

Resisting Friendship in Shakespeare *

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Friendship is a lauded value since antiquity. Your friends remain with you not due to blood ties. They are not sexually drawn to you, or have fallen in love or borne children with you. Unlike colleagues, your friends are typically not your business partners. They are not clients you court, nor are they those you must smile at because they oversee your promotion. Friends simply choose to spend time with you; follow the arc of your life supportively; think and feel for and with you; act on your behalf; help you in time of need, and value your very existence (while you choose to do the same for them). If

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someone opts to do this for your sake, you must have done something right, and are on your way to happiness. Because friendship is unforced and independent of instrumental calculations, it possesses a unique quality, which explains why Aristotle, Cicero, Themistius, and many others, have showered praise upon its head, regarding friendship as one of the noblest and ennobling qualities of human life. A “marriage of the soul” is Voltaire’s definition in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (Grayling 2013, 102). Cicero concludes his treatise on the topic by asserting that, aside from virtue, friendship is “the greatest thing we can find in life” (Cicero 2018, 177)¹.

In Shakespeare’s England, people did not merely read treatises on friendship, but composed new ones or read translations of contemporary offerings written in the Continent – Erasmus devoted many adages to the value of friendship; Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* describes supreme friendship as yielding “all the good that life holds for us” (Castiglione 1959, 125). In England, Churchyard and Dorke wrote essays glorifying this relationship. The fourth book of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is devoted to friendship. Cicero’s *De Amicitia* was sufficiently familiar for Greene to weave an entire play around Cicero’s own friendships (*Ciceronis Amor: Tullie’s Love*)². ‘Friendship’ probably had a broader meaning than it has today. According to historian of friendship Alan Bray, the tradition of wedded brothers was still very much alive, as may be gathered from graves whereby two men were buried together with the approval of the church (Bray 2003, 84-104). Yet, to overemphasize such differences risks losing sight of the overlap with current usage. What you and I regard as friendship was highly valued in early modern England.

Where does Shakespeare stand on the issue of friends, given the centrality of friendship in his culture? Disregard duplicitous friends (Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Scroop, Iago). Ignore trustworthy underlings (Kent, Emilia, Enobarbus). Focus, rather, on real friends: those who supportively follow us over a substantial

¹ For a thoughtful historical overview, see Grayling 2013.

² For a detailed survey of this literature, see Mills 1937.

period of time, spend pleasurable hours with us, seek our best interest without being compelled to do so. With the exception of Hamlet's Horatio, we do not find such characters in his tragedies. None feature in *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, or *Titus Andronicus*. Romeo is orbited by playful buddies, but he keeps these in the dark regarding his entanglements. As for Horatio, he is mostly limited to being an aloof confidant. His lament over Hamlet – "Now cracks a noble heart. Goodnight, sweet Prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (Shakespeare 2016, V.ii.343-44) – misses the personalized feelings of loss which characterizes Shakespeare's most memorable mourners³.

Friends can, however, be found in the comedies, heavily dominated by the love-friendship tension. In eliciting dramatic dividends from this conflict, Shakespeare was no innovator. Chaucer made Palamon and Arcite – sworn friends – fight over Emelye in *The Knight's Tale*. Boccaccio did the same for Titus and Gisippus in relation to Sophronia in *Decameron*, and Thomas Elyot imported this plot to England (and to English) in his *The Book Named the Governor*. John Lyly's Semele (*Endymion, or The Man in the Moon*) mobilizes a powerful conflict within Eumenides when he falls in love with her despite his awareness that she is loved by his friend Endymion. In another of Lyly's plays (*Euphues*), the eponymous character betrays his friend Philautus upon being smitten with Lucilla. In Greene's *Philomela*, a man asks his friend to seduce his wife in order to test her fidelity (I leave the reader to guess whether this turns out to be a wise strategy).

³ Moreover, to the extent that Hamlet's friendship with Horatio echoes the one between Orestes and Pylades, it is striking to see the degree to which Shakespeare removed traces of physical warmth from the relationship. In Lucian, Orestes undergoes a seizure, and "Pylades 'wiped away the foam, tended his body, and covered him with his well-woven cloak' acting not only like a lover but like a father" (Lucian 1996). Horatio and Hamlet are committed to each other, but the quality remains reserved.

1.

Dramatists around and before him were mostly milking dramatic payoffs from the dugs of rival attachments. Shakespeare chooses to do so as well. Yet his seismometer also records how love causes the subterrestrial plates of identity to metamorphose, cracking, on the way, the very foundations of friendship. The lover's family is too distant to register the change. Friends, by contrast, can get close enough to notice how, as part of that joy-riddled trauma we call 'love', Cupid does not merely fire arrows at his victims, but also transfigures them⁴.

Shakespeare's most explicit demonstration of such disturbing rebirth is not part of comedy. Mercutio laments how Romeo has been killed by love:

Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead, stabbed with a white wench's black eye, run through the ear with a love-song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft [...]. (Shakespeare 2003c, II.iv.13-15)

Mercutio erroneously believes that Romeo is still in love with Rosaline, thereby underscoring the extent of the infatuated youth's detachment from his friends. Yet he tellingly evokes figures of violent death in his ridicule. When Romeo steps into the scene and

⁴ For Tom MacFaul, the weakness perceived in the perfect friendship ideal by contemporary critics such as Shakespeare resided in placing false hopes in unchanging selves: "The ideal of perfect friendship suggests a beautiful particularity of relationship between individuals that becomes increasingly necessary in a socially and physically mobile society. It allows other people to anchor one's identity. Yet the dreams of stasis in friendship are always just dreams. Humanist texts may present fictions of one soul in bodies twain, but the drama presents the shifting and untrustworthy nature of friendship even as it recognizes the desire for stasis" (MacFaul 2007, 19). This strikes me as overly strong, implying that friends must resist any significant changes in one another and that the critique would vanish for friends who happen to accept the instability of selves. In the following examples I will be making a different claim, which avoids this implication and does not necessitate ascribing to Shakespeare a metaphysical commitment to fluid selves: regardless of whether or not selves are permanent or everchanging, friends will object to some changes, which, in turn, is why friendship would be resisted by those it aims to restrict.

consents to engage in a banter with Mercutio, the latter rejoices, applauding Romeo on his revival by way of reclaiming his former self:

Why, is not this better now than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature, for this drivelling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole. (72-75)

Mercutio is elated by Romeo's return to his 'Romeo-ness'. You have not been yourself. Now, you are.

What ostensibly seems like an instance of a friend's enviousness of the lover is never merely such in Shakespeare's comedies. 'Jealousy' is induced not merely because of the friend's decreasing affection. It is triggered by what the friend becomes. Love is capable of distorting a friend's morality. In such episodes, the friend-turned-lover does not merely betray his soul mate, but also grows wicked. "In love, / Who respects friend?", Proteus asks Silvia, by way of excusing his treachery towards his best friend, Valentine (Shakespeare 1994a, V.iv.53-54). In *Much Ado About Nothing*, an enraged Beatrice instructs an obliging Benedick to kill Claudio, his best friend. Beatrice's motives are clear: Claudio has gravely wronged her own friend and relative. Yet, even in the height of her rage, she feels that Benedick is not the person who ought to carry out her vindictive intent ("It is a man's office, but not yours" [Shakespeare 2003b, IV.i.258]). Benedick should realize this, too, retaining enough love for Claudio to either try for some peaceful middle way or, at the very least, avoid becoming her sword-bearer. Instead, we have his consent, which is not merely rash or amounting to a case of shifting loyalties, but is also blatantly out of character. Mirthful Benedick becomes some grim avenger on behalf of another? How so?

In fact, Benedick is the first to note how love remakes his friend, Claudio. When Claudio asks for his opinion of Hero, Benedick sprinkles cool water atop the hissing embers that verge on erupting into flames of love: "[...] methinks she's too low for high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise" (I.i.126-27).

When Claudio persists, Benedick dubs Hero “Leonato’s short daughter” (158). Mere jealousy? Not quite when Benedick proceeds to issue a less light-hearted warning: she will take away your Sundays; your resting periods and leisure will no longer be yours (149). Apprehensions over the lover drawing away your friend can tax your patience, but more lamentable are the hours she would take away.

Friendship is about time. The labor of friendship – acting *with* and acting *for* another, feeling with and feeling for another, thinking with and thinking for another – not only requires temporality, but is constituted by it⁵. Friendship partly means time shared in performing such labors. When Claudio may no longer spend it with Benedick, he is a transformed person.

Love is also capable of undoing the labor of friendship by erasing its history. Accosting her best friend, Hermia, a grieving Helena is granted some of Shakespeare’s loveliest lines in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

Injurious Hermia, most ungrateful maid,
 Have you conspired, have you with these contrived
 To bait me with this foul derision?
 Is all the counsel that we two have shared,
 The sisters’ vows, the hours that we have spent
 When we have chid the hasty-footed time
 For parting us – O, is it all forgot?
 All schooldays’ friendship, childhood innocence?
 We, Hermia, like two artificial gods
 Have with our needles created both one flower,
 Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
 Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
 As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds
 Had been incorporate. So we grew together
 Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,

⁵ For an early hint of an articulation of friendship as labor, see Themistius’ “On Friendship”, in Grayling 2013, 144. Note that “labor” points to an ongoing commitment, and cannot be reduced to singular acts of friendship, even outstanding ones. The labor of being/thinking/acting with in friendship differs from overlapping labor relating to family, in being predicated on choice.

But yet an union in partition,
 Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
 So with two seeming bodies but one heart,
 Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,
 Due but to one, and crownèd with one crest.
 And will you rent our ancient love asunder,
 To join with men in scorning your poor friend?
 It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly.
 Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,
 Though I alone do feel the injury.
 (Shakespeare 2003a, III.ii.195-219)

When heard or read within the context of the entire play, it is hard not to be taken aback by such lines – by the manner they brim with creativity and significance. Intimating a shared history of closeness and unity, such lines appear to issue from a different register than the three lovers' interchangeable love-speak which relentlessly bombards us. Hermia's betrayal erases their shared history. It voids the labor of a friendship that was.

Through clenched teeth, a disguised Portia tells her husband that his wife would not commend him for what he had just said. (The audience of *The Merchant of Venice* has just heard Bassanio profess that he would gladly sacrifice his wife in order to free his best friend.) Moments later, 'she' beseeches Bassanio to relinquish a ring his wife gave him. Bassanio, thereby, undergoes a second loyalty test. Antonio seconds Portia's plea. Both prove victorious in getting Bassanio to betray his wife.

Are we witnessing conflicting attachments or a full-blown battle over Bassanio's identity? The answer depends on what the Antonio-Bassanio friendship is taken to encompass. Alan Bray's work shows the extent to which, since it was blind to homoeroticism and acknowledged desire between men only when it amounted to sodomy, early modern friendship could be surprisingly inclusive. Without being perceived as homosexual, friendship could encompass far more than our contemporary disembodied notion (Bray 1982 and 2003). Cultural acceptance is not always accompanied by emotional equilibrium; conceptual vagueness may kindle erotic anxieties rather than stifle them. If

friendship did include affective and physical gestures that have later been ostracized from its province, such could certainly be felt as endangering marriage, even if the unease cannot be put into words. Portia could be interpreted as a mouthpiece for such apprehensions. Michael Radford's 2004 film of the play, with Al Pacino as Shylock, perceives Portia and Antonio to be, in this episode, putting a test not merely to the depth of Bassanio's love for his wife, but as fighting over Bassanio's sexual identity. Like all the above episodes, the question is not whether you would prefer your friend or your lover when forced to choose, but over whom you would wish to be.

Friends, it should be said, may encourage each other to fall in love: Benvolio urges Romeo to attend the Capulet feast, Antonio finances Bassanio's suit to Portia, the four youths of *Love's Labour's Lost* are eager to excuse each other for breaking their oaths of abstinence, and Celia or Hero are far from being impartial observers of Rosalind's (or Beatrice's) infatuations. Yet the commentaries friends produce upon the transformations they behold are laced with bitterness, cynicism, and anger. When it is suggested that the friendship would survive alongside the love – as is the case in *Love's Labour's Lost* – this achievement seems often connected to the friends, too, morphing into lovers.

2.

Although often its mouthpiece, their criticism of love's daunting capacity to reshape identities does not grant superior status to Shakespearean friends. If his culture set 'perfect friendship' on a pedestal, Shakespeare unsettled it whenever he passed in its vicinity. Celia describes her friendship with Rosalind thus:

We still have slept together,
 Rose at an instant, learned, played, eat together,
 And wheresoe'er we went, like Juno's swans,
 Still we went coupled and inseparable.
 (Shakespeare 2000, I.iii.63-66)

When Rosalind attempts to convince Celia not to follow her into banishment, Celia protests that “Rosalind lacks then the love / Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one; / Shall we be sundered, shall we part, sweet girl?” (86-88).

Here is how Polyxenes describes his friendship with Leontes:

We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i'th'sun,
 And bleat the one at th'other: what we chang'd
 Was innocence for innocence: we knew not
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
 That any did. Had we pursu'd that life,
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
 With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
 Boldly 'not guilty' [...].
 (Shakespeare 1994b, I.ii.67-74)

Bygone formative memories are conveyed by adults in these descriptions (or in Helena's lines earlier). Snapshots of times past are a foundation for the relationship. They record symbiosis, collaboration, participation in an organic unity, and erotic innocence⁶. Yet the idealization of friendship also amounts to its demotion when it takes the form of backpedaling into a stage of adolescence. By glamorizing it, Shakespeare also associates friendship with nostalgic longing. We tend to think of nostalgia as, in part, a fabrication. Shakespeare stops short of taking this further step. We are not encouraged to doubt the erstwhile bond. His critical point is that, while the temporality of friendship may involve reminiscing about formative scenes, recreating such unity is no longer within the reach of adults⁷. Few grown women will

⁶ Emilia's description of her friend Flavina, who had died at the tender age of eleven (Fletcher and Shakespeare 2015, I.iii.64-78) is, likewise, nostalgic, but has also been regarded as infused by a not-so-innocent erotic streak (Stretter 2017). Emilia's reference to Flavina's breasts in those lines strikes me as alluding more to Flavina's scent, which overpowered the fragrance of flowers, than to any erotic longing on her part. A non-sexual reference to breasts has a point – the reference to a time whereby incipient breasts possessed no erotic significance is a powerful way of conveying an original state of innocence.

⁷ Robert Stretter describes the novelty in such an outlook in view of the tradition of perfect friendship, for which friendship is not a phase, but rather a timeless

persist in companionate needlework with their best friends. No grown man will hop about in the sun with his friend like two jovial lambs⁸.

Self-descriptions of friendship are also susceptible to being overblown. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Arcite's attempts to comfort Palamon by summoning an idealized image of the friendship they preserve even when imprisoned, comes across as hyperbolic and shrill:

And here being thus together,
We are an endless mine to one another;
We are one another's wife, ever begetting
New births of love; we are father, friends, acquaintance,
We are, in one another, families;
I am your heir and you are mine.
(Fletcher and Shakespeare 2015, II.ii.78-83)

Friends simply cannot be all that to and for each other, and the emptiness of such talk will quickly be unmasked. Shakespeare's skepticism also extends to the recycled trope of friendship as a single soul inhabiting two bodies. Bitterly used in *Sonnet 42*, this image becomes a wry joke, providing a tongue-in-cheek crutch when a strained rationalizing of rejection and betrayal is called for.

achievement. He sides with accounts by Janet Adelman, Marjorie Garber, and Coppélia Kahn in which, through alternative conceptualizations, attachments to friends become a phase to be overcome on the way into adulthood. For Stretter, the point is not to criticize friendship, but rather mourn its fragility due to its proneness to be destroyed by love (Stretter 2017). In his concluding remarks to his discussion of friendship in Shakespeare, Mills, too, avers that, for Shakespeare, "the classical ideas had become a fad, and contact with actual conditions had been lost. Deriving from classical sources, it was made ultra-romantic and unreal" (Mills 1937, 283-84).

⁸ In his discussion of friendship in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Huw Griffiths argues that it is Fletcher rather than Shakespeare who, in this play, is responsible for a more critical stance toward the idealization of friendship (Griffiths 2015). I suggest, however, that Shakespeare's descriptions of friendship convey doubt throughout all of his work.

3.

I have, so far, claimed that Shakespeare pairs friends to bring out an identity shift prompted by love. Fixated on who you once were, your friend would alert you that such a transformation has befallen. In serving such a function, the friend also sets a limitation – your past attempting to bridle your elasticity. Shakespeare’s eschewal of the friendship ideal could, thus, be understood as anchored in what friends hold onto and strive to hold back.

The crux that this leads us to lies in accounting for the dearth of some more positive mode of friendship. Shakespeare is often admired for his comprehensive prism, for the ways whereby his dark strokes do not eclipse the brighter hues. Why is it, then, that friendship – a value universally cherished – is virtually banned from Shakespearean tragedies, and is either instrumentalized into a token of the protean identity of the lover, or toned down into a fading phase in the comedies? Some of Shakespeare’s kings (Richard II and Macbeth) certainly bemoan their friendlessness. Shakespeare must have, accordingly, conceded that friendship is a precious value. Even if friends impose limitations on freedom, and even if adult friendship cannot be a recreation of youthful symbiosis, these are drawbacks rather than damning flaws.

Our question returns. Why would Shakespeare withhold from us a single example of friendship – not the loyalty of a subordinate, or the fleeting sympathy of some soon-to-vanish buddy, but affectionate lifelong companionship, of the kind admired by Seneca, Plutarch, or Montaigne?⁹ Recent work on early modern

⁹ It has been argued that long-term friendship is suggested in *2 Henry IV*, in the relationship between Shallow and Falstaff, and that friendship is part of the relationship between Lear and Gloucester. The textual basis for such ascriptions (Lees-Jeffries 2011) strikes me as ambiguous and brief. The strongest statements of friendship in Shakespeare focus, by and large, on loyalty. Antonio and Bassanio, for example, make such statements, mostly about how they would sacrifice all for one another. Yet loyalty is hardly a sufficient condition of friendship, as it characterizes other relationships, such as filial duty or faithful service. To reduce friendship to loyalty amounts to casting it into the same category as the relations between Kent and Lear, for example, which is unsatisfactory.

friendship suggests that literary or dramatic descriptions should not be considered as exemplifications of abstract treatises on perfect friendships, but, rather, as tests of these (Langer 1994)¹⁰. If so, how exacting was Shakespeare's testing of the friendship ideal? Judging by the examples we have already canvassed, he virtually rejected it. Again, what could have motivated such an extreme view, if, indeed, he held it?

A possible, albeit bleak, reply is that Shakespeare regarded loneliness as our genuine predicament¹¹. The awareness of an all-pervasive mirage of affection that has imploded – an awareness surfacing in some episodes of tragic loss – may suggest that Shakespeare endorsed such perspective. Love or friendship become short-lived leaps away from the dismal realization, the surface of this grim trampoline. If they are variants of disavowal, the fraught presentation of both love and friendship in his plays is thereby explained.

It is Beckett, rather than Shakespeare, who is a more likely subscriber to such morbid view. Before pledging to it, we should explore further what may have prompted Shakespeare's skepticism, by turning to his most searching play on friendship: *Timon of Athens*.

¹⁰ See also the essays in Part II of Lochman, López, and Hutson 2011 (81-145). Apart from Tom MacFaul, whose explanation for the critique of perfect friendship was given above (see note 4), Lisa Jardine and Laurie Shannon have proposed two of the more interesting explanations for the refusal to wholeheartedly subscribe to the friendship ideal. Jardine argues that the perfect friendship ideal began rivaling the emerging emphasis upon companionate love, rather than the manic infatuations celebrated in the comedies. The implication, for our purposes, is that the questioning of the friendship ideal should be assessed in terms of an alternative paradigm of companionship likely to replace friendship by allocating it within the marital sphere (Jardine 1996, 114-31). Shannon offers a political reason for regarding friendship gingerly: its capacity to rival political subordination (Shannon 2002).

¹¹ For MacFaul, critics of perfect friendship sensed that the ideal was predicated upon a disavowal both of impermanent identity and one's unavoidable loneliness (MacFaul 2007, 20).

4.

Timon superficially reads as a play concerned with underestimating flattery. Its hero misjudges the fine line separating generosity from prodigality. Consequently, he mistakes parasites for friends. We should resist such a reading because it renders Timon a fool. Everyone else in the play, from senators to servants, understands the imprudence of showering your acquaintances with gifts, yet Timon is unaware of this mundane truism¹². In no other play does Shakespeare diminish his titular hero: for all their mistakes, flaws, or rash errors, the imprudence of an Antony or the irrationality of a Lear are not the mundane underappreciation of some fact known to all. Why should he switch course with Timon?

A more rewarding reading will search for an implicit objective realized by Timon's disproportionate and indiscriminate giving. Instead of inquiring why he bestows gifts so uncritically, we ask why Timon corrupts his friends. Surely, at least some of those who end up as blood-sucking leeches could have flowered into genuine friends had Timon not opted to turn himself into a nonstop funfair. Could Timon's giving itself be an expression of a *resistance* to friendship?¹³

From the fourth act onward, Timon spends all his time cursing Athens and hoping for humanity writ large to be annihilated. Etched upon his tombstone is an epitaph via which he continues hurling abuse long after his death:

*Here lies a wretched corse, of wretched soul bereft;
Seek not my name; a plague consume you, wicked caitiffs left.*

¹² Seneca's ninth epistle calls self-serving relations of such kind "fair-weather friendships"; "one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful. Hence prosperous men are blockaded by troops of friends; but those who have failed stand amid vast loneliness, their friends fleeing from the very crisis which is to test their worth [...]. He who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays" (Seneca 1917, 47, 49).

¹³ In Plutarch's source, Timon is merely a hater of others. In Cicero's *De Amicitia*, Timon is mentioned as a misanthrope who, for all his hatred, ironically sought to communicate such hatred to other people (Cicero 2018, 149). Shakespeare builds a motivation for Timon's aversion to others.

*Here lie I, Timon, who alive all living men did hate;
Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass and stay not here thy gait.*
(Shakespeare 2001, V.iv.70-73)

The epitaph has rightly confused editors. It is as if, midway in its composition, Timon had changed his mind regarding his preference to remain anonymous. Even more intriguing is Timon's need to misrepresent facts. On one reading of "all living men did hate", with Timon as the subject hating others, Timon is falsifying his pursuit of company; the Timon we were introduced to was certainly not a hater of all men. The other possible reading, in which Timon is the object of the hatred of others, is also untrue: much of his time in the wilderness is spent chasing away people who seek him out. Some of them, as Timon himself eventually confesses, do not plan to harm him, but act from genuine concern. We are invited to consider reading "Here lie I, Timon", as referring not to the posture of a corpse, but to intentional misrepresentation of the facts, to lying¹⁴.

We are also invited to regard both parts of the play as grappling with the hatred of other people. In the second part, Timon chases them away through curses; in the first, he does so through gifts. His hatred of others notwithstanding, why would Timon lie about being hated by *others*? His belligerent exchange with Apemantus hints at an answer. Apemantus picks out Timon's tendency to think in absolutes: "The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends" (Shakespeare 2001, IV.iii.307-8). Narcissism is the source for such all-or-nothing thinking. It peeks moments earlier, when Timon mocks Apemantus, arguing that – unlike himself – Apemantus lacks a reason for his hatred of humanity:

TIMON
Thou art a slave, whom Fortune's tender arm
With favour never clasped, but bred a dog.
Hadst thou like us from our first swath proceeded
The sweet degrees that this brief world affords

¹⁴ In Shakespeare's source, Plutarch, the epitaph is not ambiguous: Timon was the one who was "the hater of men" (Plutarch 1959, 301).

To such as may the passive drugs of it
 Freely command, thou wouldst have plunged thyself
 In general riot, melted down thy youth
 In different beds of lust, and never learned
 The icy precepts of respect, but followed
 The sugar'd game before thee. But myself,
 Who had the world as my confectionary,
 The mouths, the tongues, the eyes and hearts of men
 At duty, more than I could frame employment;
 That numberless upon me stuck, as leaves
 Do on the oak, have with one winter's brush
 Fell from their boughs, and left me open, bare,
 For every storm that blows. I to bear this,
 That never knew but better, is some burthen.
 Thy nature did commence in sufferance, time
 Hath made thee hard in't. Why shouldst thou hate men?
 They never flattered thee. What hast thou given?
 If thou wilt curse, thy father, that poor rag,
 Must be thy subject; who in spite put stuff
 To some she-beggar and compounded thee
 Poor rogue hereditary. Hence, be gone!
 If thou hadst not been born the worst of men,
 Thou hadst been a knave and flatterer.

APEMANTUS

Art thou proud yet?

(IV.iii.257-84).

'After all your proven foolishness, how can you remain proud?', asks a bitter Apemantus. Call it 'pride', or 'self-love', or 'narcissism'. Call it what you will, as long as you differentiate between excessive self-love and the distinct problem of being able to love only oneself. A narcissist need not be besotted with himself, merely unable to love anyone other. That is the incapability which Apemantus reveals in Timon when the latter claims exclusive rights over misanthropy. We note how Timon's chosen imagery of being abandoned, casts *him* as an oak, *them* as numerous leaves. *He* stands out and is unique; *they* are interchangeable and relational.

We think back on Timon's friendships, on how those he called 'his friends' were never particularized by him: "No porter at his

gate, / But rather one that smiles and still invites / All that pass by" (II.i.10-12). Such was how his indiscriminate generosity was described by others. He never expected anything from his friends: not emotional participation, not advice, not concern. All they were for him are faceless vessels for what he called 'his giving', props in an internal theater in which he stood apart. Timon flirted with friends; he never had any – "[A] dream of friendship" is how Flavius will call it (IV.ii.34).

To have real friends one must bridle self-love¹⁵. Shakespeare deepens here an insight which formed the basis of Plutarch's treatise on how to tell apart friends from flatterers. The latter, said Plutarch, appeal to one's self-love. Accordingly, he advised "eradicat[ing] from ourselves self-love and conceit" (Plutarch 1922, 349). The problem with Plutarch's solution is that it throws out the baby with the bathwater. Aristotle and Cicero reckoned that love of self is a precondition for friendship. Bereft of some degree of self-love, you would be incapable of loving others (Cicero 2018, 141). The cells of self-love both constitute the membrane of friendship, and have the potential to metastasize into an all-consuming incapacity to love others.

Shakespeare exposes how the intrinsic problem of self-love does not merely amount to its wordless solicitations for flattery, but rather lies in its erection of an inner wall barring a meaningful connection among people. For friendships to be not merely initiated but also cemented, one must allow for various types of value to resonate, as well as be capable of acknowledging them meaningfully. The disinclination to do so arises from the ways whereby such evaluations threaten to erode the scaffoldings of

¹⁵ The friendship between Arcite and Palamon in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* collapses when they spot Emilia inquiring about a flower called narcissus. She hears the story of a self-loving youth as their friendship breaks down, implying a connection between self-love and the impossibility of sustaining friendship (see Stretter 2017). The incompatibility between narcissism and friendship was not known only to Shakespeare. Ben Jonson's epistle to Master Arthur Squib includes the following lines: "Turn him [your would be friend], and see his threads: look, if he be / Friend to himself, that would be friend to thee. / For that is first required, a man be his own. / But he that's too much that, is friend of none" (Jonson 1996, 190).

one's own worth. Timon is in danger of being enlightened regarding the limited scope of his generosity. Yes, he gave lavishly, but he offered only either money or the experiences or goods which money could buy. He never gave his time. He never offered his concern. Unlike Flavius, who is not even a friend but a past servant, we cannot tell if Timon would follow another human being into the wilderness.

In a lovely passage, Seneca argued that you do not have friends so that they will help you out, but in order that you may help them. Friendship is about loving others, not about being loved yourself, he claimed (Seneca 1917, 49). Flavius demonstrates this. Timon does not. Friendship based upon genuine admiration – considered by Aristotle as the highest of the three kinds of friendship – demands candidly allowing oneself to be accessed by other people and the distinct merits they bring to the table (Aristotle 1934, VIII.iii-iv). If they lack such qualities, you will not admire them. If you belittle such values or are incapable of fully registering why they matter, you cannot be a friend. Acknowledging other values in this manner is necessarily humbling. This proves impossible for Timon, who comes close to comparing himself to a god (Shakespeare 2001, III.vi.59-64).

Homogenizing everyone else in order to protect his own sense of worth could be read as continuous with Timon being unmarried (there are virtually no women in this play). It is also a formative dimension of his psyche. When the supports of his self-esteem are rattled by Apemantus, Shakespeare shows us a Timon devolving into the infantile:

TIMON

Away thou issue of a mangy dog!
Choler does kill me that thou art alive;
I swound to see thee.

APEMANTUS

Would thou wouldst burst!

TIMON

Away, thou tedious rogue, I am sorry I shall lose a stone by thee.
[Throws a stone]

APEMANTUS

Beast!
 TIMON
 Slave!
 APEMANTUS
 Toad!
 TIMON
 Rogue, rogue, rogue!
 (IV.iii.362-70)

Reaching into primal matter of the self – toddlers quarrel in such ways – Apemantus unearths Timon’s resistance to friendship as caused by an inability to admit competing yardsticks to evaluate worth. These will spoil Timon’s stand-apartness. Show him that there are rival criteria for gauging the value of a person, and he regresses into a child, clinging to an unargued need to be superior to another.

I began by pointing out the problem of accounting for the surprising status of friendship in Shakespeare. Friends are either absent or reminisce over a transient adolescent stage of interchangeable symbiosis which one outgrows in adulthood. I have suggested that given the privileged value of friendship in his philosophical and cultural context, and given the comprehensive nature of Shakespeare’s art, we may be rewarded if we pause to explore further his disinclination to subscribe to the norm. Poring over all those classical and contemporary defenses of friendship, Shakespeare may be imagined as stopping to wonder at the sheer volume of such panegyrics. After all, why praise friends so much if they are nothing but positive?

I claimed that in treating the love-friendship tension in his comedies, Shakespeare uses friends as those who remind you of the self you are abandoning. If love is the call to be made anew, to be reborn in another’s gaze, friendship will be resisted because it plunges you back to the identity that was, to that which you hope to transcend. Shackles upon the fluidity of identity – that is what

friends are. Their rivalry with your lovers is merely a symptom of a greater drawback of friends.

Friends could become undesirable for another reason. When you genuinely engage in the labor of friendship – acting for and with, feeling for and with, thinking for and with, and undertaking these willfully for a substantial period of time – friends would progressively expose numerous human excellences which you yourself lack. This realization, I suggested, is precisely what Shakespeare's *Timon* is avoiding. Your very best qualities are but a trifle. Three or four letters out of an entire alphabet. If you are openhanded with money, your friend might prove more liberal in bestowing time. If you can be trusted for helping out in hardship, your friend might be far more capable to heighten the good times, revealing you to be indispensable for commiserating with, but unable to withstand or increase another's happiness. Some people enable us to relax and be; others inspire. Some deepen us; others are a joy to be with. The more you discover others and what they excel at, the humbler you become.

Humility tends to be lauded. We are urged to avoid being smitten with ourselves. Given time and opportunity, you will discover that your very best is inferior to another's. Yet 'humility', in *Timon's* context, is an altogether different challenge, whose overcoming is not some preparatory stage in one's perfectibility. 'Humility' may mean a crisis of self-value repeatedly enacted upon fully registering a friend's unique qualities. Admitting the superiority of others in relation to your own excellence is not the issue. *Timon* does not learn that someone is more generous than him with their money. The crisis is, rather, rooted in discovering competing and valid yardsticks for excellence – ones which you have never considered applying to yourself.

Friendship based upon genuine appreciation among adults entails volunteering to be exposed to such assaults. Choice is a crucial component. Unlike relations of kin or of professional subordination, in which you are meant to remain a daughter or a monarch's knight even when the parent or king has altogether transformed or lost power, friends must be re-chosen. Yet such a choice is accompanied by repeated encounters with your

shortcomings. Shakespeare may not have categorically ruled out this possibility. He could have merely believed that genuine friendship is rarer than the rhetoric of affection would have us believe.

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