

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Timon of Athens*, Presented by Theatre for a New Audience, in partnership with Shakespeare Theatre Company and association with the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Polonsky Shakespeare Center, Brooklyn, New York, January 11-February 9, 2020.**

Justin Hopkins  
Franklin & Marshall College  
[JHopkins@fandm.edu](mailto:JHopkins@fandm.edu)

As I noted in my last review of this play for *EMLS* ([19.2, 2017](#)), all productions of *Timon of Athens* that I have attended have set the story in (more-or-less) modern times. That trend continued (more or less) in this revival, restaged by director Simon Godwin with an almost entirely new company in the United States after the production's original Stratford-upon-Avon and London runs. However, unlike other versions I've attended, which have treated *Timon* like a psychological study or a social critique, Godwin's vision played most like a parable, or an illustration of an archetype, blending fantastic, moralistic, classic, and contemporary elements. The production featured superb acting and design, although it did lack some coherence and resonance in certain crucial parts of the narrative. While it was not wholly satisfying, it did prove emotionally and intellectually stimulating.

There was plenty to admire and enjoy – perhaps most of all, playing Timon, Kathryn Hunter, the one cast member to travel with the production from England. Hunter entirely lived up to her high reputation. With her husky voice and sharply angular physical gestures, Hunter spanned the dramatic spectrum from simple comedy to incandescent rage to utter desolation. One moment she made funny faces at the even more funny-faced, abstract picture presented to her by the proud Painter (played by Zachary Fine, his absurdly oversized paintbrush resting snugly in a richly brocaded baldric hip holster), trying to reassure him how much she liked the Jackson Pollock-esque mess. Another moment she ranted and waved her arms wildly, achieving a Lear-like poetic grandeur. Her curses scalding humankind, she poured petrol over her possessions and paused to

perch on an ornate chair, spitting out her scorn, before striking the match. Yet at another moment she clung, weeping, to Apemantus (Arnie Burton), striking his chest and sobbing ‘Rogue, rogue, rogue!’ (4.3.367)<sup>1</sup> until she subsided into despair. Hunter’s was a truly remarkable performance, rendering the play not so much a psychologically realistic portrait as a broadly cautionary tale, tracing a tragic fall from nobility (however naïve) to inevitable misanthropy – a woman more sinned against than sinning.

Regarding the change to Timon’s gender, dramaturg Jonathan Kalb in an online program claimed that the casting sat at the core of this production: ‘Making the character an aristocratic lady forces us to ask how such extreme intemperance... might be illuminated, possibly even better understood, if its bearer is female’.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, but actually, after the first few times that the words ‘lady’ replaced ‘lord’ – which stood out primarily because of the ways in which those replacements changed the poetry’s meter – I paid little explicit attention to these changes. This was a story about a person, and, with a few exceptions, gender was simply not a foregrounded factor.

One such exception was the moment mentioned above, when Timon clung despondently to Arnie Burton’s Apemantus, the man with whom, just moments before, she had been wrestling in the dirt, trading vicious insults. Together, Hunter and Burton created a poignant relationship, balancing playful sarcasm and genuine anger, tender affection and bitter disappointment. Theirs was a nuanced exchange of expletives and exhortations, pleading and pushing away. At that final moment of confrontation, both the zenith and the nadir of their relationship, that relationship seemed to me almost like mother and son, though this was not explicitly indicated.

Hunter, Burton, and the rest of the capable cast were well framed by Soutra Gilmour’s set and costume design, which was beautiful, functional, and meaningful. On entering the theatre, I noticed the tree trunk, bare of leaves, hung high above the stage. Immediately (and correctly) I assumed it would be the tree from which Timon would eventually hang herself. Meantime, the stage was occupied by an opulently laid table to which the final touches were being applied by a staff of elegantly attired servants. A few other pieces of furniture would come and go before the tree was lowered to the stage as the central, foreboding focus of the second act. (That act began with a slow sunrise, carefully crafted

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<sup>1</sup> Act, scene and line references refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Theatre for a New Audience website, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.tfana.org/current-season/timon/360viewfinder>

by Donald Holder, whose lighting design contributed greatly to the atmosphere throughout.)

Director and editor Godwin and co-editor Emily Burns had not treated the text with excessive reverence. Shakespeare and Middleton's script – disdained by many, if not by myself – was judiciously cut in places: for example, there was no need for the scene between Apemantus and the Fool in 2.2. In other places, the text was both cut *and* pasted cleverly. For example, the three individual scenes in which Timon's servants unsuccessfully seek funds from his former friends (3.1-3) were conflated into a single, staggered sequence: one conversation began, then those actors froze, and the next took over, and so on in a cycle of escalating urgency. The device kept the scenes visually engaging and the pacing also reinforced the impact of the failed requests.

Other changes to the text were less welcome. The scene I missed most keenly – and the absence that most severely undermined the overall narrative trajectory of the production – was the confrontation between Alcibiades and the Senate. Since this scene was struck entirely from the narrative, we only met Alcibiades (played by Elia Monte-Brown) briefly at Timon's feast, where Monte-Brown came across as more agitating activist than military general. Then we did not see her again until after the intermission and Timon's discovery of the buried treasure. Hunter turned the exclamation of 'Gold!' (4.3.26) into a marvelous, multi-syllabic clarion call of shocked disgust, and Alcibiades led onstage a mob looking more like protestors than soldiers. They carried signs decrying social injustices, suggesting that Timon's disenfranchisement was symptomatic of a larger issue, declaring: 'No home, No Country' and 'We are the City!'

I imagine for someone not more familiar with the text, it might have been hard in this moment even to recall who Alcibiades was, much less guess who her followers might be. For me, it was frustrating to feel prompted to engage with characters who had not been significantly established, since I had as yet not seen or heard any reference to the specific social injustices being protested. That there was some kind of movement against the avaricious luxury of Timon's coterie did not surprise me, but neither did it viscerally penetrate me. Bluntly, I didn't care about this cause, beyond general principled agreement with the notion to 'Give the dispossessed their place'. I would have liked to have invested more in this subplot, but its introduction was too abrupt and muddled, as was its eventual climax and denouement.

At the play's end, Alcibiades and her mob rushed in on the Athenian senators, forcing them at gunpoint to surrender the city – the senators, incidentally, using lines borrowed from *Henry V*: 'Our expectation hath this day an end... Enter our gates; dispose of us and

ours; / For we no longer are defensible' (3.3.121-7). While the scene could have been powerful in itself, I was again frustrated at the lost opportunity to make this story arc mean more than a means to further emphasize Timon's personal dispossession. When Alcibiades invoked yet another play – 'Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.735) – in response to the death of Timon, I started wishing that Godwin and Burns had just used a bit more of the actual *Timon* script. The depiction of Flavius carrying Timon's corpse onstage in his arms was an explicit visual nod to *King Lear*, and once more I wondered whether it was necessary so substantially to alter *Timon*'s conclusion. The mob gathered slowly around the body, and while it was not an unimpressive picture, I just didn't care about Alcibiades or his followers' grief.

On the other hand, I did care about Flavius's sorrow. The steward had been splendidly played by John Rothman, a sympathetic presence from even before the beginning of the play, as he supervised preparations for Timon's feast. And I cared even more about Apemantus, who had entered and stood silently on the edge of the stage, woefully observing. Tears streamed down the cynic's face at the sight of a woman whose fall he had predicted – no joy at that prediction proving true. So, finally, though there were parts of the production that didn't cohere as fully as I would have liked, the throughline of Timon's and Apemantus's tragic relationship ensured that I did not leave the theatre without being genuinely moved.