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Poisonous Language: *Timon of Athens* and the Scope of Invective

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On 30 June 1637, during the period legally known as the Trinity Term of the infamous Court of Star Chamber (*Camera Stellata*), William Prynne, barrister at law, was found guilty "for writting and publishinge a scandalous and libellous Booke"[1] together with two other pamphleteers, Henry Burton and John Bastwick. They were all fined £5000, ordered to stand at two pillories (at Cheapside and at Westminster), to have their ears cut off, and be imprisoned for life without pen or paper in three removed castles in Wales. Dr Prynne, who had already been sentenced in 1633, stripped of his degree at the university of Oxford and expelled from the Inns of court for publishing an invective against all acting and spectacles[2], was found to have his ears already partly cropped. He reportedly

1 Samuel Rawson Gardiner, ed., *Documents Relating to the Proceedings Against William Prynne in 1634 and* 1637, London, The Camden Society, 1877, p. 1. For a general account of Prynne's case at the Star Chamber see also Edward P. Cheyney, "The Court of Star Chamber", *The American Historical Review*, 18:4 (July 1913), pp. 727-50.

2 William Prynne, *Histriomastix: The Player's Scourge, or Actor's Tragedy*, London, Michael Sparke, 1632.

fainted at the pillory when a rough hangman sawed off part of his cheek with what was left of his ears. Upon special motion of Chief Justice Finch, Prynne was also sentenced "to be branded in the forehead" with the letters S and L, *Seditious Libeller*,[3] and to have his "nose slitt"[4]. Unexpectedly, the public execution for this ferocious sentence, itself a spectacle, elicited an outpour of empathy on the part of the people gathered, the sign of a growing discontent that was to lead to the abolition of the Start Chamber three years later, in 1640. The charges against Prynne underlined his disruptive role as a railer, "stirring up people to discontent", "cast[ing] an aspersion upon Her Majesty the *Queen*, and railing and uncharitable censures against all Christian People"[5]. Prynne was described "lyke a madde dogge" that "bayes at the moone"[6]. The Star Chamber proceedings interestingly underline that their sentence had less to do with his attack on theatres than with his

3 "The haingman burnt Prin in both the cheekes, and, as I heare, because hee burnt one cheeke with a letter the wronge waye, hee burnt that againe; presently a surgeon clapt on a plaster to take out the fire. The haingman hewed off Prin's eares very scurvily, which putt him to much paine, and after hee stood longe in the pillorye before his head could be gott out, but that was a chance" (Gardiner, p. 87).

4 Gardiner, pp. 25, 76.

5 Once again, Gardiner informs us that "Mr. Prynn compiled and put in Print a Libelous Volume, Entituled by the name of Histriomastix against Plays, Masques, Dancings, &c. And although he knew well, that His Majesties Royal Queen, Lords of the Council, &c. were in their publick Festivals, and other times, present Spectators of some Masques and Dances, and many Recreations that were tolerable, and in themselves sinless, and so published to be, by a Book printed in the time of His Majesties Royal Father: yet Mr. Prynn in his Book hath railed, not only against Stage-Plays, Comedies, Dancings, and all other Exercises of the People, and against all such as behold them; but farther in particular against Hunting, Publique Festivals, Christmas-keeping, Bonfires, and May-poles; nay, against the dressing up of a House with Green-Ivy: and to manifest his evil and mischievous design in publishing of this Libel, he hath therein written divers incitements, to stir up the People to discontent, as if there were just cause to lay violent hands on their Prince; and hath expressed in many Speeches against His Majesty, and His Houshold, infamous terms unfit for so Sacred a Person. He hath cast an aspersion upon Her Majesty the Queen, and railing and uncharitable censures against all Christian People" (Gardiner, pp. 86-87).

6 Gardiner, p. 25.

sweeping invective, his "quarrells with all mankinde"[7], his venom-spitting rhetoric[8] which scorned the "prodigall disbursements" incurred by the kingdom[9]. Prynne's *cause célèbre*, quite possibly the one that sealed the definitive demise of the Star Chamber, marked the culmination of procedures which had in fact been put in place much earlier, during the reign of Elizabeth in the 1590s, and firmly encoded into Anti-Libel legislation by James I in 1605. The Case *de Libellis Famosis* (Easter Term, 1605) of the Court of Star Chamber laid out the legal precedent that was to set in motion the Court's repressive action against Libel for years to come[10]. Among other damning provisions, the decree established that "it is not material whether the Libel be true, or whether the party of whom the Libel is made, be of good or ill fame" because libelling, like poison, operates by secretive means and may not be openly prevented or counteracted. He who "poisoneth another" by infamous libel commits a most grievous offence, whether the scandal is caused *in scriptis* or *sine scriptis*[11]. The Case concluded memorably, with a list

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7 "this booke is not meerely against stage playes, but it raythe quarrells with all mankinde, and Mr. Pryn, lyke madd Ajaxe being offended with Ulisses and the Grecian princes, whippes all that come in his waye" (Gardiner, p. 22).

8 Justice Finch claims to have heard "this monster of men and nature spitt his venome against the people in generall" (Gardiner, p. 10). Later, of Prynne it is said that by "alledginge the examples of vitious kinges, by him scited in his booke, the venomme of his harte passeth all their vyces" (Gardiner, p. 23).

9 Gardiner, p. 9.

10 In her book on the "culture of slander" in early modern England, Lindsay Kaplan explicitly aims "to establish that defamation was a significant social concern in the early modern period" and to highlight "the literary importance of defamation" (M. Lindsay Kaplan, *The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 109). Cheney notes that as early as 1602 "next to riot and forgery [libel] is more frequently punished in Star Chamber than any other offense" (Cheyney, p. 735). Veeder Van Vechten explains that "during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I, the reports teem with such cases [of defamation] and the bulk of litigation in defamation at once assumed very large proportions" (Veeder Van Vechten, "The History and Theory of the Law of Defamation. I", *Columbia Law Review*, 3:8 (1903), pp. 546-73: 557). Perry Curtis talks about a widespread "culture of libel" to which some of James I's poetry provides a response; see Perry Curtis, "'If Proclamation Will not Serve': The Late Manuscript Poetry of James I and the Culture of Libel", in Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds, *Royal Subjects: Essays on the Writing of James VI and I*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2002, pp. 205-32.

11 The *OED* makes it clear that, while the word "libel" may have initially retained its etymological connection to print (*libellus*), i.e. "any published statement

of three "certain marks by which a Libeller may be known: [...] 1. *Pravitatis incrementum*, increase in lewdness. 2. *Bursae decrementum*, decrease of money, and beggary. 3. *Conscientiae detrimentum*, shipwreck of conscience"[12].

This paper evokes this well-known episode of British legal history to reflect upon the rhetorical and political resonances of railing and invective in a play probably composed between 1604 and 1608, but presumably only staged in its original form in the nineteenth century[13]. The "unfinished"[14] *Timon of Athens* straddles uneven ground in the corpus of Shakespeare's plays. Traditionally grouped with the tragedies, yet often ascribed along with *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* to the nebulous category of 'problem plays', *Timon* presents the kind of 'false starts' and 'loose ends' which scholarship has come to expect in later romances[15]. Critical

damaging to the reputation of a person" or "any writing of a treasonable, seditious, or immoral kind", by the early seventeenth century it had already come to include "any false and defamatory statement in conversation or otherwise". Perhaps it could be shown to have been competing with the word "slander", which was much more forcefully tied to a feudal, verbal code of "shame and dishonour". In fact, Jacobean legislation on libel, with the royal edict of 1613, put an end to duelling as an "honourable" means of addressing defamation (see Van Vechten, p. 555). The word "libel" seems also to have taken on aesthetic overtones similar to the ones we find in the secondary sense of "mock" as "imitation/counterfeiting", for instance when applied "to a portrait that does the sitter injustice, or to a thing or circumstance that tends to bring undeserved ill repute on a person, a country". The shifting boundaries between railing and counterfeiting would deserve some reflection, not possible here. See *OED*, "libel". Lindsay Kaplan discusses terminological ambiguity over 'libel' and 'slander' at some length, noting that "distinctions in the terms 'libel' and 'slander' were still unclear" and that "the common law courts did not consistently distinguish them as libel and slander respectively until 1660" (Kaplan, p. 12).

12 See Edward Coke, *The Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, ed. Steve Sheppard, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2003, p. 148.

13 Several adaptations were staged in the course of the seventeenth century, all quite unlike the Shakespeare original. See Stanley T. Williams, "Some Versions of *Timon of Athens* on the Stage", *Modern Philology*, 18:5 (September 1920), pp. 269-85.

14 See Una Ellis-Fermor, "*Timon of Athens*: An Unfinished Play", *The Review of English Studies*, 18:71 (1942), pp. 270-83. Twentieth-century editors of *Timon* have also put forth other conjectures but the question is not settled.

15 With the romances, *Timon* shares in fact elements of theme, style, and imagery, so much so that despite its stark, misanthropic gloom and the seeming absence of romantic closure, one may be inclined to read it along the sinuous path of

consensus points to a date of composition between 1604 and 1608[16], and *Timon* was printed in the First Folio of 1623. However, no record of it ever being performed during Shakespeare's lifetime exists. This, combined with stylistic inconsistencies and the lack of a prompt copy, has been used to uphold theories of a collaborative work. Opinion on the matter is still somewhat divided[17]. Possibly to a wider extent than other plays by Shakespeare and arguably on account of its perceived flaws, the text of *Timon* has provided an adaptable backdrop to changing critical views on Shakespeare. The one aspect of the play, however, that seems to have mostly exercised the attention of critics and to have engaged directors in recent performances is less Timon's misanthropic deployment of invective than the swift parable of his financial ruin, from the heights of irresponsible prodigality to a state of abjection and savagery that ultimately exposes usury and rejects gold itself as the source of all evil[18]. Research along these lines has, among other

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romances to come. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from: William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton, *Timon of Athens*, eds Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2014.

16 In his Cambridge edition of the play, Karl Klein mentions "comparatively 'free' versification and the rough nature of the blank verse" as features scholars associate with romances. See William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, ed. Karl Klein, New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 1.

17 Largely on the basis of stylometric analysis, critics now seem to have embraced the theory of a co-authorship involving Middleton, but dissenting voices remain. Previous candidates included Chapman, Day or Wilkins. See William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, ed. H. J. Oliver, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 1959, p. xiv.

18 See for instance the following studies: Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983; Karen Newman, "Rereading Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* at the Fin de Siècle", in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Los Angeles, 1996*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1998, pp. 378-89; David Bevington and David L. Smith, "James I and *Timon of Athens*", *Comparative Drama*, 33:1 (1999), pp. 56-87; Hugh Grady, "*Timon of Athens*: The Dialectic of Usury, Nihilism, and Art", in Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, eds, *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works*, Malden, Blackwell, 2006, 4 vols, vol. I, pp. 430-42. The 2012 National Theatre production of *Timon* starring Simon Russell Beale elaborated on the topical issue of waste and money by setting part of the play in the current financial enclave of the City and part in a waste ground with "parodic echoes of the financial sector's tower blocks". *The*

things, shed much-needed light on the brittle network of aristocratic and homo-social patronage, the capital-driven practices of a prodigal Jacobean court and the legally infused language that traverses the play[19]. This paper acknowledges the relevance of these contributions but would shift focus on the rhetorical modulations of invective itself, on Timon's *"bursae decrementum"* as the marker (not only the motive) of his invective, and on railing as a topically dramatic feature that deserves much closer scrutiny. Back in 1966, in his ground-breaking essay on "Timon and Misanthropic Gold", Kenneth Burke suggested that we see through the theme of gold, money and debt so central to the play and start to explore its symbolic ramifications[20]. More specifically, Burke recalled Freud's well-known association between the finding of treasures and defecation[21] to argue that in *Timon* gold partakes ambiguously of the same excremental symbolics of invective (to

Guardian reviewer hailed the play as "a perfect parable for our times", "a fable about the toxic nature of a ruthlessly commercialised world"; see: https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jul/18/timon-of-athens-review-olivier (last accessed October 2018).

19 Coppélia Khan's 1987 analysis of Jacobean patronage and feminine power in *Timon* is an influential early instance of this enduring interpretative outlook, which has engaged the substantial corpus of Shakespearean criticism repeatedly in accordance with the priorities envisaged by cultural studies. Among other things, what studies of this kind have contributed to develop is a sustained focus on the ties that Shakespeare's theatre entertains, implies or constructs between the aesthetically-charged language of the stage and the all-encompassing, discourses of power, sex, and politics in Shakespeare's England. Coppélia Kahn, "'Magic of bounty': *Timon of Athens*, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38:1 (1987), pp. 34-57.

20 Burke relates "the fecal connotations of gold" dug up by Timon to the "fecal connotations of invective" identified by Freud. In Freudian terms, invective would thus be equated "with the excrementitiously tabooed" that Timon's misanthropy so obdurately embodies. See Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966, pp 120-23.

21 Primarily in Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press, 1959, 24 vols, vol. IX, p. 174. See also Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1959. For a recent discussion of the ties between excrement, money and literature, see Susan Signe Morrison, *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 26.

mimic the legal Latin above, we could talk about a sort of *irae excrementum*), a type of language that is the most outrageous expression of unregulated freedom. Burke suggested that we turn specifically to the rhetorical workings of invective to try and make sense of a play like *Timon*, a "sturdy display of golden misanthropy", "corrupt text on the subject of absolute corruption"[22]; a text which brings to radical extremes the probing of invective undertaken in *Coriolanus* and *King Lear*. Ultimately, rhetorical invective of the kind used by *Timon* could be seen as the drastic exercise of "a primary 'freedom of speech'" tied to the one that would have been granted to the "gifted railer" of antiquity or, in milder form, to the fool in medieval times, whose cursing was seen to perform an invaluable apotropaic function in the community[23]. That this "mode of expression", Burke notes, should have been necessarily at odds with the prescriptions of the Athenian-Jacobean powers evoked by the play makes for interesting dramatic tension. Also, such rhetorical invective poses a series of issues that, via Shakespeare, would still be highly relevant to the "most thoroughly repressed" genre of invective in American society[24]. Burke's claim and suggestion seem to me even more forceful for us at present, in a spectacle-driven aggregate of cultures ever more anxious about the social scope, the limits and

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22 "*Timon of Athens* and Misanthropic Gold", in Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, pp. 115-24.

23 In his symbolic role, the Fool does infiltrate the play in Act II, in a bantering scene with Apemantus quite unrelated to the rest of the play.

24 "Though one has heard much about the repression of sexual motives, in our average dealings invective is the mode of expression most thoroughly repressed. This state of affairs probably contributes considerably to such 'cultural' manifestations as the excessive violence on television, and the popular consumption of crude political oratory. Some primitive tribes set aside a special place where an aggrieved party can go and curse the king without fear of punishment [...]. In earlier days the gifted railer was considered invaluable by reason of this expert skill at cursing the forces deemed dangerous to the welfare of the tribe" (Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 93). The current topical relevance of Burke's reflections need not be stressed. On the role of invective in democracy see Jeremy Engels, "Uncivil Speech: Invective and the Rhetorics of Democracy in the Early Republic", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 95:3 (August 2009), pp. 311-34 and Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 1:1 (2011), pp. 22-30.

the challenges posed by apparently uncontainable instances of a rhetoric of vilification, blame or discontent. To claim that *Timon* is "first and foremost about money"[25] is, I believe, to misrepresent the dramatic network of motives at work in the play: it means taking at face value thematic threads which are certainly present and immediately relevant to our current obsessions, while in fact neglecting the symbolic filaments that the titular hero, by *antonomasia* the reviling misanthrope, brings to the complex texture of the play. This paper follows Burke's lead to reread *Timon* primarily as a play on invective, and to address invective in *Timon* as instances of symbolic rhetoric. A few qualifications are in order. Interest in the character of Timon the cynical railer has been voiced before, both in canonical scholarship and in subsequent criticism[26]. An example is a 2012 volume entirely devoted to early modern railing and reviling, which reserves a whole section to Shakespeare's play[27]. As I intend to show, my own reading of *Timon* expands upon existing scholarship of this kind in two directions: 1) by touching upon invective as a highly-encoded rhetorical mode or genre of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature, and 2) by using these preliminary data to put forth general remarks on Shakespeare's topical use of invective in *Timon*, especially against the Star-Chamber anecdote recalled above. There is arguably a sense in which, in its compelling drive to relate the hang-ups of our present to the incipient anxieties of a shared, early modern past, recent criticism of Shakespeare has overplayed or side-lined features of his language and rhetoric. I submit that this applies to the rhetoric of invective, which Prendergast's study, for example, examines primarily in the terms of the Jacobean polemics around stylistic and/or moral perversion[28]. The long rhetorical history of

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25 Shakespeare and Middleton, *Timon of Athens*, eds Dawson and Minton, p. 3.

26 See "The Pilgrimage of Hate: An Essay on *Timon of Athens*", in G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1930, pp. 235-72.

27 Maria Teresa Micaela Prendergast, *Railing, Reviling, and Invective in English Literary Culture, 1588-1617: The Anti-Poetics of Theater and Print*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2012. See especially chapter 4, "Aristocratic Remains: *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*."

28 "This is a book about the Renaissance fashion for railing as an expression of perversion in its many senses […]. The rhetorical perversions of railing dominated the English literary landscape from 1588 to 1620, inspiring writers to

classical, medieval and Renaissance invective could suggest other viable lines of interpretation which were equally part of the cultural debate at the time[29].

Dramatis personae?

The Life of Timon of Athens (to use the title given in the Folio) puts in play from the start the resonances and the implications of the Graeco-Roman names that populate its character-list. Only two female characters challenge an all-male cast, and then only in the male-imposed role of mistresses. Timandra (whose name echoes Timon's via etymological word play on the notion of 'man reverence') figures on stage very much as the emblematic embodiment of female unfaithfulness. Phrynia closely mimics *Phryne*: the famous *hetaira* or courtesan from ancient Greece charged with impiety[30]. And in their antonomastic roles, Timon and Alcibiades bring to the stage multiple allusions to episodes of Greek history and Athenian philosophy which would have been quite familiar to an educated Blackfriars audience and in all probability known by hear-say to a fairly large circle of early modern theatregoers[31]. While North's translation of Plutarch seems to have been Shakespeare's main source for *Timon*, research also indicates that Shakespeare's familiarity with other relevant Greek and Roman classics, notably Plato's *Symposium*, may have been

rant about a variety of topics that they deemed to be immoral" (Prendergast, p. 1).

29 To qualify Shakespeare's version of invective and misanthropic language in *Timon of Athens*, I tap into a number of seventeenth-century rhetorical compendia, in the form of brief, relevant quotes from Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), Johann Susenbrotus (1484-1543), Henry Peacham (1545-1634), George Puttenham (1529-1590) and Thomas Wilson (1524-1581).

30 *Phryne* belonged to the class of *hetairai*, ἑταῖραι, high-class prostitutes who allegedly set themselves apart from brothel prostitutes by using the language of gift-exchange to mask their ply. See Leslie Kurke, "Inventing the 'Hetaira': Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece", *Classical Antiquity*, 16:1, (1997), pp. 106-50.

31 Robert S. Miola, "Timon in Shakespeare's Athens", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 31:1 (1980), pp. 21-30.

underestimated[32]. Timon's churlishness is cited as a stock simile, an instance of *copia* in Erasmus's widely circulated compendium on abundant style, which references his own translation of Lucian's Greek original *Timon*[33]. This suggests that by Shakespeare's time the mention of Timon's name could rely and play on a set of culturally sedimented associations (starting with excessive prodigality, Athenian corruption, misanthropy) which rhetoricians had been quick to enlist. Timon's thoroughness in the pursuit of invective and hatred had made him proverbial in England well before Shakespeare's play. And the turbulent life of Alcibiades must have provided a similarly potent paradigm. Timon is the ultimate giver and the ultimate hater: his excesses of lavishness and aversion strain the fabric of his character to the diaphanous texture of a type or a cipher. He is less a tragic hero than the memorable embodiment of human flaws. And Alcibiades, in his flash appearances on stage and the prepossessing quality of his speech, shines forth with the vivid self-sufficiency of a myth. Apemantus the philosopher eventually comes across as a more palpable character than either, but at least initially he also lacks substance and consistency[34]. One could certainly see where Ellis-Fermor was coming from when she complained that Timon "is only real by reason of his continual presence" and is a character with "no

[32] See Jowett's comments on this in William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 189.

[33] Desiderius Erasmus, "Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style (*De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii duo)*", in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1978, 89 vols, vol. XXIV. Incidentally, Christy Desmet underlines the melodramatic potential of Erasmian exercises on copia and mentions one sentence that Erasmus offered for systematic expansion, "he lost all through excess", well suited to the plot of *Timon* (Christy Desmet, "Progymnasmata, Then and Now", in Patricia Bizzell, ed., *Rhetorical Agendas: Political, Ethical, Spiritual*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006, pp.185-92: 189). See also Craig Thompson, "The Translations of Lucian by Erasmus and S. Thomas More", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 18:4 (1939), pp. 855-81; Thompson explains that *Timon* "in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [...] was one of the favourite Lucianic writings, published four times before 1506" (p. 872).

[34] In Ellis-Fermor's view even Apemantus "lacks sinew" (Ellis-Fermor, p. 272).

individuality"[35]. What are we to make of a play whose protagonist seems non-existent? A character whose tragic identity comes in and out of focus along a precipitous dramatic movement that Wilson Knight qualified perceptively as a "pilgrimage of hate"[36]?

The tenuous permanence of characters in *Timon*, which has led some critics to discern behind its tragic features the structural and thematic pattern of a morality play, calls for an interpretation that is broad enough to allow for an appreciation of its 'generic' flexibility, its formulaic contours and its universalist aspirations. Within a Shakespearean corpus that has of late become the ideal playground for criticism firmly anchored to the material contingencies of early modern culture, *Timon* could be seen to mark a disruption, a forced reappraisal of the connections that such contingencies necessarily harbour with the transcendental and the essential, of the inextricable blend between history and meta-history. In his uncompromising thoroughness, Timon, we noticed, is dramatized as the ultimate giver and the essential hater. Arguably, one way to shed more light on the shifting boundaries of this puzzling play is to read it beside the matrix of a rhetorical exercise that belonged to the classical Greek and Roman past thematically evoked by the play and was still very much alive in the Erasmian educational setting of sixteenth-century England: the attribution of praise or blame[37]. This type of exercise belonged to epideictic rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise and blame, of honour and dishonour, of excellence, nobility, bounty, magnanimity, of liberality and magnificence as well as vilification, backbiting and

[35] "our complaint concerning Timon is not that we do not see enough of him, but that, in spite of the length of time during which he occupies the stage, he fails to leave a deep, coherent impression of his personality. [...] Timon here is negative. There is no individuality play" (Ellis-Fermor, pp. 280-81).

[36] Wilson Knight (see note 26 above).

[37] Evidence of Shakespeare's training in the kind of rhetorical praise-and-blame exercises of *progymnasmata* was gathered by Thomas Whitfield Baldwin in his *William Shakspere's small Latine & lesse Greeke*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1944, 2 vols, vol. II, pp. 288-354. For a recent discussion see Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002. Erasmus's own *Morias Enkomion* (*In Praise of Folly*, 1509) is a masterful instance of epideictic rhetoric, which also addresses the issue of mild invective (biting or *mordacitas*) as a subtle rhetorical tool to promote social awareness and possibly reform.

vituperation: subjects of commemorative speeches, whose focus is neither political deliberation nor judicial pronouncement but ceremonial display[38]. It is a rhetoric of public show well-suited to the spectacular and the anti-spectacular sways of Shakespeare's *Timon*[39], to which we shall now turn for clues.

Sweep of vanity

The first act of *Timon* presents us with the spectacle of patronage, the pyrotechnics of flattery and the extravagance of lavish consumption. Scene i enlists representatives of the Renaissance guilds: a Poet, a Painter, a Jeweller, and a Merchant, summoned to take part in a sort of neo-Platonic Symposium which blends philosophical and literary platitudes with praise and outright flattery. In the flurry of compliments and mutual deference that follows there takes shape a powerful motif which runs through the play and resonates from the start with Shakespearean romances[40]. It is the theme of sensational appearance, of seductive semblance and their problematic relationship with the 'real' or 'truthful' demands of ordinary life. The prevailing sentiment is one of dignified pomp and affected decorum. Pleasantries are exchanged, platitudes tactfully restated and circumstance ceremoniously

38 Yun Lee Too, "Epideictic genre", in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995. The rhetoric of vituperation is also linked to the ancient Greek practice of ψόγος ('blame, censure'), a form of ritual invective whose social scope was amply discussed by Bruno Gentili in *Poesia e pubblico nella Grecia antica: da Omero al V secolo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1988, especially pp. 108-9. See also the study on *psógos* and elegy by Carles Miralles, *Studies on Elegy and Iambus*, eds Stefano Novelli and Vittorio Citti, Amsterdam, Hakkert, 2004.

39 A very perceptive essay on the 'spectacular' in *Timon* is Richard Hillman's "The Anti-Spectacular in *Timon of Athens*", http://09.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/shakespeare/index.php?id=134 (last accessed October 2018).

40 Editors of *Timon* have invariably recorded this affinity with the romances. Jowett, for instance, noticed the "Shakespearian romance theme of the journey from the city to the wild woods" (*Timon of Athens*, ed. Jowett, p. 45). Dover Wilson quoted previous scholarship, including Clifford Leech who saw "the germ of the romances" in *Timon* (William Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, eds John Dover Wilson and J. C. Maxwell, The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. xiii). See also *Timon of Athens*, ed. Oliver, p. xii.

endowed with the veneer of mystery and of myth. Timon's "Magic of bounty" (I.i.6), the Poet says, must be praised for the sensational ("strange" and "rare") event that had them all "conjured" up to attend, away from the dull weariness of the world:

POET
I have not seen you long: how goes the world?

PAINTER
It wears, sir, as it grows.

POET
Ay, that's well known:
But what particular rarity? what strange,
Which manifold record not matches? See,
Magic of bounty! all these spirits thy power
Hath conjured to attend. (I.i.1-7)

The first act deploys all the traditional *topoi* that Aristotelian rhetoric of the kind practiced in Elizabethan grammar schools would have ascribed to the praising of virtue (value, honour, wisdom, worth, excellence, liberality, magnanimity, nobility). Each guest presents worthy Timon with worthy specimens of their respective art: samples of excellence in which "artificial strife" has, in keeping with received wisdom, managed to "tutor [...] nature", to surpass life itself: a dazzling jewel, an admirable picture, a morally edifying book. Providing as they do a "pretty mocking of the life" (I.i.35), these objects show a veneration of art and artifice that is quite central to the characters' understanding of themselves and of Timon's role at the outset of the play. The magnanimity they so admire in Timon is, in a sense, a quintessential form of art, which enthrals and mystifies in equal measure "all sorts of hearts", from "glass-faced flatterer[s]" to those who, like the cynic Apemantus, are allegedly immune to charismatic appeal. At least two features come immediately to the fore. First, Timon's brilliance is far from natural: it is in fact quite unnatural. It emanates from the sustained effort of one who is said to be long-trained in its exercise, someone "breathed, as it were / To an untirable and continuate goodness" (I.i.10-11). Perhaps more importantly, Timon's liberality seems to

be the ultimate index of the mystifying power of wealth, a motif addressed repeatedly from different angles and to various ends by critics of the play[41]. At a deeper level, Timon's art is associated with religious awe: it partakes of the redemptive efficacy of sacrament, for it is practised in the service of a goddess (Fortune) and made the object of "kneeling" and "sacrificial whisperings" by those who entreat him and "through him / Drink the free air" (I.i.83-84). Timon's priest-like power is said to rest, presumably unchallenged, well beyond the pale of others. He is an "incomparable man", cutting across all social distinctions ("all conditions") and all modes of individual constitutions ("all minds"). As such he at once embodies and sustains what has rightly been considered as a new type of order, a liberal hierarchy of means up against a traditional order of titles. He is not described as an aristocrat, nor is his position shown to lie in the sphere of politics or public service. His moral worthiness would seem rather to proceed first and foremost from his material wealth. The Merchant's offhand remark "O, 'tis a worthy lord" applies to Timon and is paralleled a few lines later by another remark, "'Tis a good form", which uses the same brisk formula to assess the worth of an object (a poem). Timon's worth is sanctioned in similar terms also by the Jeweller, whose "Nay, that's most fixed" recalls the language of money, namely the fixing of rates. Timon certainly rates high in the eyes of all. Possibly too high. For the breath-taking scope of his success is fragile. It is crippled from the start by the very art his patronage so generously upholds. The Poet has already imagined a poem which portrays Timon as the current favourite of the goddess *Fortuna*, whose fickleness is proverbial. Fortune's mutability, her "shift and change of mood" is clearly tied up with Timon's "present grace", and casts a disquieting light on his seemingly boundless triumph (I.i.65-74):

> POET
> When Fortune in her shift and change of mood
> Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants,
> Which laboured after him to the mountain's top

[41] The undercurrent of counterfeit and mockery is present from the start, e.g. when the poet recites to himself: "When we for recompense have praised the vile, / It stains the glory in that happy verse / Which aptly sings the good" (I.i.16-18).

> Even on their knees and hands, let him flit down,
> Not one accompanying his declining foot. (I.i.86-90)

As guests discuss the relative merits of their arts and the bounty of their patron, premonitions of distress gather around their frequent mention of 'mocking'. At first, both Timon and the guests use "mock" in the appreciative sense of artful imitation, as in the Painter's comment "It is a pretty mocking of the life" (I.i.35) and in Timon's "well mocked" (I.i.176). Yet 'mock' gradually veers towards the more dyslogistic senses of 'counterfeiting' as a lie and of 'mocking' as vituperation and derision[42], which will inhabit most of the play after the first act. The ambivalence of mocking and counterfeiting, a key note in the dramatic tension of the play, will be voiced towards the end, in the plaintive apostrophe of a steward[43]:

> O, the fierce wretchedness that glory brings us!
> Who would not wish to be from wealth exempt,
> Since riches point to misery and contempt?
> Who would be so mocked with glory as to live
> But in a dream of friendship –
> To have his pomp and all what state compounds
> But only painted, like his varnished friends? (IV.ii.30-36)

It is, however, an ambivalence that debilitates the play from its outset, notably in the exchange between Timon and the Jeweller, where it crosses two other major undercurrents of meaning, that of wealth and money, debt and bond, and the related one of dissipation, as leeching, consumption and waste. Converging as it

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42 The *OED* lists "mock" in the sense of "derision" as the earlier meaning of the word, with an initial record dating back to the early fifteenth century. The secondary sense of "imitating closely or resembling" would seem to have emerged later and the *OED* lists Shakespearean occurrences of this later sense. See *OED* "mock".

43 Critics have long noticed that, rather untypically, interpretative clues about the play in *Timon* are actually entrusted to subsidiary, anonymous characters, a feature that recalls both the sympathizing chorus of Attic tragedy and the depersonalising types of morality plays. See for instance Earl Showerman, "*Timon of Athens*: Shakespeare's Sophoclean Tragedy", *The Oxfordian*, 11 (2009), pp. 207-34.

does the major dramatic drives at work in the play, this passage deserves to be quoted in full:

> TIMON
> Sir, your jewel
> Hath suffered under praise.
>
> JEWELLER
> What, my lord, dispraise?
>
> TIMON
> A mere satiety of commendations –
> If I should pay you for't as 'tis extolled
> It would unclew me quite.
>
> JEWELLER
> My lord, 'tis rated
> As those which sell would give. But you well know
> Things of like value differing in the owners
> Are prized by their masters. Believe't, dear lord,
> You mend the jewel by the wearing it.
>
> TIMON
> Well mocked.
>
> MERCHANT
> No, my good lord, he speaks the common tongue
> Which all men speak with him (I.i.167-76)

The misunderstanding over praise and dispraise here is one first telling index of the confusion and 'confounding' of values that will sustain Timon's vitriolic attacks after his fall[44]. As we shall see, Timon's invective is deployed in terms of a confusion of categories. And the prospective loss of money signified in the uniquely Shakespearean 'unclewing' (in the sense of uncoiling and coming apart) reminds us of the degree to which Timon's identity is bound up with his own perception of himself as a 'man of substance'. The

[44] Jowett notes that the term "confound", meaning 'ruin' and 'destroy', is an "important word in the play. It and *confounding* occur eleven times, over twice as often as in any other play by Shakespeare or Middleton, always in Shakespeare sections" (*Timon of Athens*, ed. Jowett, p. 185).

Jeweller uses flattery to endow Timon's identity with intrinsic value ("You mend the jewel by the wearing it"). But as Timon acknowledges his rhetorical skill, the Merchant cuts in to add that the language of the Jeweller, far from being the product of artistic ingenuity, is simply the "common tongue" of the market, the genius of exchange which "all men speak with him". This slippery line of thought breaks off with the sudden stage appearance of Apemantus, the cynic philosopher. What follows is a sustained repartee between him and Timon over the worth of Athenians and their gifts, even though the subject of their speech matters little. As they lob barbs at each other in a joust of words, Apemantus clearly comes through as the professional reviler, the one who nimbly juggles all the rhetorical resources of abuse to secure his Athenian notoriety. Interestingly, one of the resources he favours in his quick retorts, the chiastic wordplay of *antimetabole* that inverts whatever Timon says, serves well to prefigure in words Timon's own impending reversal of fortune[45]. From the very start Apemantus uses the language of mockery effortlessly, albeit with the kind of verbal slickness and Machiavellian expediency that we have come to expect from the scheming of Iago, Shylock or Claudius. By the time this scene comes to a close, Timon's impending downfall is sealed. Alcibiades the hero makes a one-line appearance on stage to state his own ambivalent devotion to Timon, a devotion phrased, once again, in the stylized, erotically consumptive language of feeding:

> ALCIBIADES (to TIMON)
> Sir, you have saved my longing, and I feed
> Most hungrily on your sight. (I.i.258)

The banquet scene that follows picks up this homoerotic thread and weaves it into a spectacle of reciprocal feeding and drinking. What we are presented with in scene ii is at the same time a highly sensual, and sensationalised, staging of Plato's Symposium and a

[45] "A species of chiasmus (q.v.), or word repetition in reverse. The term is apparently first recorded in Quintilian […] who defines it merely as a figure of words 'repeated with variation in case or tense'" (Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993).

parody of the Last Supper. Timon's 'Symposium' is meant to showcase the delicacy of "his bounties" and, once again, praise the liberality of his "plenteous bosom". However, while the guests of Plato's gathering were urged to transcend sensual charms to contemplate eternal truths, here it is not people, but "the five best senses" which directly acknowledge Timon as their patron (I.ii.119-20). It is an apotheosis of wealth, a masque-like celebration of *copia* and excess accompanied by music and dance. But what reaches such pleasurable heights, must soon come down. The facade of unrestrained praise will prove brittle under the relentless barbs of Apemantus: scorn, and dispraise, creep in. Despite Timon's efforts, Apemantus, the "unpeaceable dog" (I.i.273), won't hide his angry sarcasm or be silenced: at table he gets away with a derisive caricature of grace and later openly inveighs against the vanity (and madness) of pomp:

> APEMANTUS
> Hoyday,
> What a sweep of vanity comes this way!
> They dance? They are madwomen;
> Like madness is the glory of this life,
> We make ourselves fools to disport ourselves,
> And spend our flatteries to drink those men
> Upon whose age we void it up again
> With poisonous spite and envy.
> Who lives that's not depraved or depraves?
> Who dies that bears not one spurn to their graves
> Of their friends' gift? (I.ii.130-41)

Apemantus's invective exposes the "poisonous spite" that lies behind the frenzied theatrics of flattery. He mocks and inverts the pleasures of food through a rather graphic picture, an ecphrasis of drinking and vomiting (voiding) which ties the physiological cause of a disordered, angry temper (cholera) to the ungrateful indulgence of flatterers. The end of the first act officially sanctions Apemantus' self-appointed role as a railer and reviler for the sake of Timon, whom he warns: "there would be none left to rail up on thee, and then thou / wouldst sin the faster" (I.ii.247-48).

All's obliquy

Timon's plunge from the pinnacle of praise and affection to the pit of scorn and hatred is as precipitous as it is thorough. Acts II to V chart the inexorable steps of his progressive estrangement from Athens, far from the "sweep of vanity" of civilised convivia and the lure of Athenian pomp. The undercurrents of mockery that ran through the encomiastic displays of Act I now flow out into powerful, visible streams of vituperation. Timon's language of bounty gives way to a rhetoric of penury, for it is now "deepest winter in Lord Timon's purse" (III.iv.14): having been the object of detraction, first material, then moral, Timon will now turn detraction into his informing principle. Two characters partake of his pilgrimage and are played off against him and each other in this unforgiving *mis-en-scène*: Apemantus and Alcibiades. Both, like Timon, deploy a rhetoric of invective but their ends differ, and the play encourages us to see their varying styles of disparagement side by side. Apemantus exercises his cynical skills at key junctures in the play, to attack and ridicule Timon's creditors, usurers' men who are "bawds between gold and want" (II.ii.61) and, we shall see, in a protracted final showdown with Timon (IV.iii.200-393). But Apemantus has long embraced scorn as his *modus vivendi* and if there is rage left in him, it is very much compressed within the rather narrow emotional range of irony (or its lighter variants in the form of urbane jests and barbs) and sarcasm. In his jaded detachment, Apemantus remains, despite himself, an Athenian, the cultural product of a society that values the prerogatives of privilege and sophistication. As a railer, Apemantus may be said to cover a conventional, socially acceptable role, not very different from that of a court jester, and the play indicates as much when it places both him and a Fool on stage in rather long, unexpected exchange (II.ii.51-125). Not so for Alcibiades. His earnest appeal to the Senate in Timon's favour falls on deaf ears, and when he tries to make a case for Timon's justified anger at the ungrateful attacks of creditors, he is bitterly rebuked for "undergo[ing] too strict a paradox, striving to make an ugly deed look fair" (III.vi.24)[46].

[46] The exchange between Alcibiades and the Senators in III.vi over "a friend" who "should die" is one of the loose ends never quite cleared up in the play. I would be strongly inclined to read it as a reference to Timon himself, rather than to another friend of Alcibiades never mentioned elsewhere.

Hypocritically, the Athenian Senators qualify Timon's rage as "riotous" while they shield their "usuring" behind their entitlement to "anger". They blame Alcibiades for allegedly attempting to "make gross sins look clear" (III.v.39). And when he persists, he is banished from Athens. "Worse than mad" (III.vi.105), he lashes out against them:

> FIRST SENATOR
> Do you dare our anger?
> 'Tis in few words, but spacious in effect:
> We banish thee for ever.
>
> ALCIBIADES
> Banish me?
> Banish your dotage, banish usury
> That makes the senate ugly. (III.vi.97-99)

And again:

> ALCIBIADES
> Now the gods keep you old enough that you may live
> Only in bone, that none may look on you!
> I'm worse than mad: I have kept back their foes
> While they have told their money and let out
> Their coin upon large interest – I myself
> Rich only in large hurts. All those for this?
> Is this the balsam that the usuring senate
> Pours into captains' wounds? Banishment.
> It comes not ill: I hate not to be banished.
> It is a cause worthy my spleen and fury,
> That I may strike at Athens. I'll cheer up
> My discontented troops, and lay for hearts.
> 'Tis honour with most lands to be at odds,
> Soldiers should brook as little wrongs as gods. (III.v.102-16)

Alcibiades' spirited invective stands out against the measured sullenness of Apemantus' barbs. "Spleen and fury" drive his vehement retort to the Senators, in a combative apostrophe where the fencing of words becomes one with the striking of weapons. To

Alcibiades the captain the wrangle of the Senate is just as intoxicating as the tactics of war. He will deploy troops and strike Athens. Via North's Plutarch Shakespeare effectively dramatizes Alcibiades' notorious impetuosity and brings to the play biographical allusions to the scandal involving Socrates, the corruption of Athenian youths (hinted at in the eroticised attachment to Timon) and the charges of impiety brought against Alcibiades as Socrates' favoured lover and later cleared. While arguably justified in the face of the senators' hardness of heart, Alcibiades' invective deploys a rhetoric of force and violent annihilation that Timon, despite his rage, will openly reject[47]. More specifically, Alcibiades' *hubris* (whereby for instance he does not hesitate to equate soldiers to the status of gods and claims that he would "hate not to be banished") opens up the very real option of violent scheming and reasserts abuse as a prerogative of a privileged class. Alcibiades is ready to use his rhetoric to stir up his troops and "lay hearts", an obscure phrase that conflates ideas of ambush ("waylay") and ruthless, almost Machiavellian, manipulation.

Timon's rhetoric of invective, on the other hand, is articulated on an altogether different plane. His definitive rejection of civilised society as such is signalled in his mock banquet for Athenian senators, whom he will surprise with a meal of stones and lukewarm water well devised to expose their hypocritical entitlements. Irony is the weapon of choice here, as Timon bends the protocols of etiquette and seating precedence to insinuate a levelling of social hierarchy and a corresponding flattening of sensual indulgence in the delicacies of food:

> TIMON
> Your diet shall be in all places alike.
> Make not a City feast of it, to let the meat cool ere we can
> agree upon the first place. Sit, sit. (III.vii.65-67)

[47] "TIMON: Warr'st thou 'gainst Athens? / ALCIBIADES: Ay, Timon, and have cause. TIMON: The gods confound them all in thy conquest, and thee after, when thou hast conquered. / ALCIBIADES: Why me, Timon? / TIMON: That by killing of villains thou wast born to conquer my country." (IV.iii.101-6).

Irony takes on a progressively sarcastic colouring in the mock prayer of grace that follows. Timon's address to the gods merges notions of praise and scorn, of lending and borrowing, of sacred and profane in a rising pitch of anger that forcefully turns a blessing into a curse. Timon's confusion and "confounding" of categories, the ultimate outcome of his rage, comes across in this open imprecation (the first one of many to follow), a "malediction" that warps the intentional phrasing of good wish and uses *oxymora* (a figure of confusion) to great satirical effect. Alliteration is also very subtly deployed as a way of compounding and intensifying scorn:

> TIMON
> Live loathed and long,
> Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites,
> Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears –
> You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies,
> Cap-and-knee slaves, vapours, and minute-jacks!
> Of man and beast the infinite malady
> Crust you quite o'er. (III.vii.93-98)

After this, in Timon's eyes "All's obliquy" (IV.iii.18), a most piercing pun: all will be *obloquy* (abuse) and *oblique* scheming, all will be curse, vituperation, abhorrence and loathing, all malicious and debasing crosstalk. His speeches, which will take up most of the play, furnish a veritable catalogue of figures of censure, of the kind meticulously listed in Elizabethan rhetoric manuals[48]. Beside the more common and general categories of 'irony' and 'sarcasm' (very much the only ones a modern reader would be likely to register immediately) we could mention *ara* (imprecation: "Nothing I'll bear from thee / But nakedness, thou detestable

[48] I borrow these categories directly from the rhetorical compendia of Richard Sherry, *A treatise of schemes [and] tropes*, STC 22428, London, John Day, 1550; Thomas Wilson, *The arte of rhetorique*, STC 25799, London, Richard Grafton, 1553, 1560; Henry Peacham, *The garden of eloquence*, STC 19498, London, Richard Field, 1577 (revised in 1593); George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, STC 20519, London, 1589, who were translating and expanding earlier work in Latin by Johann Susenbrotus, Desiderius Erasmus and the classical tradition. These rhetoric manuals were a key part of the Elizabethan grammar school curriculum of *progymnasmata* that has been shown to have influenced Shakespeare's writing. See also Mack, and Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

town!", IV.i.32-33); *cataplexis* (*ominatio*: "Itches, blains, / Sow all th'Athenian bosoms, and their crops / Be general leprosy", IV.i.28-30); *categoria* (accusation: "ALCIBIADES: I never did thee harm. / TIMON: Yes, thou spok'st well of me", IV.iii.173-74); *bdelygmia* (*abominatio*: "Therefore, be abhorred / All feasts, societies, and throngs of men!", IV.iii.20-21); *procles* (provocation: "Maid, to thy master's bed, / Thy mistress is o'th' brothel", IV.i.12-13); *diasyrmus* (ironic elevation: "Be strong in whore, allure him, burn him up; / Let your close fire predominate his smoke, / And be no turncoats", IV.iii.143-45); *tapinosis* (the figure of 'substraction' or 'detraction', debasing of good things: "The sun's a thief, a with his great attraction / Robs the vast sea", IV.iii.439-40); *threnos* (lamentation: "all's obliquy; / There's nothing level in our cursed natures / But direct villainy", IV.iii.18-20); *mycterismus* (private mock: "All villains that do stand by thee are pure", IV.iii.363). To name a few. Rhetorically, all these would be grouped together as figures of exclamation (*ecphonesis*, or the outcry), the voicing of "vehement affections in vehement formes" visually conveyed, in Timon's devastating attack on Athens, in the pressing punctuation dictated by the nomenclature of hate. An effect of overpowering thoroughness is achieved to great dramatic effect as Timon's long tirade against the city modulates outcry and lament with the eschatological and scatological tones of *epiphonema* (a pointed, intensely passionate statement that is meant to seal an earnest moral message). The result is a splendid show of rhetoric; in Hazlitt's words, "some of the finest pieces of invective possible to be conceived[49]":

> TIMON
> Let me look back upon thee. O thou wall
> That girdles in those wolves, dive in the earth,
> And fence not Athens! Matrons, turn incontinent;
> Obedience, fail in children; slaves and fools,
> Pluck the grave wrinkled senate from the bench
> And minister in their steads. To general filths
> Convert o'th' instant, green virginity,

[49] William Hazlitt, "*Timon of Athens*", in *The Round Table. Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, London, Dent, 1902, pp. 210-13: 210.

Do't in your parents' eyes. Bankrupts, hold fast;
Rather than render back, out with your knives,
And cut your trusters' throats! Bound servants, steal:
Large-handed robbers your grave masters are,
And pill by law. Maid, to thy master's bed,
Thy mistress is o'th' brothel. Son of sixteen,
Pluck the lined crutch from thy old limping sire;
With it beat out his brains! Piety and fear,
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
Domestic awe, night rest, and neighbourhood,
Instruction, manners, mysteries, and trades,
Degrees, observances, customs, and laws,
Decline to your confounding contraries –
And yet confusion live! Plagues incident to men,
Your potent and infectious fevers heap
On Athens, ripe for stroke. Thou cold sciatica,
Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt
As lamely as their manners; lust and liberty,
Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
That 'gainst the stream of virtue they may strive
And drown themselves in riot. Itches, blains,
Sow all th'Athenian bosoms, and their crop
Be general leprosy; breath infect breath,
That their society, as their friendship, may
Be merely poison. Nothing I'll bear from thee
But nakedness, thou detestable town. (IV.i.1-33)

Timon in the woods

The style of Timon's invective from now on is very much shaped by this all-encompassing rhetoric of confounding[50], the ultimate

50 Marx's reading of *Timon* had acutely brought this aspect of his rhetoric to the surface. Cf.: "In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 Marx quotes *Timon of Athens* xiv.26-45 and 382-93, and, weaving Timon's language into his own, he comments, 'Does not money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary? […] is not money the bond of all *bonds*? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties?' He attributes to money 'The disturbing and confounding of all human and natural qualities […] it is the general *confounding* and *confusing* of all things […]. It makes contradictions embrace'" (*Timon of Athens*, ed. Jowett, p. 53).

discomfiture and destruction of all the forms that sustain civil intercourse: he will flee mankind, recast himself in the novel role of "Misanthropos" and live in a cave among the beasts. We too leave Athens behind with Timon as he looks back and curses its walls, and for the rest of the play action shifts to the woods and by the sea, where characters must come to find him and even struggle to make out his features in the wild abasement of his new condition. They will show up in turns, and in turns be cursed and sent back. Timon will reject Apemantus' malicious advice to adopt cunning (a strategy Apemantus can clearly use with consummate skill) and refuse Apemantus' claim that he is only aping the ways of cynics (IV.iii.200-20). His own indignation, Timon well knows, is of a very different calibre. Nor is Alcibiades, in Timon's accusing words, "th' Athenian minion whom the world voiced so regardfully" (IV.iii.81) treated any better. As he makes a formal entrance "in warlike manner" accompanied by two courtesans, Timon berates him for his violent lust and sends him off, with gold, to "follow [his] drum [and] paint the ground, gules, gules" with the blood of man (IV.iii.59-60); to spare no excess of violence and, once again, "make large confusion" (IV.iii.129):

TIMON
The gods confound them all in thy conquest,
and thee after, when thou hast conquered!

ALCIBIADES
Why me, Timon?

TIMON
That by killing of villains
thou wast born to conquer my country.
Put up thy gold. Go on; here's gold, go on.
Be as a planetary plague when Jove
Will o'er some high-viced city hang his poison
In the sick air. Let not thy sword skip one. (IV.iii.103-10)

Timon's vitriol reaches its nadir while he is out digging for roots, and, in this renewed pact with 'mother nature' appeals to bestial forces, to "tigers, dragons, wolves, and bears", and "new

monsters", for the chthonic annihilation of mankind. The one 'single man' who comes to mitigate his hate is his faithful steward, the only one Timon can proclaim honest (IV.iii.491). He is the one just man who, by Timon's own admission, could almost turn his "dangerous nature mild" (IV.iii.487). Yet, in the brief time still allotted to his life, Timon feels more curses are to be uttered: at the Poet, the Painter, and later at the Senators who flock like pilgrims to his cave hoping for a reasonable settlement and rewards in gold. Timon will not be turned. Eventually, a soldier will bring the news that noble Timon is "Dead / Entombed upon the very hem o'th' sea" (V.v.65-66). The unspectacular end of a most spectacular demise. His epitaph, in the form of a final execration against those who outlive him, is read out by Alcibiades, whose praise for Timon's noble heart, forever to be treasured, swiftly makes way for a planned attack on Athens. Now that Timon is dead, Athens will be 'treated' with Alcibiades' violent, swift prescription. Not bitter scorn but drums of war will strike:

> ALCIBIADES
> Dead
> Is noble Timon, of whose memory
> Hereafter more. Bring me into your city,
> And I will use the olive with my sword,
> Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each
> Prescribe to other as each other's leech.
> Let our drums strike (V.v.77-83)

"Great Timon! Noble, worthy, royal Timon!"

Alcibiades's encomium, which takes us back full-circle to the rhetoric of praise of the first act, firmly restates a claim that echoes throughout the play off the lips of many: that Timon the "Misanthropos" was in fact noble at heart to the very end. That is relevant for our purposes because we are led to wonder whether Timon's parable of scorn only charts a tragic fall from dissipation to utter perdition, or whether his invective, as the faithful Flavius maintains, bears the redeeming features of a "noble nature" (202), even in a society, like Athens', that may have ceased to recognise nobility as a virtue beyond the protocols of law, the entitlements of

privilege, and the pleasantries of social etiquette. Timon's own invective against senators as "vapors" and "minute-jacks" (III.vii.96), as empty abstractions of the law or overzealous bureaucrats, would seem to suggest as much[51]. The numerous references to 'noble' in the play certainly play out the full array of senses conveyed by the word and the multiple, or even conflicting, uses to which 'nobility' can be bent. Clearly, in the mouths of senators, to be noble has mostly to do with the status secured by means or property (as when creditors urge Timon to pay back what he owes by using his "noble parts", II.ii.26). Or nobility resides possibly in the dazzling social spectacle that patronage entails (as when the Poet laments the demise of the "star-like nobleness", V.i.61, whereby Timon gave freely to all). However, Timon's nobility would seem to consist in more than either, as Flavius, the "one honest man" (IV.iii.492), is eager to suggest. It is perhaps Alcibiades' passionate defence of Timon at the Senate that provides the best clues on the subject. Alcibiades openly links Timon's nobility to Timon's passion (his "hot blood") and sets it up as a virtue of spirit against the treacherous mires (the depths) of the law. Not gold, but "noble fury and fair spirit" are the driving forces of his honour[52]:

> ALCIBIADES
> Of comely virtues;
> Nor did he soil the fact with cowardice–

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[51] The epithet is especially telling because it recasts the Senate's alleged nobility in the terms of excessive fixation on formal minutiae, a criticism which in Jacobean England could easily have applied to the minute-books and the lengthy procedures of the Court of Star Chamber. This characterization also brings into play the whole semantic nexus between fastidiousness, formal scrupulousness, and loathing, an aspect that deserves analysis elsewhere.

[52] Timon's nobility of spirit against the self-interested nobility of wealth comes across in his early exchange with Ventidius: "TIMON: Honest Ventidius. You mistake my love. / I gave it freely ever, and there's none / Can truly say he gives if he receives. / If our betters play at that game, we must not dare / To imitate them. Faults that are rich are fair. / VENTIDIUS: A noble spirit!" (I.ii.9-13). His qualification of ceremony against "true friendship" is also significant in this respect: "TIMON: Nay, my lords, ceremony was but devised at first / To set a gloss on faint deeds, hollow welcomes, / Recanting goodness, sorry ere 'tis shown; / But where there is true friendship, there needs none. / Pray sit. More welcome are ye to my fortunes / Than my fortunes to me." (I.ii.15-20).

> An honour in him which buys out his fault–
> But with a noble fury and fair spirit,
> Seeing his reputation touched to death,
> He did oppose his foe; (III.vi.15-20)

Interestingly, Alcibiades' impassioned speech also qualifies Timon's rhetoric of anger as a legitimate kind for argument: a measured progression, at least initially "sober" and quite apt to the circumstances that occasioned it:

> ALCIBIADES
> And with such sober and unnoted passion
> He did behave his anger, ere 'twas spent,
> As if he had but proved an argument. (III.vi.21-23)

As he challenges the heartless verdict of the Senate ("We are for law. He dies", III.vi.86) Alcibiades even draws a daring parallel between Timon's justified anger and the recourse to violence for self-defence:

> ALCIBIADES
> To kill, I grant, is sin's extremest gust,
> But in defence, by mercy, 'tis most just.
> To be in anger is impiety,
> But who is man that is not angry? (III.iv.54-57)

Who indeed, among humans, knows no anger? This question must have had the ring of truth and everyday experience even to those, among Jacobean audiences enured to a Protestant ethics of thrift, may have been less inclined to countenance Timon's prodigality and recklessness. The sense of Timon's nobility (nobleness) arguably lies here, in the broad emotional spectrum (the magnanimity) and the intensely human, deeply tormented passion of his enraged response to a corrupt and bureaucratised social order (the "strange times" of a "flinty mankind", IV.iii.479) which

has forsaken pity[53]. Despite all, Timon's self-styled misanthropy admits at least one exception:

> TIMON
> Had I a steward
> So true, so just, and now so comfortable?
> It almost turns my dangerous nature mild.
> Let me behold thy face. Surely this man
> Was born of woman.
> Forgive my general and exceptless rashness,
> You perpetual sober gods! I do proclaim
> One honest man. Mistake me not: but one,
> No more, I pray, and he's a steward.
> How fain would I have hated all mankind,
> And thou redeem'st thyself! But all save thee
> I fell with curses. (IV.iii.485-96)

If this is true, noble intensity of feeling could be said to smoulder even under the darkest embers of Timon's invective. And while this goes against the grain of recent productions of the play along modernist lines (with a predilection for absurdist aesthetics)[54], I

[53] In his exchange with Flavius, the faithful Steward: "TIMON: What, dost thou weep? Come nearer then. I love thee / Because thou art a woman, and disclaim'st / Flinty mankind, whose eyes do never give / But thorough lust and laughter. Pity's sleeping. / Strange times, that weep with laughing, not with weeping!" (IV.iii.476-81). Something could be said about Timon's association of Flavius to women in this passage and the verses that follow (Flavius the one honest man is 'surely born of woman'). We could take his comment as a stereotypical slight, in the purely dismissive tone of irony (women are overemotional) or see it as a veiled, final acknowledgement of women's emotional soundness over and above the male-dominated institutions or the homo-social bullying Timon has grown accustomed to in his pleasure days.

[54] I am thinking especially of the 2017 production directed by Stephen Ouimette at the Stratford Ontario Festival; see: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/review-strong-performances-anchor-the-politically-apt-timon-of-athens/article35218268/ (last accessed October 2018). See also the 2018 San Francisco production by Rob Melrose, who wrote a short essay on his own stage interpretation of Timon where he claims that "the second half of the play anticipates Beckett with its dark sense of the absurd", http://cuttingball.com/productions/timon-of-athens/ and https://www.kqed.org/arts/13829027/how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-timon-

believe it gives us a sense of how this tragic play partakes of the style of romance. To be sure *Timon of Athens* lacks the symbolic breadth of *The Winter's Tale* or the strange, exotic richness of *The Tempest*. But Timon's meteoric fall presents us with a chiaroscuro – between the lustre of civilised culture he inhabits (Timon's "Lights, more lights!", I.ii.235) and the dour environment he retreats to – which I think can convey equally well the tableau of a morality play or the sublime aesthetics of a vista by Caspar David Friedrich. Timon's "rich conceit", that has "vast Neptune" weep for a "low grave" seals in a final, memorable scene the highs and the lows of Timon's life, as the expanse of the sea opens out to other seas, the primary setting of romances to come. No one could have captured the grandeur of the medieval romance of the 'low grave' evoked in the final scene better than William Hazlitt, who turned our attention to Timon "making the winds his funeral dirge, his mourner the murmuring ocean; and seeking in the everlasting solemnities of nature oblivion of the transitory splendour of his life-time"[55]. More importantly for our purposes, Hazlitt is also one of the very few critics to have expressed unqualified esteem for the intense feeling at work in the play and to have seized, in the nuanced prose that distinguishes his criticism, the very different motivational tapestries of Timon's and Apemantus' imprecations:

> Every topic of contempt or indignation is here exhausted; but while the sordid licentiousness of Apemantus, which turns every thing to gall and bitterness, shews only the natural virulence of his temper and antipathy to good or evil alike, Timon does not utter an imprecation without betraying the extravagant workings of disappointed passion, of love altered to hate. Apemantus sees nothing good in any object, and exaggerates whatever is disgusting: Timon is tormented with the perpetual contrast between things and appearances, between the fresh, tempting outside and the rottenness within, and invokes mischiefs on the heads of mankind proportioned to the sense of his wrongs and of their treacheries.[56]

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of-athens (last accessed October 2018). For an overview of much earlier productions, see Stanley T. Williams, "Some Versions of *Timon of Athens* on the Stage", *Modern Philology*, 18:5 (1920), pp. 269-85.

55 Hazlitt, p. 213

56 Hazlitt, p. 212.

As we have seen, a closer scrutiny of the language of abuse employed by three main characters, Timon, Apemantus and Alcibiades, brings out rhetorical patterns that might help us make sense of the controversial literary (and cultural) purview of polemic, the rhetoric of *praise* or *blame* that gained unprecedented currency in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Renaissance[57]. Rhetorically, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England have been shown to present hybridization between the emotional repertoire empowered by the Catholic liturgy of the past and the strictures imposed by the Anglican implementation of Protestantism, whose mistrust of pathos was matched by a fierce resolve to quell any upsurge of Popish superstition. It was, in fact, a hybridity fuelled by the relentless exercise of Protestant scatological invective against Roman rites, a highly theatrical posture of the kind conveyed, paradoxically, in the very anti-theatrical polemics of William Prynne's *Histriomastix*, the most illustrious victim of early anti-Libel legislation[58]. Perhaps more importantly, it was a hybrid form particularly ill-fitted to the incipient modes of capitalism and the elitist interests that went with it, a clash of interests and a cultural tension that *Timon of Athens* brings powerfully to the Jacobean stage. Emergent capitalism must downplay the fluid, pathos-infused rhetorical models of the past in favour of predictable, reproducible patterns of language, a form of standardization and technicization envisaged in the rigid dichotomies that Peter Ramus, the most influential Protestant rhetorician of the time, made popular[59]. Along these lines,

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[57] Vickers, pp. 54, 291.

[58] See Grace Tiffany, "*Hamlet* and Protestant Aural Theater", in *Shakespeare's Christianity: Catholic-Protestant Presence in* Julius Caesar*,* Hamlet*, and* Macbeth, ed. Beatrice Batson, Waco, Baylor University Press, 2006, pp. 73-90.

[59] "Standardisation" and "technicization" are the words used by Kathryn Dean in her study on the links between capitalism and the kind of analytical popularized by Ramus. In *Capitalism, Citizenship and the Arts of Thinking: A Marxian-Aristotelian Linguistic Account*, London, Routledge, 2014, Dean argues that "Ramus, and the Ramist movement that flourished in England after his death, can be seen as an early manifestation of [...] attempts to 'industrialise intelligence'" (p. 88).

invective, whether in fact it be Popish or Protestant[60], would be contained, channelled and meticulously broken down in the manageable (and profitable) codes of science and the law. *Timon of Athens* should, I think, be seen as a highly effective theatrical response to this fraught cultural and rhetorical juncture. Its staging of unregulated invective is the dramatization of emotion, a radicalized instance of *exclamatio* or *ecphonesis*, the figure "of vehement affection or passion"[61] whose rhetorical potential would have been widely recognized and shared in the past as a legitimate vehicle for social utterance but must now be given melodramatic embodiment on stage in order to be heard. *Timon of Athens* may be said to assert as much, when seen against the cultural backdrop of a society that increasingly defined itself around the manipulative terms of contractual bonds, methodical procedures and capital-driven litigation[62]. Also, in a genre-problematic play like *Timon of Athens*, that already partakes of the uneasy blend of tragedy and comedy found in Shakespeare's romances, there is an important sense in which the melodramatic intimations of 'romance', itself a

[60] The Puritan version of Protestantism would soon have to face its own rhetorical alter-ego in the debates sparked by the Antinomian controversy in the New World, which forcefully brought repressed emotion back to centre stage. This was to resurface also in the rhetoric of *Enthusiasts* and seventeenth-century *Ranters*. See Michael Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*, Leiden, Brill, 1995. Especially suggestive is Heyd's study of the association (corroborated by Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1621) between Enthusiasm and Melancholy, the latter being one of the features explicitly mentioned with regard to Timon's invective in the play. See also: David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985; David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1990.

[61] In Peacham's definition: "Ecphonesis of the Latines called Exclamatio, is a forme of speech by which the orator through some vehement affection, as either of love, hatred, gladnesse, sorrow, anger, marvelling, admiration, feare, or such like, bursteth foorth into an exclamation or outcrie, signifying thereby the vehement affection or passion of his mind" (p. 62). Puttenham's definition (p. 177) is phrased in very similar words.

[62] The first recorded use of the word 'procedure' itself dates back to the mid seventeenth century (see *OED* "procedure"). This is one aspect of the play underlined by Shakespearean criticism in the past but somewhat side-lined in recent studies. See for instance Ernest Charles Pettet, "*Timon of Athens*: The Disruption of Feudal Morality", *The Review of English Studies*, 23:92 (October 1947), pp. 321-36.

hybrid form of Catholic and Protestant rhetoric[63], strive to circumvent or elude those insidious forms of cultural coercion[64]. Hazlitt's appreciation of the play and of Timon's nobility in particular resonates with the romance-infused quality of Timon's limitless invective.

Ultimately, we read *Timon* from a historical vantage point that is both similar and different to the one in which the play was written and circulated. One significant point of departure, I submit, would have to do with the status, the function and the aim of display rhetoric, the language of praise and of blame, of open scorn and invective, which our highly bureaucratised culture seems constantly engaged to curtail[65]. *Timon of Athens*, an unusual play on

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63 Research by Tiffany Werth to characterize the cultural milieu which leads to the resurgence of Romance is invaluable in this respect. Her aim is "to identify its function as a hybrid genre, expressing the complex, overlapping, and intersecting history of forms and formal representations that were never fully reducible to simple binaries. These texts consistently trouble such categorization, whether literary (such as 'epic' or 'romance', prose or poetry, dramatic or nondramatic), religious ('Protestant' or 'Catholic'), or even historical periodization (medieval, early modern, or 'Renaissance'). Romance's quality of being in-between – both in its formal attributes and in its historical development – disrupts a familiar narrative whereby the medieval and Catholic give way to the early modern and the Protestant" (Tiffany Jo Werth, *The Fabulous Dark Cloister: Romance in England After the Reformation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, pp. 6-7).

64 On this point Werth notes that "even as historians have mapped this confessional confusion with greater subtlety, the place of imaginative literature as both reflection and constituent of a hybrid or in-between religious climate has only intermittently come into scholarly focus. Because of the ways that the formal attributes of romance are interleaved with English religious identity, this book argues it is a literary genre that provides a singular portal into the contested, tempestuous intermediacies that undermine these newly formed, and forming, communities. They are the 'ruined choirs' in the changing landscape of post-Reformation English literature" (Werth, p. 3).

65 This is an issue that calls for sustained future reflection elsewhere. The rhetoric of praise may be said to fare better in our time possibly because it responds so effectively to the market-driven priorities of business and global advertising, now often embraced even in academia. The scope of censure and invective, on the other hand, seems to me seriously curtailed in academic discourse, and very much exercised along tacit ideological lines that lurk behind scientistic expectations of neutrality and factual objectivity. Leading cues come once again from Burke, whose *Philosophy of Literary Form* considers the rhetorical impoverishments brought about by scientific discourse. His comments apply to the literary rise of irony in nineteenth-century France, but as always in Burke,

invective and abuse written – possibly never performed – at a time when libel and slander were being firmly encased within the widening remit of the law, also invites us to reflect on all this[66]. On what invective – a literary device that captures the potentials and the pitfalls of an irrevocable cultural practice – brings to our imperfect understanding of human interaction. A most notable instance of Shakespearean difference.

they provide a "representative anecdote" of a symbolic mechanism at work in the increasingly scientistic and professionalising context of Jacobean England, especially in view of the libel legislation being put in place at the time on much more systematic grounds than ever before: "pure science had robbed the social critics of a stable basis upon which they might erect a system of protest, such completely relativistic sciences as psychology and anthropology having destroyed the underpinnings of absolute judgment. Only those who remained staunch Catholics were able to write sturdy invective. They could still base their thunder upon the old ideology of horrors, thus deriving 'strength,' but the 'new men' had weakened: they could not say, 'It is wrong in the eyes of God,' nor even, 'It is wrong in the eyes of human justice,' but simply, 'I do not like it'" (Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, New York, Vintage, 1941, pp. 419-20).

66 William Hudson's 1621 extensive treatment of libel is a good instance of this Jacobean trend, fully embodied in the coercive power of the Star Chamber. The Chamber would soon become a byword for political and social oppression, wielded via draconian measures against seditious libel and perjury. Cf. William Hudson, "A Treatise on the Court of Star Chamber", in Francis Hargrave, ed., *Collectanea juridica: consisting of tracts relative to the law and constitution of England*, London, Clarke, 1792. See also Kaplan's study on slander (mentioned bove) and Andrew McRae, "The Literary Culture of Early Stuart Libeling", *Modern Philology*, 97:3 (2000), pp. 364-92.