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Timon of Athens:
The Iconography of False Friendship

By Clifford Davidson

The realization that iconographic tableaux appear at central points in the drama of Shakespeare no longer seems to involve a radical critical perspective. Thus a recent study is able to show convincingly that the playwright presented audiences with a Hamlet who upon his first appearance on stage illustrated what the Renaissance would certainly have recognized as the melancholic contemplative personality.1 As I have noted in a previous article, the hero of Macbeth when he sees the bloody dagger before him is in fact perceiving the image which most clearly denotes tragedy itself; in the emblem books, the dagger is indeed the symbol of tragedy,2 which will be Macbeth’s fate if he pursues his bloody course of action. Such tableaux, it must be admitted, are often central to the meaning and the action of the plays. In what Glynne Wickham has called “emblematic” theater, therefore, the spectacle itself has become of prime importance in the structure of each play.3 The visual is not something tacked loosely to the text, but is an integral part of the whole. My argument in this paper is that the emblematic nature of Shakespeare’s art can very properly be studied through the iconography of false friendship in Timon of Athens, 4 a play which has commonly been called unfinished or imperfect even when critics have not brought Shakespeare’s sole authorship into question.

An iconographic analysis of Timon of Athens illustrates how the play

1 Bridget Gellert Lyons, Voices of Melancholy (New York, 1971), pp. 77-112.
2 Clifford Davidson, “Death in His Court: Iconography in Shakespeare’s Tragedies,” Studies in Iconography, 1 (1975), 77-79. For further attention to iconography in this play, see Clifford Davidson, The Primrose Way (Conesville, Ia., 1970), passim.
4 The Elizabethan interest in “the evils of flattery” has been noted in connection with Timon of Athens by Willard Farnham, Shakespeare’s Tragic Frontier (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), p. 72. See also Laurens J. Mills, One Soul in Bodies Twain: Friendship in Tudor Literature and Stuart Drama (Bloomington, 1937), p. 282 et passim. The major classical treatment of the ideal of friendship is Cicero’s De Amicitia, first translated into English by John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester. The translation consulted here, however, is by Thomas Marsh, contained in Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises: Conteyninge Discourses of Friendshipp, Old Age, Paradoxes and Scipio His Dreame (London, 1577), which has been compared with the modern text and translation in the Loeb Library edition. A useful Elizabethan treatise on the subject of true and false friendship is M.B., The Triall of True Friendship; or, A Perfit Mirror, Whereby to Discerne a Trustie Friend from a Flattering Parasite (London, 1596).
revolves around visual tableaux which illuminate the classical understanding of friendship—an understanding which Shakespeare himself, as the sonnets prove, valued most highly. To be sure, the iconography, like the very language of the play, explores the negative aspects of this quality. The lines of the drama are not swelled “with stuff so fine and smooth” that they are given the appearance of a painted naturalness (V.i.83-84); this is not “the happy verse / Which aptly sings the good” (I.i.16-17). The art of Timon is keenly attuned to irony and the deception which carefully placed visual tableaux can unmask for the audience.

In this play the major character himself must be seen as a highly significant icon of failed friendship. He who at the beginning had believed himself to be the epitome of friendship is at the end a totally disillusioned man. His epitaph reads:

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

(V.iva.70-73)

Timon would never have come to such an end if he had not experienced the failure among his acquaintances of the great Renaissance ideal of friendship. The “bond” between friends ought to be as strong, and of the same quality, as the essential bonds of love and loyalty which cement together the social structure itself. Unfortunately, however, Timon has found that he has built his prodigal expectations on an imaginary “bare friendship” which only destroys him after its failure. From a picture of blind and excessive generosity, he falls to a representation of an excessive and alienated hatred which cannot be conquered even by the moving example of the good man, his former steward, who refuses to relinquish his loyalty to his former master. As Apemantus tells him in Act IV.iii.301-302, Timon has never known the “middle of humanity . . . but the extremity of both ends.”

Because he so prodigally shares his substance with wolfish parasites, Timon will ultimately be tumbled into an angry misanthropy which thinks it sees the devastating truth about the universality of human depravity. Prodigality, as visualized by Cesare Ripa, is “hoodwink’d”—i.e., blindfolded, as in the game of blind-man’s-buff. Thus Timon is one of those who unseeingly “spend and squander their Substance without Reason, to those who are unworthy, for the most part, observing neither Rule nor Measure.”5 He takes the show or shadow of friendship for the

realty, until the hypocrisy of his guests is revealed to him. At the point when he recognizes the truth, however, the milk of his kind disposition begins to sour, and by the beginning of the fourth act he can only pour the scorn of his fury (also pictured as blindfolded by Ripa\textsuperscript{6}) upon the concepts of loyalty, piety, degree, truth, manners, law, and custom. “And let confusion live!” he loudly concludes. This is his prayer to Chaos that all might be swallowed up in her numbing power. At neither “extremity” does Timon have a clear-sighted view of the human condition.

Traditionally, Timon had been known in the Renaissance as the image of a more or less unmotivated misanthrope who was believed to have lived in the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristophanes. It is thus that he is presented in North’s translation of Plutarch, who pictures him as “angry” and untrusting.\textsuperscript{7} Typical of the Renaissance view of Timon as a “hater of all kinde” is Montaigne: “Timon wisht all evill might light on us; He was passionate in desiring our ruine. He shunned and loathed our conversation, as dangerous and wicked, and of a depraved nature.”\textsuperscript{8} Such a merely cynical and misanthropic character would have been of little use to Shakespeare had not another element also informed the iconography of Timon. It was largely from Lucian’s satiric dialogue of Timon, widely known in the Renaissance through Erasmus’ Latin translation,\textsuperscript{9} that the notion was derived of a man, once wealthy, who had ruined himself through generosity. In the seventeenth-century English translation of Thomas Heywood, Mercury speaks as follows:

You see how his humanitariane hath chang’d him,  
And freenessse, from his dearest friends estrang’d him:  
His mercy unto others, being so kinde,  
And then amongst so many not to finde  
One gratefull, hath distraction in him bred,  
Still to be living, but to them thought dead.  
Considering next how is he scorn’d, derided,  
And his revenue and estate divided,  
Not amongst Crowes and Wolves, but worser far,  
Ravenous and tearing vultures, who still are  
Gnawing upon his liver; those whom he  
His friends and best familiars thought to be.  
For they who now in his abundance swim,

\textsuperscript{6}Ripa, \textit{Iconologia} (1603), p. 176; (1630), Pt. 1, p. 219 (sig. O2\textsuperscript{r}); Pt. 1, p. 279 (sig. R8\textsuperscript{f}).  
\textsuperscript{7}Plutarch, “Life of Marcus Antonius,” in New Arden ed., p. 141; see also the slightly shorter selection from the same source in \textit{Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare}, VI, 251.  
\textsuperscript{9}M. C. Bradbrook, in her lecture, \textit{The Tragic Pageant of “Timon of Athens”} (Cambridge, Eng., 1966), p. 19, notes that Erasmus’ translation was “used as a school text.”
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Were more delighted in his feasts than him:
Nay, those who at his table did applaud him;
When even unto the bare bones they had gnawne him,
They suckt his very marrow, and then fled.10

Reliance on a set of false friends, none of whom will live up to any ideal, brings Timon to a thoroughgoing hatred of the human species: "These brought him to this base despised trade, / And hurl’d him from the Scepter to the Spade," while those "rais’d and brought to fame" by his "bounty" now hardly "remember Timon has a name."11 Here, in Lucian’s dialogue, is the basis for the icon of the exemplar of friendship’s acts who becomes understandably disillusioned.

Shakespeare’s Timon is engaged in displaying tremendous acts of generosity when we first see him in Act I. He visualizes himself at the center of a band of friends knit to him by the most sacred bond of comradeship. Almost his first words in the play are "I am not of that feather to shake off / My friend when he must need me" (I.i.103-104), and he expects the same quality of those who surround him. Nor does he hear anything which would shatter his illusion. For example, Ventidius, whose servant tells Timon that his master is "ever" bound to him (I.i.107), would have him think that he is secure among those who share his friendship. Moved by that feeling that Spenser identified as a "kindly flame,"12 he is even comforted by his relationship to others: "O what a precious comfort ’tis," he says, "to have so many like brothers commanding one another’s fortunes" (I.ii.101-103). His will to give is infinite, for he is truly "the very soul of bounty" (I.ii.207).

Friendship is understood as a bond which is not only a radiant ideal but is also an expression of a most necessary kind of good will that makes society cohesive. For the Renaissance, one of the basic texts thus describing friendship was Cicero’s De Amicitia, a work which specifically mentions the negative case of Timon, an unusual man without desire for or need of friends, as an example of the adverse of the ideal.13 For Cicero, "if you take out of the world the knot of Friendship [benevolentiae conjunctionem], certes, neyther shall any house be able to stand, ne City to

10 Lucian, Misanthropos; or, The Man-Hater [Timon], in Pleasant Dialogues, and Drama’s, trans. Thomas Heywood, ed. W. Bang, Materialien zur Kunde des älteren Englischen Dramas (Louvain, 1903), p. 60. See also Bullough’s translation from the Italian version of N. da Lonigo (1536) in Narrative and Dramatic Sources, VI, 263-277.
12 The Faerie Queene, Bk. IV, Proem.
13 Cicero, Fourte Severall Treatises, fol. 37r.
endure, no, nor yet any tillage to continue.’’14 Since virtue and good will are the natural wellsprings of friendship,15 it cannot be forced or false, but must flow spontaneously from the heart. There can be nothing calculating about true friendship, no cool weighing of profit and loss.16 Nor can such a feeling of unity, such love come into being except between virtuous men. Cicero explains, ‘‘neyther can Freendeshippe in anye wise bee withoute Vertue.’’17 Thus, while Timon scorns hollow ‘‘ceremony’’ (I.ii.15-17) and wishes that he had possession of whole ‘‘kingdoms’’ that he might bestow them on his ‘‘friends’’ (I.ii.219), these hypocritical para-sites universally will prove themselves unworthy of his trust. But the total lack of true friendship and gratitude in Athens will eventually make itself felt: the city will not be able to stand when the banished Alcibiades returns to work his revenge.

Timon’s will is weak only on the side of generosity. As his Steward comments, he is ‘‘brought low by his own heart, / Undone by goodness’’ (IV.ii.37-38). He is, of course, the image of a most unusual man, sanguine and sophisticated in his love of music, entertainment, and feasting—all of which provide central tableaux in the earlier part of the play. Yet he loves such things not for their own sake but because they will delight and cheer his friends. His prodigality is not, of course, to be identified too precisely with the classic Christian paradigm: he is no prodigal son sowing his wild oats. Despite the obvious double meaning which would seem to connect Timon’s ‘‘spending’’ of gold with ‘‘spending’’ in the sexual sense,18 Shakespeare seems content with the iconography of a man ecstatically scattering his worldly wealth. Indeed, we see no women in the play, except in the masque, until Alcibiades’ mistresses appear in IV.iii. But the Renaissance meaning of ‘‘prodigality’’ would allow for the facts as they are presented in Timon. The principal character’s flattering would-be friends are shown drawing away the riches of this magnanimous man and leaving him impoverished. In this instance, a gloss in the Geneva Bible seems relevant, for there reference to the prodigal’s ‘‘riotous living’’ is said to involve a ‘‘Greke worde [which] signifieth, so to waste all that a man reserveth nothing to him self.’’19

The magnanimous person, however, was believed in the Renaissance

14Cicero, Fourse Severall Treatises, fol. 11r.
15Cicero, Fourse Severall Treatises, fol. 23r.
16Cicero, Fourse Severall Treatises, fol. 23r.
17Cicero, Fourse Severall Treatises, fol. 9v.
20Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery: The 1758-60 Hertel Edition of Ripa’s Iconologia (New York, 1971), No. 64.
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to be entitled to a certain carelessness in his disposing of wealth. A putto behind the figure representing Magnanimity in the Hertel edition of the Iconologia pours forth the contents of a cornucopia with careless generosity.20 Hence Timon is said to "pour out" kindness (I.i.273-274). Surely it is significant that in the 1603 and 1630 editions of the Iconologia, the pouring out from a cornucopia appears as an essential detail in both Prodigalita and Pieta.21 To have a liberal hand may thus be a sign of immense goodness and nobility, or it may mean unpardonable folly. In Timon, goodness and prodigality are inseparably bound together in one character. Shakespeare seems very much aware that Timon's openness is at once a great virtue and a great fault. Unfortunately for Timon, however, the Renaissance proverb is proven true: "A spending hand that alway powreth owte / Had nede to have a bringer in as fast."22

Except for his loyal servants, Timon as we see him in the early part of the play is surrounded only by parasites and flatterers rapaciously reaching out for whatever wealth they can get from Timon's liberal hand. With the exception of bitter, unfeeling Apemantus, those who come to Timon's feast present false faces which hide more or less crudely disguised serpent hearts full of "poisonous spite and envy" (I.ii.135). These "glass-fac'd" flatterers are "glib and slipp'ry creatures" (I.i.54, 59) who are intent upon transforming the quality of their host's good will into a quantity of gold coin. The description of the flatterer as "glass-fac'd" is iconographically important, for the mirror appears widely as a standard emblem of pride23 and surely is intended to point toward weakness in Timon, who obviously very much likes to receive back the desired image of his beneficence. The smiling face of the flatterer is thus the mirror into which he looks. Nevertheless, despite the obvious ambiguity in Timon's character, the reader will tend to overlook such faults in comparison with the horrible depravity presented by the parasites. Until the mirror is shattered in Act III, Lord Timon will fail to see what is behind the glass. Unlike Hamlet when we first see him, he is blind to that which only "seems"; Timon cannot recognize these spiritual ancestors of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for what they are. Surely the words of

23See, e.g., MS. Laud Misc. 740, fol. 69f; Spenser, Faerie Queene I.iv.10; the engraving of Superbia in the series of the Seven Deadly Sins published by Jerome Cock in 1558 and formerly attributed to Brueghel.
24See III.iv.90.
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Apemantus, unpleasant as he is, are better than the ‘‘smiling, smooth’’ flatterers whom Timon will come later to detest.24

The most important emblem of the deceptive language of flattery is the dog, a creature to which Timon’s friends are constantly being compared. Appropriately, a dog is an equivocal symbol in Renaissance iconography, for this creature can appear in reference to loyal friendship25 as well as to flattery, or even ingratitude.26 The latter is the more common. Two proverbs recorded by Tilley are typical of the prevailing attitude toward canines: “‘The dog wags his tail not for love of you but of your bread’; ‘Whores and dogs fawn on a man no longer than they are fed.’”27 As Caroline Spurgeon has pointed out, Shakespeare generally linked dogs to ideas of fawning, licking sweets, flattering.28 Thus in Timon, flatterers are hungry dogs who gulp down the Lord Timon’s ‘‘meat’’; thereafter they only ‘‘fawn upon his debts / And take down th’ int’rest into their gluttonous maws’’ (III.iv.51-52). They are hypocrites who, when they are unveiled, are utterly lacking in the sanctity they pretended while enticed by the candy of Timon’s feast and riches. More than this, they actually incorporate within themselves a high degree of viciousness. In the height of Timon’s fortune, they dance before him; when he becomes bankrupt, they will, as Apemantus predicted, ‘‘stamp upon’’ him (I.ii.139-140). These dogs will attack Timon’s substance, and when that substance has been swallowed down, they will bare their ungrateful teeth and snarl at him. So it is that at the base of a column in the illustration of Ingratitude in the Hertel edition of Ripa, the following words appear: ‘‘Nutri canes, ut Te edant’’ (‘‘Feed dogs, that they may eat you’’). The words allude ‘‘to the story of Actaeon devoured by his own dogs.’’29 Hence Timon becomes the victim of those whom he has fed, recognizes at last his position in relation to these false friends, and invites them with perfect appropriateness to partake of a banquet of warm water with the words ‘‘Uncover, dogs, and lap’’ (III.xi.82).

As they symbolically devour the lord who has kept and fed and pampered them, the false friends are indeed like Actaeon’s ‘‘dogs’’ which, in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (III.301-302), ‘‘hem [their master] in on everie side’’ and ‘‘With greedie teeth and gripping paws their Lord in peeces dragge.’’ ‘‘I know my lord hath spent of Timon’s wealth,’’ says Hortensius, ‘‘And now ingratitude makes it worse than stealth’’

24 For example of dogs as symbolic of ingratitude, see ill. of the motto Ingratitudo summam vitium in Mathias Holzwart, Emblemata Tyrocinia (Strassburg, 1581), as cited in Henkel and Schöne, col. 560. For example of dogs as emblematic of flattery, see Henry Peacham, Minerva Britanna (London, 1612), pp. 206-207.

25 Tilley D439 and W327.


27 Ripa, Iconologia, Hertel ed., No. 128.
Ingratitude, symbolized in Renaissance iconography by Actaeon’s dogs, is indeed much worse than theft, for it is a barbaric devouring of a victim: “O you gods!” exclaims Apemantus, “What a number of men eats Timon, and he sees ‘em not” (I.ii.39-40). Since Actaeon’s death is capable of being interpreted by the allegorizers of Ovid as symbolic of the crucifixion,30 Timon’s destruction by the ravening mouths of his alleged friends may be seen as having more complex meanings. His feasting of his fellow Athenians is even, on one level, a kind of parody of Communion in which they partake of his body and blood. Because the basic ingredient of trust and friendship is missing from the hearts of those attending the supper, his love feasts are no more successful than Macbeth’s banquet for Banquo: none of these are able to produce a community knit together in peace and good will. And Apemantus in a sense voices our horror that “so many dip their meat in one man’s blood” (I.ii.41).

The cannibal theme is, as we have seen, introduced in Lucian: “When even unto the bare bones they had gnawne him, / They suckt his very marrow, and then fled.”31 In Shakespeare’s play, the prodigal turned misanthrope will understand life only in terms of his own dreadful experience with his untrustworthy friends. “You must eat men,” he will advise the banditti (IV.iii.428). Men indeed have feasted upon him; now he firmly believes that not friendship but hostility between man and man is the normal and only condition of life. He has come to understand his “mouth-friends,” his “trencher-friends” (III.vi.85, 92) as gaping for his flesh as well as his substance. They are but betrayers of pretended friendship, and hence in Timon’s eyes they prove all mankind unworthy of any expenditure of love. Before his mock banquet, Timon prays: “Let no assembly of twenty be without a score of villains. If there sit twelve women at the table, let a dozen of them be as they are” (III.vi.75-77). All men and women at every feast are hollow-hearted Judases (and the feminine equivalents of the archetypal betrayer).

The false friends are like (or worse than) ravenous beasts, for they are designated as “Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears” (III.vi.91). Cicero states that it is “a very beastly thing to preferre money before Freendshype,”32 yet this is precisely what these men have done. The Triall of True Friendship (see n. 4, above) speaks of those who “esteme no more of fine Thraso without pence, then a horse doth a faire stable without provender” (sig. C1v). Farnham quotes a sentence

30 See Don Cameron Allen, Mysteriously Meant (Baltimore, 1970), pp. 173, 243. As Allen (p. 173) explains, Pierre Bersuire’s moralization of Ovid gives both a positive and a negative meaning to the Actaeon story: “In malo Actaeon is a usurer; in bono he is Christ.”
31 Lucian, p. 60.
32 Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises, fol. 28r.
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attributed to Alphonsus: “flatterers are not unlyke Wolves: for even as Wolves by tickling and clawing are wont to devour Asses: so flatterers use their flatterye and lyes, to the destruction of Princes.”

Timon, of course, is the ass upon whose carcass the wolves have fed. Leaving Athens, he expects to find in the wilderness that “Th’ unkindest beast [is] more kinder than mankind” (IV.i.36). He has learned the lesson stated in Peacham’s Minerva Britannia, an emblem book which asserts that “No HIRCAN Tyger, ERYMANTHIAN Beare” is “So arm’d with malice, thirstie after blood, / To high estate aspiring” as such men are. These are “The worst of men, nay man it is too good,” for they are Luciferian in their rebellious intent. Their greed and ambition indeed have taught the flatterers to rebel against the values which support both friendship and the very fabric of society. These are men who, motivated by self-interest, have devoted themselves to the acquisition of a quantity of goods at the expense of the essential quality of life. As we might expect, they have gained no understanding of themselves from their experience at Timon’s last banquet. One of them speaks for all when he insists that “He’s but a mad lord, and nought but humors sways him. He gave me a jewel th’ other day, and now he has beat it out of my hat. Did you see my jewel?” (III.vi.106-109). So when Timon in the next scene looks back on the city wall of Athens, he calls for that structure which “girdles in those wolves” to sink into the earth (IV.i.1-3). He will turn his back on civilization and will go forth naked with the prayer that he might be given the strength to hate “the whole race of mankind, high and low” (IV.i.39-40).

Earlier, the pouring forth of wealth had seemed infinite; now its sources are all dried up, and Timon himself has become a sapless branch cut off from the life of the community of men. His former “great flood of visitors” (I.i.42), now revealed as a “tide / Of knaves” (III.iv.112-113), presumably will find other channels in which to flow. Timon’s former “bounty” and “kindness” are described as a liquid which he pours out (I.i.273-275). The Steward complains that he will not “cease his flow of riot” (II.ii.3), and finally when he gets the opportunity to tell Timon that he should have held his “hand more close” (II.ii.143), he laments that he was not allowed to influence his master “in the ebb of your estate / And your great flow of debts” (II.ii.143-146). The imagery is significant, for here prodigality is set forth iconographically. The playwright is surely indicating that on the tide of excessive and careless giving, irrational and immoderate generosity is destined to bring one in the end to the bottom of one’s purse. Lucian had noted that to give wealth to Timon is like attempting to fill Danaë’s daughters’ casks: “No sooner ought pour’d in, but out it runnes; / So many holes being in the bottom drild, / That it

33James Sanforde, The Garden of Pleasure (1573), fol. 99v, as quoted by Farnham, p. 72.
34Peacham, p. 198.
draines faster than it can be fild.’”\(^\text{35}\) Furthermore, the outward flow lacks a significant result, for ultimately such needless pouring forth of bounty as Timon’s will inevitably conclude with the drying up of its source.

In the meantime, however, Timon is displayed attempting to give the impression of limitless bounty. Instead of keeping a balanced course—the ‘mediocrity’ which the Elizabethans had felt to be the best economic policy—he engages in spectacular waste. “Still in motion / Of raging waste!” the Senator exclaims at II.i.3-4; “It cannot hold, it will not.” In contrast, one of the predatory and flattering lords attending on Timon in Act I is speaker for the illusion of limitless wealth: “Plutus the god of gold / Is but his steward. No need but he repays / Seven-fold above itself: no gift to him / But breeds the giver a return exceeding / All use of quittance” (I.i.275-279). According to Fraunce, “Pluto was accompted the Lord of riches and treasure: Pluto is the earth, whence al metals are digged. Plutos in Greeke, signifieth riches.”\(^\text{36}\) But despite the fact that precious metals indeed do come from under the earth, they will breed only for the parasites who have found a fool to repay them at a higher rate than usury. Yet for Timon wealth fails to breed: he will be left shortly with less than empty coffers, for his debts exceed his net worth.

Nevertheless, despite his interest in Timon’s prodigality as imprudent economy, Shakespeare really insists upon focusing on the matter which he considers more basic—the subject of friendship. As a Renaissance playwright, he could not have wished to isolate mere business matters and the tabulation of accounts as the stuff upon which his imagination might work. Timon is most certainly not a lesson in holding onto one’s money, for Shakespeare surely accepts the Renaissance dictum that to have a too tight fist is far less desirable than to have a too open hand. Typical is Sir Francis Bacon’s statement that “sins of defect are justly accounted worse than sins of excess; because in excess there is something of magnanimity,—something, like the flight of a bird, that holds kindred with heaven; whereas defect creeps on the ground like a reptile.”\(^\text{37}\) Shakespeare must have believed with Cicero that the defects of “Covetousnes of monye” and ambition are among the greatest plagues which might infect friendship.\(^\text{38}\) Also, Cicero lashes out at the means which the parasites use to gain financial enrichment as well as pleasure: “there is no greater Plague or mischiefe in Friendshipe, then adulation, glavering [blanditiam], and flattrye.”\(^\text{39}\) Such men will speak “all to pleasure, and nothing to

\(^{35}\)Lucian, p. 68; see also Geoffrey Whitney, A Choice of Emblemes (1586), p. 12.


\(^{37}\)Francis Bacon, Works, ed. J. Spedding et al. (1861; rpt. Stuttgart, 1963), VI, 254.

\(^{38}\)Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises, fol. 16v.

\(^{39}\)Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises, fol. 39r.
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Truth.’’

Fickle falsehood and hypocrisy masking love of money and pleasure are faults that tend to dismember the communal unity toward which friendship naturally aims. A famous classical proverb attributed to Pythagoras states: ‘‘Among friends all things are common,’’ and Cicero writes: ‘‘there should bee among [friends] a communitie or participation of all their gooddes purposes and willes withoute any exception.’’

Love unifies and brings together. On the other hand, Timon’s ‘‘friends’’ will dismember, tear him apart for his gold. Gold is, of course, the prime temptation for Timon’s false friends. While he is rich, they will come around him like ‘‘Time’s flies’’ (III.vi.92); when his time of poverty comes, they will swiftly buzz away to other feasts. Yet it is not when gold has failed him that Timon becomes a misanthrope: we see him driven into his final despairing and angry state only when he has discovered that he is not rich in friends.

Timon’s ‘‘bounty’’ might well have seemed on the level of the play’s spectacle to function with the efficacy of ‘‘Magic’’ which has the ‘‘power’’ to conjure ‘‘these spirits’’—i.e., parasites—‘‘to attend’’ him (I.i.6-7). But magic also involves deception or ‘‘juggling,’’ as Macbeth and Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus learned. In the case of the latter, occult power over spirits turns out to be illusory in the end, when they turn upon him and tear his soul from his body. Magic is playing with appearances; the ability to transform reality or to perform genuine miracles is beyond its reach. Timon thus has been like a magician attempting to create artificial bonds of loyalty and friendship. The illusion lasts as long as Timon’s gold with iconographic appropriateness gives him the appearance of potency; when it is all spent, the revels at his house are ended.

The illusion, to be sure, has been grandiose. The tableaux of feasting have been sumptuous, the entertainment lavish: ‘‘every room / Hath blaz’d with lights and bray’d with minstrelsy’’ (II.ii.164-165). We see an example of the splendor in the masque introduced by Cupid in I.ii. Like everything we see and hear in the first act, the words spoken by the blind god of love point to the desperate condition of Timon’s fortunes. When he cries, ‘‘Hail to thee, worthy Timon, and to all / that of his bounties taste’’ (I.ii.118-119), he is echoing the ‘‘all hail’’ of Decius’ greeting to Julius Caesar, the words of the betraying witches in Macbeth, and Judas’ fatal salutation to Christ.

He continues: ‘‘The five best senses / acknowledge

40Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises, fol. 39f.
42Cicero, Foure Severall Treatises, fol. 27f.
43See, e.g., Shakespeare’s Sonnet 36, which begins: ‘‘Let me confess that we two must be twain, / Although our undivided loves are one.’’
44See Richmond Noble, Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge (1935), pp. 103-104.

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thee their patron, and come freely / to gratulate thy plenteous bosom. There, / taste, touch, all, pleas’d from thy table rise; / They only now come but to feast their eyes” (I.ii.119-123). Epicurean delight focused upon the five senses will appropriately be celebrated emblematically in this masque, which promises to reflect the spirit of the feasting at Timon’s house.45 Timon will presumably be paying the bill for such entertainments as this, for he himself thanks the “fair ladies” for entertaining him “with mine own device” (I.ii.142-147).

At the height of his bounty, fortunate Timon appears to have been the focal figure for a whole school of Athenian poets and painters who claim to be his friends. It is the representative Poet who very early in the play describes the iconographic landscape enclosing Fortune’s hill:

I have upon a high and pleasant hill  
Feign’d Fortune to be thron’d. The base o’ th’ mount  
Is rank’d with all deserts, all kinds of natures  
That labor on the bosom of this sphere  
To propogate their states. Amongst them all,  
Whose eyes are on this sovereign lady fix’d,  
One do I personate of Lord Timon’s frame,  
Whom Fortune with her ivory hand wafts to her,  
Whose present grace to present slaves and servants  
Translates his rivals. (I.i.65-74)

For Timon is one who appears to be loved especially by Fortune and followed by those who would look as though they are worshiping him. The Poet finally, however, comes around to a prophecy of the tragic conclusion, and his prophecy is expressed in terms of the familiar iconography introduced above:

When Fortune in her shift and change of mood  
Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants  
Which labor’d after him to the mountain’s top  
Even on their knees and hands, let him sit down,  
Not one accompanying his declining foot. (I.i.86-90)

“’Tis common,” the Painter responds, accurately mirroring reality. For Fortune is about to frown upon her favorite.

When the crisis is first brought home to Timon by his Steward, he insists that, despite his drooping fortunes, he is still “wealthy in my friends” (II.ii.189). Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth,

45 John Doebler accurately connects Timon’s feasts with the idea of the Banquet of Sense; see his Shakespeare’s Speaking Pictures (Albuquerque, 1974), pp. 150-151.
for his friends are iconographically portrayed as insects that fly away to shelter when unseasonable weather comes: ‘Feast-won, fast-lost; one cloud of winter show’rs, / These flies are couch’d’ (II.ii.175-176). They are also compared to swallows who follow Timon as they follow the summer (III.vi.28-29); these are birds which are often regarded as emblematic of ‘fair-weather friends.’ The Renaissance proverb says, ‘Swallows, like false friends, fly away upon the approach of winter.’ “Such summer birds are men,” Timon says (III.vi.30). The seasonal imagery is also very explicit in Lucius’ servant’s speech at III.iv.11ff:

Ay, but the days are wax’d shorter with [Timon]:
You must consider that a prodigal course
Is like the sun’s,
But not, like his, recoverable. I fear
'Tis deepest winter in Lord Timon’s purse.

And the ingratitude of the recipients of his bounty will now determine that for Timon his spring cannot return, that his sun cannot rise as before.

“Men shut their doors against a setting sun,” Apemantus unpleasantly but prophetically remarks during the masque (I.i.141). His words are reminiscent of another proverb: “The rising, not the setting sun is worshiped by most men.” And there is also an echo of the Fool’s advice in King Lear (II.iv.71-74): “Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill . . . but the great one that goes upward, let him draw thee after.” Lear’s wicked daughters indeed literally do shut their doors against their unfortunate father, while Timon’s “mouth-friends” only close their fists.

Cicero notes “how greevous and how painfull do manye thinke it, to be partakers of others calamities and miseries: wherunto there is none lightly found, that will willinglye entre,” and quotes Ennius: “A sure Frend is tryed in Adversitye.” When Fortune frowns, however, we see Timon failing to find a single constant friend among all the flatterers who had filled his house and accepted his riches. The man who has sat at his side and has broken his bread with him instead “is the readiest man to kill him” (I.ii.46-49). Like Richard II, Timon could complain of his betrayal by large numbers of betrayers (“Did they not sometime cry ‘All hail!’ to me? / So Judas did to Christ; but he, in twelve, / Found truth in all but one” [Richard II IV.i.167-171]). Hence Shakespeare now displays a parody of the Last Supper as Timon bids farewell to his Judas-friends: the broken community of friendship is given ritual expression in the meal.
which is no communion. Quite in keeping with the presence of the Judas archetype in the play, Timon will later issue an invitation to his former friends and fellow Athenians to hang themselves on his tree before he cuts it down (V.i.204-211). Judases ought to end their lives like the archetypal betrayer, who is said to have “hanged him self” (Matthew xxvii.5).

Timon, who has seemed like a glorious “phoenix” in the midst of his “prodigal course,” will in his evil days have the remaining feathers of his wealth plucked away by his creditors; thus he “will be left a naked gull” (II.i.30-32). The phoenix, that unique Arabian bird “dedicated unto the sun,” is a permanent symbol of redemptive good. Timon, however, has actually allowed himself to be victimized in the manner of the Elizabethan “gull.” Once he understands the unpleasant truth about how he has been duped, he will undergo a transformation in earnest. “His comfortable temper has forsook him,” Servilius explains (III.iv.70); indeed, his sanguine temper has been converted to anger and hatred directed against the whole of mankind.

“I am Misanthropos,” Timon proclaims to the vengeful Alcibiades (IV.iii.54). From the heights of illusory friendship, Timon has fallen to the depths of a hatred directed irrationally toward every member of the human race. In a sense, it appears that Shakespeare was thinking of him in terms of the iconography of Icarus, for Icarus also had “with mountinge up alofte” in the sky “Came headlonge downe, and fell into the Sea” when the sun melted away the feathers fixed by wax to his artificial wings. According to E. A. Armstrong, the associated images of wax, sea, and Icarus were in Shakespeare’s mind when he wrote the Poet’s speech at Act I.i.45-50; furthermore, Icarus’ loss of wing feathers may also lie behind the suggestion at II.i.30-32 that Timon will be transformed from “phoenix” to “gull” when his borrowed feathers are returned to their source. Once he has completed his fall, however, Timon’s hatred of mankind is as total as Lucifer’s (a fact which is significant when it is realized that Lucifer’s fall and Icarus’ were often held to be analogous in the Renaissance). “For my part,” Timon tells Alcibiades, “I do wish thou wert a dog, / That I might love thee something” (IV.iii.55-56). Indeed, he becomes as much reduced to the bare symbol as Spenser’s Malbecco, who ultimately “Forgot he was a man, and Gealousie

50Pliny, Natural History, pp. 111-112.
51See Peacham, p. 19; Whitney, p. 177.
52Whitney, p. 28.
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is hight.’’ Thus is Timon at last merely Misanthropy personified, for he has totally forgotten his humanity.

The source of such thorough misanthropy may be identified phenomenologically in terms of the food which, fed to the envious parasites earlier in the play, has been converted to poisonous substance. Timon’s servant comments, ‘‘This slave unto his honor / Has my lord’s meat in him: / Why should it thrive and turn to nutriment / When he is turn’d to poison?’’ (III.i.56-59). And Aemantius had said, ‘‘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’’ (I.ii.132-135). As in Coriolanus, the covetous belly is cause of disorder: the food of Timon’s feast, vomited up by the flatterers, becomes most sour and poisonous. Timon prays at IV.i.30-32 that this same poison might affect them physically as well as morally: ‘‘Breath infect breath, / That their society, as their friendship, may / Be merely poison!’’ The milk of human kindness, represented by the overtly generous Timon of the beginning of the play, has thoroughly curdled. His Steward explains that the ‘‘kind lord’’ has ‘‘flung in range from this ingrate seat / Of monstrous friends’’ (IV.ii.44-46). The parasites are unnatural creatures who convert milk to gall, but so also is Timon unnatural in his terrible rejection of mankind.

For Timon, the total depravity of man is much deeper than even the most pessimistic Calvinist theology would allow. He sees no value, no good in anyone. ‘‘There’s nothing level in our cursed natures / But direct villainy,’’ he insists (IV.iii.19-20). Thus community and friendship seem not possible; hence Timon will abhor ‘‘All feasts, societies, and thronges of men!’’ (IV.iii.20-21). The only proper reward which men truly deserve is death: ‘‘Destruction fang mankind!’’ (IV.iii.23). Timon’s verdict is much stronger than the Elizabethan Homilies, which describe man’s ‘‘blinded’’ state after the fall as a time when ‘‘almost all the world’’ turned from ‘‘the only eternal living God’’ to ‘‘their own fantasies.’’ According to such theology, the lack of Christian faith and the spiritual blindness of the pagan world are matters of great seriousness, for they will subject that world to an everlasting damnation. But Timon’s pessimism and his curses are more terrible, since he judges Athenian society from the depths of the total emptiness of his own despair for the race.

Athens is the image of a city whose citizens have forgot their responsibilities; they have exceeded the proper limits of behavior. For, as Luciana says in The Comedy of Errors (II.i.16-17), ‘‘There’s nothing situated under heaven’s eye / But hath his bounds.’’ Men are to be responsible masters

54 The Faerie Queene III.x.60.

over the world of plants and beasts, over their wives, and over their own unruly wills. Reason, of course, provides a bridle for men’s acts as well as the square or standard by which they may rightly be judged. When rational behavior, loyalty between friends and relatives, and decorous social patterns are violated, men become indistinguishable from beasts. To go beyond the limits of loyalty as these are naturally set down is to reduce men to less than their rightful humanity. Thus the Athenians, who are fallen and faithless pagans, will be revealed to be like “beasts.”

As vile Apemantus tells a misanthropic Timon, “the commonwealth of Athens is become a forest of beasts” (IV.iii.349-350). The iconography is significant. The quantity and quality of the beast imagery introduced into the story by Shakespeare almost in the end overwhelms the play.56 Timon himself goes to the “woods,” finds himself a cave, digs for roots like a wild man, and hopes then to “find / Th’ unkindest beast more kinder than mankind” (IV.i.35-36). But in the forests near Athens, there apparently are no happy beasts for Timon to discover. He certainly does not find beasts living a more natural, and hence more satisfactory existence than men. Not even the bestial condition is really free from the vicious conflicts and anxieties of life. Instead, animal nature as described by Timon (IV.iii.328-345) is red in tooth and claw. To be a beast might thus be even worse than to remain a man!

Yet it may be argued that the animals Timon has named in his speech will not flatter him for their personal gain. And, as the last book of Gulliver’s Travels suggests, only man is so foolish as to be corrupted by love of gold. For Timon, however, gold now has lost its utility. Since he has cut himself off from the community of men, he has no use for the wealth which he discovers while digging for roots to devour. Gold is not edible. He is like a beast with need of nothing other than food and shelter. Ironically, as Timon is distributing the wholly useless fortune he has found, the reader is made to wonder whether man indeed is no more than such a poor, bare, forked creature as this—i.e., a creature needing no more than the essential minimum that will sustain bare life.

In Act IV.iii, a tableau shows Timon giving lavishly to Alcibiades to help him meet his military payroll: “There’s gold to pay thy soldiers; / Make large confusion; and thy fury spent, / Confounded be thyself.” Of course, when they see the gold, Alcibiades’ whores want “more” (IV.iii.134); they will “do anything for gold” (IV.iii.152). These “beagles” are slaves and worshipers of gold; they are no less devoted to their god than Ben Jonson’s Volpone, whose adoration of Mammon in Volpone I.i is so unforgettable. Later Timon asks, “What a god’s gold, / That he is worshipp’d in a baser temple / Than where swine feed?”

56On the beast imagery, see Farnham, pp. 68-74.
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(V.i.46-47). Timon, however, is "no idle votarist" (V.iii.27). In the midst of his malice, the qualities of this misanthropic man, living a bestial existence, nevertheless impress us as somehow preferable to the false appearances, the hypocrisy, and the acquisitiveness in the society he has left.

Timon, who is "sick of this false world, B says that he "will love nought / But even the mere necessities upon't" (IV.iii.378-379). Obviously, human society is not one of the "mere necessities." As painter V s version of the Timon story describes him, "he shewed how like a beast (in deed) he was: for he could not abide any other man, beinge not able to suffer the company of him, which was of like nature." 57 Thus Timon, eating a rude root, will not allow Apemantus to "mend" his "feast": "First mend my company," says the misanthrope, "take away thyself" (IV.iii.284-285). The refusal by Timon of all communion with other men is, of course, an extreme but not unpredictable reaction to the failure of his ideal friendship earlier in the play. Nevertheless, as we see him amidst great wealth but loving no one, we can hardly feel very comfortable with him. He has cut himself off not only from a healthy life of the emotions, but also from trust, from piety, from meaning in his life. His language near the end of the play at times even approximates the subhuman speech of the wild man Caliban. As on one level he has become the image of Misanthropos, so on another he is an icon of the bestial man, characterized by his separation from those qualities which are most particularly human. In his alienation, Timon the bestial man has even proudly assumed a pose of cantankerous and despairing madness. It is a madness which can only lead to one woeful conclusion.

For Timon's fall into misanthropy involves a whole series of disturbing inversions: love to hate, excess to defect, life to death. In the final analysis, such a stance as Timon's cannot resolve the conflict in his soul. His despair about the human condition, like Gulliver's at the end of the Travels, so sets him off from other men that "reconcilement" seems impossible. There appears to be at last absolutely no hope which might sustain him and give him some reason for continuing to live. Such aversion to life itself leads at last to what he says when we hear his voice for the final time in the play:

Graves only be men's works and death their gain;
Sun, hide thy beams, Timon hath done his reign. (V.i.221-222)

Now there is only his epitaph, along with the message which is apparently attached to his tomb and which is read by the soldier at Act V.iii.3-4.

57 The Palace of Pleasure, as quoted in Narrative and Dramatic Sources, VI, 294.
Despite the invitation of his epitaph for us to curse Timon's corpse, however, Shakespeare at the last wishes to draw from his audience some belated sympathy for his protagonist as he once was. The man who "all living men did hate" (V.iv.72) was once "noble," and, through our "memory" of his nobility, we are indirectly invited by Alcibiades to join our tears with the drops wept by Neptune over his "low grave" (V.iv.77-80). Through a study of the iconography of the play, we have seen the failure of an ideal through human fault. Its failure does not, however, prove that this ideal—friendship—must always thus fail.