figuring the Steward. The play's abrasively harsh humour and its depiction of social relationships that involve a denial of personal relationships are Middletonian traits.

Jowett stresses that **Middleton's** presence does not mean the play should be disregarded, stating "*Timon of Athens is all the more interesting because the text articulates a dialogue between two dramatists of a very different temper.*"

THEMES AND MOTIFS -Major motifs in the Shakespearean play include **dogs, breath, gold** (from Act IV on), and "**use**" in reference to usury (so called because it takes payment for the "use" of money).

EMMENDATIONS

One of the most common emendations of the play is the Poet's line:

"*Our Poesie Is as a Gowne, which uses From whence 'tis nourisht,*" to "*Our poesy is as a gum, which oozes from whence 'tis nourished*" (originated by **Pope and Johnson**).

Soellner says that such emendations erode the importance of this motif, and suggests a better emendation would be "from" to "**form**," creating a mixed metaphor "**revelatory of the poet's inanity.**"

One odd emendation that often appears near the end of the play is Alcibiades commanding his troops to "cull th' infected fourth" from the Senate, as if he intends to destroy a fourth of the Senate. The word in the folio is, in fact, "**forth**," suggesting that "th' infected" are simply the ones who argued strongly against the cases of Timon and Alcibiades's officer, and that the troops are to leave alone those who just went along with it.

Banquets and Feasting

Banquets and feasting in Shakespeare are dramatically significant; besides sometimes being of central and structural importance, they often present dramatic spectacles in themselves. **The first banquet of Timon** of Athens reflects contemporary understandings of lavish Athenian entertainment at which Timon celebrates friendship and society. All the citizens are welcome to the banquet, as in accordance with the democratic principles of Athens.

The second banquet functions as a parody of the first, as Timon uses it to exact revenge on his false friends, before abandoning feasting and the city completely by exiling himself. The senses are absent from this feast: Timon mocks the insatiable appetite of his guests as he uncovers *dishes of smoke* and water. Timon is misled by facades of friendship, and so inflicts apropos revenge: **misleading those that had misled him** by having them suffer the disillusionment of mortal senses with the mere spectacle of a banquet.

Feasting had political importance both in **Ancient Greece and early modern England**. The accession of James I, however, brought to it a new level of hedonism. Excessive and riotous pageantry and feasting stirred anxiety about man's unbridled appetite and difficulty in keeping desire in check. It is likely that Shakespeare's audience would have been influenced in their perception of feasts by the religious precept of penitence. Fasting was a key feature of penitent behaviour.

Two Biblical banquets in particular resound in the language and themes of the play. The story of **The Last Supper** offers a model for sociable eating which *unites and yet anticipates betrayal*. The story of the **Prodigal Son**, on the other hand, serves to illuminate the *moral ambiguities of gluttony and excessive feasting*.

Shakespeare includes the character **of Alcibiades**, in the play, the ultimate redeemer of iniquitous Athens. He would have been known among the educated of the audience for **his presence at the Greek banquet in Plato's Symposium** at which he gets the last word on the nature of love, proposing that it cannot be found in superficial appearance.

Robert Weimann notes how the stage directions in the play inform us that the men of elevated status sit down at the main table in the middle of the stage, but **Timon orders Apemantus to sit at a table by himself downstage from the main table**.

From this positioning, **a contrast is created between Timon and his guests giving eloquent speeches from the area around the table and Apemantus who is situated so as the audience can hear him, but the other characters behind him cannot.**

He instructs us to *“Look at them, and at what their feasting really means.”* His remarks comment critically on the pomp and ceremony without destroying the theatrical effect of the banquet itself. **The dual perspective that results acknowledges the sensuous attraction of a dazzling theatrical occasion**, but also penetrates the showy surface; for in it there is *“a huge zest for life and the moral strength to see through it its glitter, its hypocrisies, its shame and its rewards.”*

Feasting in Timon of Athens illustrates **a tension between individual desire and common humanity**, and the **interdependence of good self-government and good social government**. Eating together can act as social bonding; sharing food reinforces community and is often celebratory. However, individual and selfish appetites can also break down the relationships between man and man.