

Timon of Athens

Timon of Athens always appeared to us to be written with as intense a feeling of his subject as any one play of Shakespeare. It is one of the few in which he seems to be in earnest throughout, never to trifle nor go out of his way. He does not relax in his efforts, nor lose sight of the unity of his design. It is the only play of our author in which spleen is the predominant feeling of the mind. It is as much a satire as a play: and contains some of the finest pieces of invective possible to be conceived, both in the snarling, captious answers of the cynic Apemantus, and in the impassioned and more terrible imprecations of Timon. The latter remind the classical reader of the force and swelling impetuosity of the moral declamations in Juvenal, while the former have all the keenness and caustic severity of the old Stoic philosophers. The soul of Diogenes appears to have been seated on the lips of Apemantus. The churlish profession of misanthropy in the cynic is contrasted with the profound feeling of it in Timon, and also with the soldierlike and determined resentment of Alcibiades against his countrymen, who have banished him, though this forms only an incidental episode in the tragedy.

The fable consists of a single event—of the transition from the highest pomp and profusion of artificial refinement to the most abject state of savage life, and privation of all social intercourse. The change is as rapid as it is complete; nor is the description of the rich and generous Timon, banqueting in gilded palaces, pampered by every luxury, prodigal of his hospitality, courted by crowds of flatterers, poets, painters, lords, ladies, who:

Follow his strides, his lobbies fill with tendance,
Rain sacrificial whisperings in his ear;
And through him drink the free air—

more striking than that of the sudden falling off of his friends and fortune, and his naked exposure in a wild forest digging roots from the earth for his sustenance, with a lofty spirit of self-denial, and bitter scorn of the world, which raise him higher in our esteem than the dazzling gloss of prosperity could do. He grudges himself the means of life, and is only busy in preparing his grave. How forcibly is the difference between what he was and what he is described in Apemantus's taunting questions, when he comes to reproach him with the change in his way of life!

—What, think'st thou,
That the bleak air, thy boisterous chamberlain,
Will put thy shirt on warm? will these moist trees
That have out-liv'd the eagle, page thy heels,
And skip when thou point'st out? will the cold brook,
Candied with ice, caudle thy morning taste
To cure thy o'er-night's surfeit? Call the creatures,
Whose naked natures live in all the spight
Of wreakful heav'n, whose bare unhoused trunks,

To the conflicting elements expos'd,
Answer mere nature, bid them flatter thee.

The manners are everywhere preserved with distinct truth. The poet and painter are very skilfully played off against one another, both affecting great attention to the other, and each taken up with his own vanity, and the superiority of his own art. Shakespeare has put into the mouth of the former a very lively description of the genius of poetry and of his own in particular.

—A thing slipt idly from me.
Our poesy is as a gum, which issues
From whence 'tis nourish'd. The fire i' th' flint
Shows not till it be struck: our gentle flame
Provokes itself—and like the current flies
Each bound it chafes.

The hollow friendship and shuffling evasions of the Athenian lords, their smooth professions and pitiful ingratitude, are very satisfactorily exposed, as well as the different disguises to which the meanness of self-love resorts in such cases to hide a want of generosity and good faith. The lurking selfishness of Apemantus does not pass undetected amidst the grossness of his sarcasms and his contempt for the pretensions of others. Even the two courtezans who accompany Alcibiades to the cave of Timon are very characteristically sketched; and the thieves who come to visit him are also 'true men' in their way.—An exception to this general picture of selfish depravity is found in the old and honest steward, Flavius, to whom Timon pays a full tribute of tenderness. Shakespeare was unwilling to draw a picture 'all over ugly with hypocrisy'. He owed this character to the good-natured solicitations of his Muse. His mind was well said by Ben Jonson to be the 'sphere of humanity'.

The moral sententiousness of this play equals that of Lord Bacon's Treatise on the Wisdom of the Ancients, and is indeed seasoned with greater variety. Every topic of contempt or indignation is here exhausted; but while the sordid licentiousness of Apemantus, which turns everything to gall and bitterness, shows 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. He impatiently cries out, when he finds the gold,

This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions; bless the accurs'd;
Make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves,
And give them title, knee, and approbation,

With senators on the bench; this is it,
That makes the wappen'd widow wed again;
She, whom the spital-house
Would cast the gorge at, *this embalms and spices*
To th' April day again.

One of his most dreadful imprecations is that which occurs immediately on his leaving Athens.

Let me look back upon thee, O thou wall,
That girdlest 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!
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 lin'd crutch from thy old limping sire,
And with it beat his brains out! Fear and piety,
Religion to the Gods, peace, justice, truth,
Domestic awe, night-rest, and neighbourhood,
Instructions, manners, mysteries and trades,
Degrees, observances, customs and laws,
Decline to your confounding contraries;
And let 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 manners 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!

Timon is here just as ideal in his passion for ill as he had before been in his belief of good. Apemantus was satisfied with the mischief existing in the world, and with his own ill-nature. One of the most decisive intimations of Timon's morbid jealousy of appearances is in his answer to Apemantus, who

asks him:

What things in the world can'st thou nearest compare
with thy flatterers?

Timon. Women nearest: but men, men are the things themselves.

Apemantus, it is said, 'loved few things better than to abhor himself'. This is not the case with Timon, who neither loves to abhor himself nor others. All his vehement misanthropy is forced, up-hill work. From the slippery turns of fortune, from the turmoils of passion and adversity, he wishes to sink into the quiet of the grave. On that subject his thoughts are intent, on that he finds time and place to grow romantic. He digs his own grave by the sea-shore; contrives his funeral ceremonies amidst the pomp of desolation, and builds his mausoleum of the elements.

Come not to me again; but say to Athens,
Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
Which once a-day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover.—Thither come,
And let my grave-stone be your oracle.

And again, Alcibiades, after reading his epitaph, says of him:

These well express in thee thy latter spirits:
Though thou abhorred'st in us our human griefs,
Scorn'd'st our brain's flow, and those our droplets, which
From niggard nature fall; yet rich conceit
Taught thee to make vast Neptune weep for aye
On thy low grave—

thus 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 lifetime.