

Imbalanced Friendship and Gendered Bonds in *Timon of Athens*

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Foreword

Timon of Athens is one of Shakespeare's most obscure plays and was doomed, until recent years, to a long oblivion. The limited interest in this play was partly justified by the traditional perplexity over the tragedy's authorship and date of composition (no longer disputed)¹; its non-resolution, with an ending that at times seems rushed²; the static nature of its second part; the stark exasperation

¹ It is well established that *Timon of Athens* is the result of a collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton; its date of composition is presumably around mid-1606. John Jowett precisely identifies the authorship of individual scenes. Cf., above all, William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton, *Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 132-53. All the references are to this edition, and line numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.

² The idea according to which *Timon* is an unfinished play was maintained first by E. K. Chambers in his *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930, and then fostered by Una Ellis-Fermor in her "Timon of Athens: An Unfinished Play", *Review of English Studies*, 18 (1942), pp. 270-83.

of characters and situations; its harsh language, which is sometimes disconnected, lacking in harmony, split, and uneven. The basic nature of the plot of *Timon of Athens* and the extreme simplicity of its protagonist compared to Shakespeare's more complex creatures underlie the many contrasting interpretations of the play: "a tragical satire [...] an *idiotes* comedy, rather than a tragedy"³; "more of a morality than a drama"⁴; "a pageant"⁵; "a cautionary tale"⁶. These readings culminate in Lesley W. Brill's view of the "polysemous construction" of *Timon of Athens* – a term that encompasses and therefore justifies all of them – according to which "the world of *Timon* is one of infinite moral complexity"⁷.

It is with this polysemy in mind that this article sets out to analyse the polymorphic nature of a tragedy that has the flavour and severity of censure, whose poetic force and relevance lie precisely in the discomfort it generates. Specifically, I shall argue that the remarkable complexity of this play results from the displacement of "a dominant ideology" by the new, Jacobean "emergent cultural forms"⁸. This clash engenders a tissue of endless and systematic refractions and mirrorings that constitute the framework of the entire tragedy; they thus become the parable of a man torn apart by continuous antinomies and false appearances in the face of which speech and action are powerless. Against the backdrop of classical inquiries into amity as well as the early modern performance of utilitarian friendship, the tragic rite of Timon's transformation into his opposite can be read through the homosocial dynamics triggered by a somewhat distorted practice of asymmetrical male friendship.

³ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1965, p. 98.

⁴ George B. Harrison, *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, p. 258.

⁵ Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare the Craftsman*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1979, p. 144.

⁶ John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, London, Macmillan, 1968, p. 143.

⁷ Lesly W. Brill, "Truth and *Timon of Athens*", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 40 (1979), pp. 17-36: 36.

⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism", in *Political Shakespeare. New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield, Manchester-New York, Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 6.

The message refraction

The mechanism of a double communication channel is established at the outset when Timon's ostentatious and purely ostensible centrality on the stage⁹ is merely the effect of the flattery of which the protagonist himself is the unquestionable addressee, while the polished and excessively ceremonious verbiage of the characters who respectfully crowd around him reveals their falsity. This crack in communication is the first tangible sign of a crisis of signification and the overlapping of different epistemic systems at the core of this play. The arbitrariness and ambiguity of language calls into question, as Molly Mahood has argued, "the real relationship between name and nominee, between a word and the thing it signified"¹⁰. It is thus no coincidence that Timon's almost fairy-tale entry into the scene produces a double effect as the protagonist is simultaneously the master of the sumptuous performance of his generosity and victim of the flattery game to which he is subjected.

Timon's initial blindness is reflected linguistically in his empty speeches packed with clichés and maxims. The following lines reveal his opening naivety contrasting with the behaviour of other characters as the narration proceeds:

TIMON

I am not of that feather to shake off
 My friend when he must need me. I do know him
 A gentleman that well deserves a help:
 Which he shall have: I'll pay the debt and free him.

[...]

I will send his ransom;
 And being enfranchised, bid him come to me.

⁹ Interestingly, Tom MacFaul states that Timon is "like a private, bourgeois version of Richard II, wanting an abstract friendship in which he is always to be the centre. In this he is as deluded and doomed as the English King" (Tom MacFaul, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 142).

¹⁰ Molly M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, London, Methuen, 1957, p. 73, quoted in Silvia Bigliazzi, *Nel prisma del nulla. L'esperienza del non-essere nella drammaturgia shakespeariana*, Napoli, Liguori, 2005, p. 16.

'Tis not enough to help the feeble up,
 But to support him after.
 (i.102-05; 107-10)

This gentleman of mine hath served me long:
 To build his fortune I will strain a little,
 For 'tis a bond in men.
 (i.146-48)

Timon harps on the idea that everything is sacred, that men must entertain amicable relationships and that women are symbols of grace and family¹¹ – and it is no accident that Apemantus will later speak of prostitution and degraded sexuality, thus deflating the whole situation and anticipating the collapse of the sacred that Timon will suffer throughout the second part of the play. The protagonist lives the utopia¹² of a perfect society with an uncommon solidity of values. In the eyes of the Elizabethans, the myth that he wishes to embody is both ancient and modern, and again splits the message: the ideal of wealth as a demonstration of power, and not as mere accumulation, is of medieval origin; the purview of aristocrats as opposed to the merchant class¹³. At the same time it also represents the Renaissance model of the generous patron surrounded by a perfect court, contrasting with the increasingly wealthy proto-bourgeoisie of seventeenth-century England.

Nevertheless, Timon also lives the Renaissance utopia of the prince with his court. The play opens with specific *dramatis personæ* (a poet, a painter, a jeweller, and a merchant) who pay homage to the great lord; though all this feels unreal, what matters is the idealisation of an aristocratic society of the sort that Timon dreams of experiencing. It is interesting to note that the only person

¹¹ Consider the Amazons in the pantomime scene, who are labelled as "fair ladies" (ii.142), or the future wife of Timon's servant, who embodies the sacred value of the family.

¹² In this respect, see Agostino Lombardo, "Le due utopie di *Timone d'Atene*", in William Shakespeare, *Timone d'Atene*, ed. and trans. Agostino Lombardo, Roma, Officine Edizioni, 1983, pp. 7-14.

¹³ Le Goff maintains that the dignity and honour of the lords consisted in giving without receiving. Cf. Jacques Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Artaud, 1967, p. 279.

admitted to this court who does not comply with the canons of the perfect courtier is Apemantus, the cynical philosopher. Apemantus is tolerated despite his brutal bluntness: it is as though the acceptance of difference within the perfect organism represented by the Renaissance court completed its overall harmony. His sanctification makes him harmless, and Timon's invitation that he stay since he is an Athenian is laden with significance: "I take no heed of thee; thou'rt an Athenian, therefore welcome" (ii.35-36). Timon's Renaissance utopia is thus completed by the cult of Athens as the perfect city, within which everything moves Platonically with harmony and nobility. For this reason, when Timon is attacked by Caphis, one of his creditors' servants, he is astonished by the indelicacy of such request: those who do not comply with the ideals of decorum and composure cannot be from Athens, and when he discovers that Caphis is Athenian, Timon will begin to realise that his ideal city is far from his long-cherished brotherly communion. By contrast, the audience is aware of this particular aspect from the very beginning of the play: the painter, the poet, the merchant, and the jeweller represent the adherence of aesthetic figures par excellence to the ruthless logic of an economic system dominating a world where wealth is the only criterion of moral judgment; even the props, which suggest the incessant dominion of gold and material goods, and the repeated clusters of images (stones, gold, disease, death) reveal what really lies behind ephemeral appearances, following a method taken by Shakespeare and Middleton to an extreme of subtlety.

This paradoxical dialectic between being and seeming is channelled through the unpleasant atmosphere that gradually develops thanks to a series of recurrent images – especially of food, animals, and sex. Apemantus is the harbinger of a gloomy atmosphere expressed in a down-to-earth, caustic, and factual language relying on continuous images of degradation. For instance, in the scene when Timon invites him to share a convivial moment,

TIMON

Wilt dine with me, Apemantus?

APEMANTUS

No; I eat not lords.

TIMON

And thou shouldst, thou'dst anger ladies.

APEMANTUS

O, they eat lords; so they come by great bellies.

(i.207-10)

the invitation is turned into something repulsive with the transformation of the perfect courtier into a greedy and lustful animal. The game of duplications reappears continually. The whole of the first part of the play shows Timon's blind prodigality, whilst he is surrounded by hypocrites who pretend to share his ideal of harmony exclusively for the sake of money; when they stop playing their parts, they become the personified negation of the Renaissance dream of the perfect court and reveal themselves as representatives of a new, Jacobean society that rejects social solidarity. Timon, on the other hand, reveals himself as a man in a cage, imprisoned by the mask he has forced himself to wear. This imprisonment is fuelled by false friends who hypocritically prevent the unveiling of the truth – and when this does occur, they force Timon into physical confinement, besieged in his mansion by the servants of his creditors.

As a precious document attesting for the historical and epistemological crisis between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Timon of Athens* develops another double, split message: the story of Timon gestures towards medieval axiology, with elements known to the Elizabethan audience – such as, for instance, the condemnation of lies¹⁴ – while simultaneously being perceived as the epitome of a new world divided between the real and the ideal that Shakespeare and Middleton view with dismay. The Greek Timon becomes a city-comedy Jacobean character and the economic reality within which the play moves makes explicit references to the historical moment when *Timon of Athens* was written, dominated by an economic rationale that will become the

¹⁴ Jacques Le Goff emphasises the role of lies in medieval society, and how they have always been continually pointed out and feared. Cf. Le Goff, p. 419.

expression of the most despicable avarice and of a collective consciousness devoid of dignity.

Above have I tried to outline a few examples of the complex game of refractions that stylistically supports the development of the fundamental theme of this tragedy: the opposition between being and seeming, expressed chiefly through social relationships. Nevertheless, the semiotic dichotomy between 'inside' and 'outside' becomes more confused (overdetermined, one might say) when we focus on Timon's actions before and after his fall, especially if we agree that Timon is a man ruined from the beginning¹⁵: for instance, the Poet's literary joke reveals the flattery surrounding Timon that he himself uses to obtain rewards and thanks:

POET

'Tis common:

A thousand moral paintings I can show

That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune's

More pregnantly than words.

(i.90-93)

The Poet insists on the myth of the change of Fortune, namely the medieval idea of tragedy as a steep fall from the heights of prosperity, a lesson in the terrible insecurity of worldly existence. Rolf Soellner sees the circular myth of fortune reflected in the structure of *Timon* thanks to the subplot related to Alcibiades. The critic argues that the tragedy begins with Timon being favoured by luck, only to show his fall; Alcibiades, by contrast, although momentarily at the bottom of the wheel, eventually returns to fortune's favour¹⁶. Just as both playwrights looked with concern at that yearning for power, success, and earthly gratification, so the Elizabethan audience perceived that Timon's generosity, visibly gratified by adulation, was nothing but a ruthless form of *Vanitas* – and, therefore, a sign of the decay of the nobility; therefore Timon

¹⁵ Maxwell refers to the ruin of the protagonist as an element already present at the beginning of the tragedy. Cf. J. C. Maxwell, "*Timon of Athens*", *Scrutiny*, XV (1948), pp. 194-208: 198.

¹⁶ Rolf Soellner, *Timon of Athens, Shakespeare's Pessimistic Tragedy*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1979, p. 71.

will fall and simultaneously be responsible for his own decline. And since in Shakespeare and Middleton the development of the tragic plot is accompanied by the internal co-responsibility of the hero, he will descend into the abyss, greedy for the transitory grace of mortals and forgetful of the spiritual values displayed through speech.

"I'm wealthy in my friends"

The opening dream of creating a straightforward mapping of representation between words and things raises the issue of the complete loss of referentiality and the dichotomy between subject and object, precipitated by an initial rupture and a subsequent obligatory reconfiguration of the relationship with the 'other'. The protagonist is the victim/agent of a profound personal betrayal, but, above all, he betrays himself: that is, the noble self with which he has identified in his own and others' eyes. The short circuit created by the two overlying epistemic systems is also clear when characters aim to perform amicable relations.

All seminal works focussing on the early modern dramatic treatments of friendship¹⁷ rely heavily on its classical and Renaissance formulations¹⁸. The emphasis on sameness of character and perfection in friendship, for instance, appears in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, where a virtuous friend is an 'other self', in other words a mirroring projection of the self, essential for self-knowledge. Nonetheless, to help understand the

¹⁷ Above all, cf. Laurens J. Mills, *One Soul in Bodies Twain: Friendship in Tudor Literature and Stuart Drama*, Bloomington, Principia, 1937; John M. Wallace "Timon of Athens and the Three Graces: Shakespeare's Senecan Study", *Modern Philology*, 83:4 (1986), pp. 349-63; Coppélia Kahn, "'Magic of Bounty': Timon of Athens, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38:1 (1987), pp. 34-57; G. W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; David Wootton, "Francis Bacon: Your Flexible Friend", in *The World of the Favourite*, eds J. H. Elliott and W. B. Brockliss, London-New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 184-204; Laurie Shannon, *Sovereign Amity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

¹⁸ For instance, Erasmus's collection of classical wisdom (*Adagia*); Montaigne's essay "Of Friendship", translated by John Florio in 1604; and Bacon's 1612 essay of the same name (which, of course, cannot have been passed around to Shakespeare and Middleton for the composition of *Timon of Athens*).

cultural resonances of enactments of friendship beyond the Ciceronian model¹⁹, it is of utmost importance to include Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, according to Coppélia Kahn the most significant treatise to explore "gift-giving *per se*"²⁰, and his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, with their discussion of the social conventions of friendship, grounded in ethics and goodwill. To this end, it is essential that amity be driven by love and generosity rather than expectations of reward and reciprocation²¹; however, what we see in *Timon of Athens* is a sense that giving must take place exclusively within the performance of a practice that is to some extent *do ut des*.

The multi-layered semantic value of specific lexemes that recur throughout the play engenders perverted enactments of male friendship²². For instance, from the very beginning of the tragedy we realise that words like *worthy*, *goodness*, *good*, *fortune*, *value*, *trust*, *use*, and *bond* have an unavoidable financial meaning²³. All human relationships are thus tainted, with the Athenians engaged in a mutual cannibalistic devouring in a city²⁴ where money, the

¹⁹ *Laelius De amicitia* (c. 44 BC) testifies to Cicero's friendship with Atticus. This work, influenced by Plato's *Lysis*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, has at its heart a notion of friendship in which Cicero found agreement on "de re publica consensus [...] rerum privatarum consilium [...] requies plena oblectationis" (10.34, 103). Cf. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Amicitia*, in Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer, The Loeb Classical Library, London, Heinemann, 1923, p. 211. The English translation with the parallel text in Latin is available online: https://www.loebclassics.com/view/marcus_tullius_cicero-de_amicitia/1923/pb_LCL154.103.xml

²⁰ Kahn, p. 49.

²¹ Cf. Peterman, p. 52; p. 70.

²² Cf. Lewis Walker, "Fortune and Friendship in *Timon of Athens*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18:4 (1977), pp. 577-600: 594.

²³ Among the seminal studies on the economic dimension of *Timon*, cf. W. H. Bizley, "Language and Currency in *Timon of Athens*", *Theoria*, 44 (1975), pp. 21-42; Kenneth Muir, "*Timon of Athens* and the Cash-Nexus", in *The Singularity of Shakespeare and Other Essays*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1977, pp. 56-75; Wallace, pp. 349-63; and Kahn, pp. 34-57.

²⁴ Gail K. Paster maintains that "the mentality of Athens is so narrowly materialistic that the bonding agent in this social fabric is not love [...] but rather money" (Gail Kern Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1985, p. 99). For a discussion of Shakespeare's Athenian settings, cf. Robert S. Miola, "*Timon* in Shakespeare's Athens", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 31 (1980), pp. 21-30.

“visible god” (xiv.387), and the cash-nexus underlie a ruthless, indiscriminate logic of gift-giving.

For Timon, the gift holds the utmost value, combined with friendship and a sense of solidarity between men: in contrast to the *Merchant of Venice*, for example, the protagonist gives without worrying about reciprocation, and when the nobleman begs for an opportunity to return his gifts, Timon responds with tragic irony:

TIMON

O, no doubt, my good friends, but the gods themselves have provided that I shall have much help from you. How had you been my friends else? Why have you that charitable title from thousands, did not you chiefly belong to my heart? I have told more of you to myself than you can with modesty speak in your own behalf; and thus far I confirm you. ‘O you gods’, think I, ‘what need we have any friends if we should ne’er have need of ‘em? They were the most needless creatures living, should we ne’er have use for ‘em, and would most resemble sweet instruments hung up in cases, that keep their sounds to themselves.’ (ii.85-96)

Evidently, Timon seeks fame, which he considers even more important than his luxurious goods. His narcissistic obsession with reputation takes on weightier implications through its hyperbolic reference to the celestial spheres, as Timon sees his deeds as worthy of appreciation by the gods. Although Shakespeare and Middleton may be deriding philanthropic giving, whether or not acts of beneficence can become tarnished by hubris is left shrouded in mystery. The two playwrights may already have been familiar with the distinction between true beneficence and vainglorious liberality as defined by Cicero, since it is clear from his initial insistence on public acknowledgements that Timon’s prodigality is driven by a fleeting desire for glory.

The rite of the gift is virtually enacted through gold, considered not an object to be possessed but rather a sacred element through which every earthly action is to be sublimated. Apparently, Timon is practicing his virtue through friendship in true Senecan fashion. This suggests that underlying Timon’s ideal of generosity is the classical myth of the Golden Age, also evoked by Gonzalo in the *Tempest*, where harmony and love reign supreme and nature distributes its gifts to men without any competition, abuse, or envy;

in this perfect and timeless harmony, gold acquires an aesthetic power and becomes a luminous force that embellishes and enhances everything.

However, Timon's transformation from philanthropic and idealistic patron to mad misanthrope takes place directly on stage and is a highly tragic moment. What we are witnessing is the public death of the protagonist: the man we see from this moment onwards will be a sort of human simulacrum, with death inside and destructive anger outside. The highly evocative scene unfolds throughout the second part of the play, with a continuous representation of the clash between matter and spirit. Yet the representation on stage of a moral conflict recalls the tradition of morality plays, and the religious experience we are noticing is deliberately underlined by the two dramatists with a long series of biblical echoes and explicit references to the figure of Christ: to give just a few examples, the banquet reminds us of the Last Supper, and the coins that Lucullus offers the servant to bribe him recall the thirty coins that Judas received for betraying Christ. The hour when Timon's passion begins is the exact hour at which Christ dies – and the word "passion" itself is used by Flaminius to describe Timon's sufferings. These biblical references²⁵ create a sacred atmosphere and complicate that game of allusions and communicative refractions hinted at above, as the playwrights aim to underline the religious aspect of this dramatic moment in order to elevate Timon as a symbol of the man's perennial need for spiritual values, here cruelly denied. The tension that anticipates the catastrophe gradually builds. It will be his close friends, transformed into birds of prey, who deliver the final blow destroying Timon's "verbal dream"²⁶, or his "dream of friendship" (xiii.34), and in the end caustically revealing reality to his eyes: the servants of creditors and the senators were merely a mild prelude of it.

To render this scheme effective, and to demonstrate the danger of imbalanced amicable relations, with a specific Christological

²⁵ Cf. Roger V. Holdsworth, "Biblical Allusions in *Timon of Athens* and Thomas Middleton", *Notes and Queries*, 235 (1990), pp. 188-92. See also the various works on the presence of the Bible in Shakespeare by Naseeb Shaheen, in particular *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1999, pp. 666-79.

²⁶ Mahood, p. 181.

reference echoing Peter who denies Christ three times and insisting on the number three, I will concentrate on three consecutive rejections staged by Shakespeare and Middleton, playing on the falsity of the language used and each ending with a warning message about friendship. The scene of the first refusal is very short. Lucullus denies the slightest help to his friend after accusing him of prodigality in two-faced and hypocritical language:

LUCULLUS

Many a time and often I ha' dined with him and told him on't, and came again to supper to him on purpose to have him spend less. (v.23-25)

His response, "Every man has his fault, and honesty is his" (v.27), is "brilliant in his simplicity"²⁷, and his falsity continues when he tries to corrupt the servant who spits coins at him. At this point, Lucullus hypocritically rages against his friends' duplicity: "Here's three solidares for thee, / Good boy, wink at me, and say thou saw'st me not" (v.42-43). The scene of the second refusal, by contrast, is more nuanced: Lucius is equally thoughtless and declares his willingness to help, but when he is actually asked, he leaves with a banal excuse feigning the greatest sorrow:

LUCIUS

Denied that honourable man?

[...]

yet, had he mistook him and sent to me, I should ne'er have denied his occasion so many talents.

[...]

What a wicked beast was I to disfurnish myself against such a good time when I might ha' shown myself honourable!

(vi.16-44).

Lucius's falsity is all played out in the first person; the foreigners present are astonished to witness this brazen change of perspective, and their commentary almost recalls the Chorus, which denounces the disconcerting new world of materiality that triumphs over the spirit: "Men must learn now with pity to dispense, / For policy sits above conscience" (vi.83-84). The third rejection is based on

²⁷ MacFaul, p. 146.

rhetorical artifice and develops the theme of the falsehood of language at length. Sempronius at first shows annoyance at having been asked before the others and, when the servant denies this (“My lord, / They have all been touched and found base metal”, vi.5-6), pretends to be most outraged for the opposite reason – namely, that Timon did not turn to him first, thus disrespecting him:

SEMPRONIUS

Must he needs trouble me in 't? Hmh! 'Bove all others? [...]

Must I be his last refuge? [...]

He's much disgraced me in't. I'm angry at him,

That might have known my place. I see no sense for't

But his occasions might have wooed me first [...]

And does he think so backwardly of me now

That I'll requite its last? No.

So it may prove an argument of laughter

To th' rest, and I 'mongst lords be thought a fool [...]

Who bates mine honour shall not know my coin.

(vii.1-26)

The servant clearly probes the deflated wisdom of Timon's ungrateful friends with the practice of touching, an allusion to gold, and by playing on the homophony between metal and mettle, so frequent in early modern England. Furthermore, the oxymoronic juxtaposition of “fair” and “foul” in his next line (“How fairly this lord strives to appear foul!”, vii.30-31), reminiscent of the contradictions and moral confusion pervading *Macbeth*, strengthens the ambiguous lack of adjacency between being and seeming, between referentiality and self-referentiality.

In the three moments analysed, then, the hypocrisy governing all social relations and drawing its lifeblood from the rhetorical capacity of lies is revealed once again. In view of this, Timon's supposedly faithful friends betray the archetypal view of disinterested friendship exemplified, for instance, in Cicero's *De Amicitia*. There the Latin orator states that “pestem enim nullam maiorem esse amicitiiis quam in plerisque pecuniae cupiditatem” (10.34, 146)²⁸, since they perform *adulatio* and seek only a utilitarian

²⁸ “The greatest bane of friendship is the lust for money”,

end in amicable unions. On a subtler level, as is frequent in early modern English drama, ingratitude is expressed through recurrent images of wild animals. Voracity leading to mutual cannibalism is conveyed by means of several references to famished dogs, with which Timon's friends are repeatedly associated. According to Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare usually likens dogs to "fawning or licking"²⁹, yet the "glass-faced flatterer[s]" (i.59) not only fawn "upon [Timon's] debts" (viii.50), but mangle his "int'rest into their glutt'nous maws" (viii.51); a distasteful image recalled by Apemantus previously in the play ("What a number of men eats Timon", ii.39; and "so many dip their meat in one man's blood", ii.41), heightening the ravenous behaviour³⁰ of the other characters. By analogy with Christ, Timon becomes the sacrificial victim of those whom he has pampered and nourished, and the feasting upon not only his wealth, but also his flesh is sacramentally referenced through the Eucharistic sacrifice as well as the myth of the pelican, which feeds its young on its own blood by pecking its breast.

Conclusion

Timon's misanthropic tirade results, according to Ken Jackson, from the sudden awareness that real gift-giving always involves some form of exchange. This reasoning is in line with the Derridean impossibility of the absolute gift³¹ that justifies the mechanism triggered by Timon's vanity and his ceaseless craving for attention, a mechanism which certainly follows a utilitarian logic typical of

https://www.loebclassics.com/view/marcus_tullius_cicero-de_amicitia/1923/pb_LCL154.147.xml

²⁹ Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958 [1935], p. 195. That action is also supported by Timon's line "Uncover, dogs, and lap" in xi.84. In this regard, cf. James L. Jackson, "Shakespeare's Dog-and-Sugar Imagery and the Friendship Tradition", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1:4 (1950), pp. 260-63.

³⁰ Timon's ungrateful friends recall the story of Actaeon devoured by his dogs as narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Cf. Clifford Davidson, "Timon of Athens: The Iconography of False Friendship", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 43:3 (1980), pp. 181-200: 189.

³¹ Cf. Ken Jackson, "Derrida, the Gift, and God in *Timon of Athens*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 52 (2001), pp. 34-66.

the Jacobean English social structure. The play's continuous shifting between public and private spaces allows Shakespeare and Middleton to draw a picture of persistent loneliness amongst all-male communities, whose elusive pursuit of meaningful and stable homosocial bonds is driven by practices of giving, receiving, and benefit.

Therefore, what friends may owe one another is an issue that recurs in Shakespeare's plays and becomes an explicitly crucial question in *Timon of Athens* as well, particularly because any other forms of personal relations, be they sexual or familiar, are lacking. If one does not consider Phrynia and Timandra, the only women who physically appear on stage and to whom Timon gives gold along with his counsel to "damn others" (xiv.165) with venereal diseases, the play is devoid of characters meant as providers of nourishment and bearers of life – that is female characters, belonging to the sex that substantiates manliness and homosocial bonds in a traditional aristocratic culture. The exclusively male community in Athens navigates within a multifaceted structural narrative frame that engenders a loss of virility in male characters – particularly in Timon, who ends up as the personification of a denied motherhood, metaphorically suckling his foes with money. The Renaissance dream of a continuous masquerade that embellishes life and ennobles human beings has turned into hypocrisy; animalistic brutishness desecrates all values, especially the most fundamental one of gratitude.