At the Boundary of Tragedy

Nature's fragile vessel

That a number of critics have found *Timon* lacking in tragic qualities is symptomatic of the general feeling that it is in some manner different from Shakespeare's other tragedies, that it lies, to use Willard Farnham's phrase, at the frontiers of tragedy. But, to my mind, it is still clearly within these. This is not, I think, an academic argument, because a critic's attitude toward all aspects of a work is influenced by what he judges the whole to be.

Although critics generally realize that there are no universally accepted definitions of tragedy, they sometimes act as if there were and disregard the lesson of the history of criticism, which records considerable changes of opinion about what plays to call tragedies. Well into the nineteenth century, most critics, whose judgments were formed by the standards of Greek tragedy, or rather some select Greek tragedies, were averse to using the term for Shakespeare's. And when Shakespeare was accepted into the canon, it was at first for a small number of plays. Bradley's singling out of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* made it fashionable to think only of these as true tragedies, and some even excluded one or the other of them. There are few now who would deny that *Romeo and Juliet* and the Roman plays are also tragedies. But *Timon* is still in most critics' limbo if not somewhere in an upper circle of hell; and this, I think, is unfortunate.
This is not to say that it is in the same league as Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth; but I think that it belongs to the next group, being in kind no less powerful than Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, Shakespeare's other late tragedies. If it has not been so ranked, by and large, this has been due to an overemphasis on the defectiveness of the text and to preconceptions on the need for tragedy to uplift and edify, preconceptions, I believe, that are restrictive and really quite arbitrary.

Parenthetically, we may note that there is no basis in fact for the widespread belief that the case against Timon as a tragedy can be supported by the irregularity of its placement in the First Folio. This belief is based on the editors' putting Timon in a place originally intended for a longer play, as shown by a gap in the pagination. Even though the editors put Timon among the tragedies, they did so, it is claimed, because they had no play available other than this hybrid; to indicate that it did not really belong there, they "denied" Timon the status of a tragedy by entitling it The Life of Timon of Athens. But such designations are used quite haphazardly in the Folio. Who, for instance, would wish to argue that "The Life and Death of Julius Caesar," as this play is called in the table of contents, constitutes an appropriate description? The case against Timon grows even weaker when one realizes that the most-difficult-to-classify play of all, Troilus and Cressida, was originally scheduled for the place into which Timon was put; a canceled leaf, found in several Folio copies, shows on the one side the last page of Romeo and Juliet (the preceding play) and on the other the beginning of Troilus and Cressida, which was later supplanted by a printer's ornament. Perhaps the most glaring example of the editors' nonchalance about genre is their inclusion of Cymbeline among the tragedies. No argument on genre can be supported by reference to Folio titles and classifications.

My argument for Timon as a tragedy rests on a negative and a positive demonstration. I shall first try to show that the claims for its being something else—a morality play, a satire, a domestic drama, or a pageant—stem from a partial or simplified reading. I shall then point out the essential elements Timon shares with plays that we have come to recognize as tragedies. Each of these is in some features different from the other, and we can therefore grant Timon some idiosyncracies if it meets many of the criteria that have been thought characteristic of the genre. No one play meets them all.

Although my argument is primarily formalistic, it cannot be altogether divorced from a qualitative judgment. I actually have no objection to somebody's calling Murder in the Red
Barn a tragedy along with Lear, but for good reasons only the latter claims our critical attention: it is superior in what it says about life as well as in its formal articulation. Unless we feel that a play illuminates the human condition more deeply than an ordinary serious drama, we are not apt to argue that it is a tragedy. A moral judgment of this kind, of course, is subjective, and I cannot claim universal validity for it. Only if Timon excites greater interest than it has in the past and is more widely felt by audiences and critics to have meaning for our time is it likely to become generally accepted as a tragedy.

Of the claims that Timon belongs to a genre different from tragedy, the one easiest to refute is that it is a "morality." True, its outcome is in a sense predictable; but then, in what Shakespearean tragedy is it not? For that matter, all tragedies make us anticipate their general endings since these must rest on some inevitability. The dramatic strategy of Timon is not as simple as some would have it; the outcome is not altogether anticipated by the poet's allegory of Fortune, and certainly the moral is not contained in it or the play would be both cynical and banal. Although the allegory anticipates the major turn of the action (leaving out, however, the Alcibiades movement), it makes of Timon a mere favorite and victim of Fortune, and, for better or worse, he is something more. It is also true that there is some stylization in the character portrayals, but none of the characters are really "subtilized virtues and vices." The only moral emphasis that is simple and unequivocal is on the villainy of Timon's friends—an instance of Shakespeare's painting "livelier than life." Granted that the "vices" that oppose Timon, taken en bloc, represent something like "Commercialism" or "Exploitation," not a single one represents a clearly defined particular vice, such as Pecunia or Luxuria or Dissimulatio. And there is certainly no character that embodies a definite pattern of virtue: Timon the philanthropist is also prodigal; Apemantus the philosopher is also vain and envious; Flavius is loyal but also interested in gold. We do not have the feeling of a clear moral orientation to which Timon could and should adjust himself. Alcibiades is no model of virtue; he succeeds in making himself the master of Athens because of his ambition and cleverness, not because of any moral quality. Nor does the action suggest that the characters have to make the kind of moral choices facing the characters of moralities. The play does not indicate a spiritual framework or prepare us to expect either salvation or damnation of its hero. It is therefore nonsense to say that a salvational ending is "denied" and to call Timon an anti-morality. Timon heightens life; it does not organize it accord-
ing to didactic principles. Its apparently simple pattern is made complex and ambiguous by ironies, and its presiding deity is the enigmatic and unpredictable Fortuna.

More to the point is the designation of “satire” or “tragi-cal satire.” Critics who subscribe to this classification belong to two schools, those of O.J. Campbell and of Alvin Kernan, and Kernan’s is the more defensible position. The difference turns on the critics’ attitudes toward Timon, on whether he is the object of satire or the satirist. Campbell opts for the former alternative and denies that Timon has our sympathy to any extent. The nature of his outbursts, he claims, is such as to arouse our strong disapproval; they represent everything that the Renaissance moralists and Shakespeare believed to be false, presumptuous, and ugly, and attacked as such.\(^3\) I would grant Timon some sympathy; but naturally this is a subjective area. In any case, his outbursts do not characterize him as the butt of satire; violent as they are, they are saturated with arguments that reflect major ethical preconceptions of Shakespeare’s age. Campbell’s claim that Timon was written in the new manner of Ben Jonson’s Sejanus as a tragic satire is also untenable. Jonson’s moral viewpoint is so much simpler; he permits no ironies or ambiguities and gives us a clear bearing toward all major and even most minor characters. His Sejanus is a monster quite unlike Timon.

Alvin Kernan has the better case when he finds both Apemantus and Timon satirists and considers Timon’s as, in some ways, the higher kind of satire. He grants Timon a Lear-like grandeur; but whereas he sees Lear passing through the stage of satirical outrage to tragic perception, he notes that Timon persists in unyielding hatred. Timon, so to speak, is killed by the nature of satire, which, if pursued unrelentingly, becomes self-destructive.\(^4\) However, we should not stipulate that a tragic hero must attain a “tragic perception” like Lear’s. For that matter, critics often exaggerate the extent of Lear’s self-knowledge and its significance for his tragedy. Undoubtedly he gains a fleeting understanding of his and man’s nature that goes beyond Timon’s, but the major impact of this attainment on the tragedy is that it is useless for practical purposes since it comes too late. Timon gains a clear and sharp understanding of the sycophants and usurers around him and generalizes it into the nature of man and the world. This knowledge may be faulty as a universal insight, but this does not matter for the tragic quality of the play; what does matter is that Timon finds it as impossible to live with this knowledge as does Lear with his.

Kernan’s statement that both Apemantus and Timon are satirists requires modification. Although Timon speaks occa-
sionally with the accent of a satirist, only Apemantus does consistently so; only he is true satirist, a recognizable relative of Elizabethan-Jacobean satirists. His criticism of society has the ring of what Marston calls “cynical satire.” Timon, like Shakespeare’s other tragic heroes, has an idiom of his own, an idiom that has the ring of tragedy. This is unmistakable in such phrases as “nature’s fragile vessel” or “the sweet degrees that this brief world affords.” It is audible even when his speech becomes muscular and harsh and resembles the satirists’ “Cut my heart in sums. . . . Tell out my blood” (3.4.91—93) castigates the moneygrubbers but also rings with the pathos of victimization. Tragic pathos often suffuses the satire and irony: “Strange times, that weep with laughing, not with weeping” (4.3.490). Still more often the satire disappears in the apocalyptic, Lear-like amplification. As much as this idiom absorbs the cynic’s satirical arguments, it transcends the tone and purpose of satire. Biting, harsh, and insulting as Elizabethan satire is, it never rises to the all-inclusive destructive denunciation to which Timon leaps immediately: “Burn house! Sink Athens!” (3.6.100). All the stops are out:

Crack the lawyer’s voice,
That he may never more false title plead,
Nor sound his quillets shrilly. Hoar the flamen,
That scolds against the quality of flesh,
And not believes himself. Down with the nose,
Down with it flat, take the bridge away
Of him that, his particular to foresee,
Smells from the general weal.

(4.3.155–62)

Timon is a pessimist, a nihilist, a prophet of annihilation; above all, he is a misanthrope. Among Shakespeare’s heroes, who are all extremists, he is the most extreme; to call him a satirist is to put him into a frame from which he breaks.

That Timon is killed by the nature of satire sounds better in the study or the classroom than when seeing the play or reading it as theater of the mind. What is self-destructive is Timon’s misanthropy, which is an extreme reaction to the villainy and ingratitude of his friends, and this misanthropy is fed by his recognition of the general venality of Athens, which he generalizes into that of man. Timon’s death derives with tragic logic from his character and circumstances; it does not matter that it occurs offstage if one attends to classical models, as Shakespeare appears to have done. Timon’s death certainly dominates the catastrophe in tragic manner.

To call *Timon* a satire is to put the cart before the horse, the satire before the tragedy. This has been recognized by those
who, like Sylvan Barnet, use the term “satiric tragedy,” which, however, contains the unfortunate implication that what is satirized in the play is tragedy. And to group Timon together with Troilus and Cressida under this heading is to link two plays that are profoundly different in spite of the similar moral climate they have. Troilus is satirized clearly and obviously even in his greater moments, such as when he expresses his disillusionment with Cressida and womanhood, and he is undercut by Ulysses’ comments. Unlike Timon, he never gains the strength and final definiteness that makes the tragic hero seek and find death. It seems to me therefore unwise to separate Timon from Shakespeare’s tragedies by labeling it a “satirical tragedy” or a “tragical satire.” Certainly satire is one of its defining elements, but there are other components that equally claim attention.

One of these is the particular domestic quality of the play—in fact, “domestic tragedy” was Dr. Johnson’s label for it. The action turns on the misfortune of a citizen of Athens, and the fall of his great house provides some of its pathos. Clifford Leech, who notes these facts, would look upon Timon as “not the last and least of the tragedies, but the doubtful harbinger of the romances.” Leech is undoubtedly right in observing the play’s domestic quality—one that he says is not like that in Heywood’s dramas; he is wrong, I think, in associating it with Shakespeare’s romances (and, for that matter, with Webster’s, Tourneur’s, and Ford’s tragedies). First, domestic elements in Shakespeare are not restricted to the comedies or romances; they are strong also in Othello and Macbeth. Othello’s jealousy is of the sort that can afflict any ordinary citizen, and Macbeth’s subjection to his wife’s ambition is a domestic matter. Second, Timon is no more an altogether private man than is any other Shakespearean tragic hero. Senators go in and out of his house, and his prestige is such that they offer him the leadership of the state when besieged by Alcibiades. I find him an imposing enough figure to make this credible and not to see it à la Leech as a mere concession to the Renaissance postulate that the tragic hero must be a great man. The significance of Timon for Athens is surely comparable to that of Othello for Venice. Domesticty is linked to matters of state in Timon just as it is in Othello: it is significant that the hero’s house stands in a particular city-state, Athens, of which we form a distinct impression; by contrast, we learn nothing of Leontes’ Sicily.

Like Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, Timon emphasizes the “social dimension of tragedy,” as Larry Champion has noted. The heroes of all three plays have undergone, or undergo, a profound conditioning by the shaping influences of their states. It is true that these influences are primarily
sociopolitical in the other two tragedies, socioeconomic in Timon; but Coriolanus's Rome at least associates economics with politics; Coriolanus is of the patricians' party, and this makes him callous toward hunger, poverty, and the plebeians. In both tragedies, the hero's predicament is closely linked with the ills of society. Timon is a large landowner with aristocratic manners and tastes; his ruin entails the fall of a great house and rich estate. As much as his disaster is self-generated, it is in part also due to the false, materialistic value system he has absorbed from the commercial villainy that reigns in Athens.

In one respect Timon does move closer to Shakespeare's romances: in the large role given to spectacle—to the banquets, the masque, music, and dancing. The very settings are spectacular: Timon's splendid house, the walls that symbolize the large city, the wild, wooded land that contains Timon's cave, and beyond them the universe evoked in Timon's apocalyptic imagination. Whatever one may think of M.C. Bradbrook's claim that Timon is a "dramatic show" or "experimental scenario," her pioneering insistence on its staginess is wholesome in view of so much criticism that dwells on its dramatic insufficiency. Timon excels in contrast, variety, and dramatic spectacle; incidents and scenes are given an emblematic heightening. Yet, as much as its spectacle appeals to the senses, it is integrated into the action and the dialectics of ideas. The two banquets, for instance, not only contrast lavish spending with austerity and harshness but also have a multiple significance for the reversal of images and themes and thus lead the imagination from one phase to the next. This latter function is quite like that of the two appearances of the witches in Macbeth. Neither in Macbeth nor in Timon does anything ever happen for a purely operatic effect.

J.M. Nosworthy, who has also found staginess characteristic of the play, attributes this quality to Shakespeare's intention of writing a "spectacular tragedy." Rightly, Nosworthy grants that Timon is not unique among the tragedies in this respect: Macbeth scintillates with such theatrical effects as fog, witches, cauldrons, a banquet, and songs. And surely the banquets and battles and the antithesis of Roman might and Egyptian sensuality in Antony and Cleopatra also foreshadow the spectacularism of the romances; so do the large crowds of soldiers and citizens with their loud noises of clanging swords and civil uproad in Coriolanus. The development of drama pointed in the direction of overwhelming the mind by strong effects on the senses and the imagination, in the direction of the Baroque. Shakespeare's Timon and other late plays participate in this trend in their own way without offending the intellect.
We have so far characterized Timon as tragical-satirical-domestical-spectacular, a hyphenization that views with Polonius's "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." In effect, all of Shakespeare's plays are hyphenated things; Hamlet, for instance, could be called "tragical-historical-satirical-psychological." Timon follows an even more complex recipe. We must yet add that other adjective that keeps recurring to the hyphenization that characterizes the play: pessimistic. Pessimism, of course, is as much a matter of reaction to what is presented as it is inherent in the play: what may strike one reader or viewer as a deeply discouraging statement about mankind may register only mildly on another; but experience has proved that the play manipulates its audience toward pessimism, a manipulation some have resented.

In this pessimism lies the major problem for the play's appreciation as a tragedy. Unlike the other tragedies, we are told, Timon does not "end with some sort of resolution, with a certain degree of nobility attained through suffering, and with a catharsis experienced by the audience"; and it is therefore not a tragedy. We had rather leave aside this vexing matter of catharsis, the most unmeasurable of all demands made on tragedy; but we cannot do so completely since it is interrelated with the claim that the hero must be noble and that there must be a "resolution" in the ending: there can be no catharsis (Aristotelian, Augustinian, Hegelian, or otherwise) without some uplift. Tragedy, we are urged, reconciles us in some manner to the universe or teaches us something about the working of retributive justice or edifies us about the dignity of man. Dorothea Krook puts this stipulation as follows:

We feel, extraordinarily, liberated from pain and fear (Aristotle's "purgation" of the emotions of pity and terror); not depressed and oppressed; but in a curious way exhilarated; not angry and bitter but somehow reconciled: our faith in the human condition not destroyed or undermined but restored, fortified, reaffirmed. In the greatest tragedy, I suggest, what in the end is reaffirmed is something more than the dignity of man and the value of human life. We are made to feel that, through the affirmation of man and the life of man, there is at the same time being affirmed an order of values transcending the values of human order.

If such affirmation of a transcendent order via the assertion of human dignity is de rigueur for tragedy, Timon does not qualify; its hero does his best to prove human indignity, and rather succeeds in it. But then, how many Jacobean tragedies would qualify? The pervasive corruption of society, the quirkiness of fate, and the impotence of the good in Webster's tragedies are not recommended reading for those who want their faith
in mankind restored. To derive an even moderately optimistic lesson from Lear requires a particularly benign reaction in view of the cataclysmic ending.

The claim that tragedy asserts the dignity of man and some kind of cosmic order is a characteristically twentieth-century notion and may have to be reassessed in the changing intellectual climate of our time. Much more pessimistic formulations were sometimes voiced in the nineteenth century. Schopenhauer put the case most strongly when he saw in tragedy "the representation of the terrible side of life: the un speakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent." Since tragedy showed that the self-mortifying efforts of a few were always thwarted by the wickedness and perversity of most, Schopenhauer thought that tragedy proved the futility of giving reign to the free will; resignation was the only answer. For Nietzsche, as much as he disapproved of Schopenhauer's pessimism as one of sensibility and therefore of weakness, the "Künstlerisch-Tragische," which he opposed to it, contained a recognition that the abyss of life has to be faced with a "Pessimismus der Stärke." Nietzsche wished to substitute for Aristotle's catharsis an identification with the force of creation—equivalent to the Dionysian impulse, if I understand him right—a drive that even includes the will to destruction. I do not wish to suggest that Timon is Nietzschean or Schopenhaueresque but that its pessimism does not disqualify it from being a tragedy.

Quite to the contrary, the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists thought that a tragedy ought to be pessimistic about man; although it was the fashion to speak about tragedy in moral commonplaces, nobody seems to have considered the representation of human dignity its province. Tragedy held the mirror up to nature, as Hamlet says, but the image reflected was dark. In the Prologue to Antonio's Revenge, John Marston warned that his "sullen tragic scene" and "black-visaged show" were not for him who was

Uncapable of weighty passion
(As from his birth being hugged in the arms
And nuzzled 'twixt the breasts of happiness)
And winks and shuts his apprehension up
From common sense of what men were, and are,
Who would not know what men must be—

the implication being that what men were and are is something unpleasant and that what they must come to is death. This horror of what men were and are penetrates the Timon tragedy.

A pessimistic moral for tragedy was suggested to the
Renaissance by the ubiquitous commonplace of life as a play, the *theatrum mundi*, which always has a melancholy message: life is a lamentable or ridiculous performance under the aegis of Fortune, who assigns the roles and directs the action. It is generally a tragedy the catastrophe of which is death. The frequent use of this commonplace by writers of tragedy shows that it was very much in their minds. It could be used with an explicitly Christian script that recalled that the danger in the game of fortune was to sell one’s soul to the world. It could also be without theological implications and with classical-pagan exemplification. An emblem by Lebey de Batilly, for instance, envisages the *theatrum mundi* as an arena-style theater, the actors of which are a row of young heroes in the arena who pass torches from one to the other in the manner of a relay race; life is here a race toward death. On a platform behind the men, statues symbolic of the auspices and the goals of the race are erected: Fortuna, Hercules (for Virtue), and a Terminus figure with some goal posts. So, one might say, the race is run by Timon and the torch is passed to Alcibiades.

The analogy to the emblem directs our attention to the significance of Fortune in the Timon tragedy. The immobile Fortuna statue of the emblem, of course, conveys no impression of the sinister implications and menacing ironies associated with the word *fortune* in Shakespeare’s play. The world of Timon is a nightmare of meanness and greed; Shakespeare shows what happens when men make Fortune into a deity. Even the philanthropic Timon pays her tribute since he makes giving away his treasures his sole occupation. “Fortune, not reason, rules the state of things”—the apt characterization of the French court by Chapman’s Bussy d’Ambois—also applies to the Athens of Timon. Shakespeare’s play is a tragedy of fortune in a wider sense than that of presenting the fall of a great man—the classical Renaissance formula. The hero’s change of fortune is associated with a fundamental change of attitude toward the world and with an equally radical change in the attitudes of his friends toward him. Fortune dominates this world in a crude and materialistic way to which we are not accustomed in Shakespeare but which is not so unlike that of Chapman’s tragedies (and, for that matter, in this respect at least, of Jonson’s *Sejanus*). As in Chapman, virtue is doomed here.

The suddenness and radicality in Timon’s change and, with it, in that of the play have been seen by some critics as a violation of tragic structure, as evidence that Timon is too obtrusively didactic to be a tragedy. It should be said that for Renaissance theorists the change of fortune was the defining
element of tragedy and that some insisted on its suddenness. Aristotle in the *Poetics* had merely found a *peripeteia*, a "change of fortune in the action of the play to the opposite state of affairs," characteristic of the complex plot of tragedy, the type he most approved. Julius Caesar Scaliger made this *peripeteia* prescriptive in his definition of tragedy: "Tragedy is the imitation of an action that involves the fortune of a distinguished man, with a turn toward a disastrous ending." Daniel Heinsius, demanding a *peripeteia* for tragedy, defined the term as a "sudden change of fortune to its opposite." From Heinsius's position, then, the suddenness of Timon's change would have been a virtue, and its radicality, the change to an opposite direction, is in line with what theorists since Aristotle have demanded. The later Shakespeare seems to have been tending toward a conception of tragedy based on sudden spectacular changes. Antony abruptly turns from Egypt to Rome and Rome to Egypt. Coriolanus leaves Rome for Antium, hating now the city he formerly loved—a *volte-face* comparable to Timon's. Unlike the misanthrope, of course, Coriolanus conquers his hate.

Preconceptions about tragedy have made some critics insist on an *anagnorisis* by the tragic hero; Timon has been faulted for not having one. Aristotle actually merely associated the *anagnorisis* with the *peripeteia* of the complex tragic plot; he understood by it simply the discovery by the hero of the disastrous outward turn of events, not a process of self-search. Nor did the Renaissance theorists, as far as I know, require the tragic hero to come to an understanding of his psychological and moral condition; this postulate comes out of the didacticism of our own age. In Aristotle's and the Renaissance theorists' sense, Timon has an *anagnorisis* when he realizes that he has been duped by his friends. It is true, of course, that some of Shakespeare's tragic heroes go further in the acknowledgment of their own responsibility for their fall than does Timon in his: "Unwisely, not ignobly have I given" (2.2.178). But to claim that these heroes achieve full insight is to exaggerate. In fact, the heroes of Shakespeare's other classical tragedies, that is, his Roman ones, are at least as deficient in searching their souls as is Timon. Brutus probes his psyche only before the murder of Caesar, Antony never feels sorry for the bloodshed his actions have occasioned, and the reasons for Coriolanus's saving Rome are problematic; they include certainly no acknowledged regret for what he has done. Shakespeare may have felt that a tragedy with a classical subject matter should not explore the human soul too deeply.

Much more important for tragedy than the hero's attainment
of self-knowledge is his subjection to suffering—a desideratum that, strangely, is not explicitly demanded by Aristotle. Timon's anger at mankind certainly is the manifestation of an intense suffering, and the pathos of his fall is underlined by the servants' choric comment. We feel that the suffering of the hero in tragedy should not be senseless, that there should be some meaning we can read into it. This wisdom can be, but need not be, adumbrated by a recognition of the hero—I agree here with Dorothea Krook: "The important implication ... is not that the tragic hero, the vessel of the suffering, shall receive the knowledge issuing from the suffering, but that we, the reader or the audience, shall receive it." Timon is one of the tragedies that allow us to be much wiser about the causes of the hero's downfall and suffering than the hero because the hamartia he commits entails a failure to understand himself. As the Greek tragedians and Seneca showed, him whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make blind or mad.

Like Shakespeare's other tragic heroes (Brutus is an exception), Timon is highly passionate; Shakespeare's tragedies still bear a faint imprint of the humanistic genre with its warning against excessive passion. The passion of Timon, like that of other tragic heroes, is articulated and given significance by being set in a relationship to similar but not identical passions of characters who function at least partially as foils. What Laertes and Fortinbras do for our understanding of the ways in which the grief of Hamlet and his desire for revenge express themselves is accomplished by Apemantus and Alcibiades for the wrath and misanthropy of Timon. The low-burning anger of Apemantus and the quickly aroused but also quickly controlled temper of Alcibiades show up the self-harming fury of Timon. The more vulnerable personality, he is also, not the least because of the magnitude of his passion, a man of larger sympathies and capacities. In tragic terms, Timon's wild misanthropy is his claim to greatness.

This greatness is one that isolates the tragic hero, and Timon, more than any of Shakespeare's tragic heroes with the possible exception of Coriolanus, is a lonely figure. Northrop Frye classifies Timon along with Othello and Coriolanus among the tragedies of isolation par excellence. In Timon, the isolation theme, as recent critics have recognized, relates particularly strongly to social issues. G. K. Hunter notes that Timon is an outcast of society as are also in some manner the heroes of the other late tragedies, Macbeth, Antony, and Coriolanus. Cyrus Hoy calls Timon a tragedy of alienation—a useful, if modern, term. And R. A. Foakes makes the valuable modification that in Timon, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra, the heroes are "unable to adapt themselves to a world of relative values
which sanctions the flexible man [like Alcibiades] in place of the man of absolutes [like Timon]." But Foakes thinks of Shakespeare as accepting this changing world and new flexibility more complacently than I do. Shakespeare certainly shows that Timon's isolation is not merely self-created. Misanthropy, of course, is by definition an isolating passion, but philanthropy should be a fusing and a synthesizing one; if it fails in that, the meanness around Timon is at least as much to blame as his own foolishness.

The isolation of the philanthropic Timon is the one we moderns know best: the loneliness in the midst of the crowd. Timon, the giver, is a loner even when among his admiring friends. His most ironic, tragically ironic, sentiment is that of the first banquet: "I have often wish'd myself poorer that I might come nearer to you" (1.2.98–99)—at the very moment when he glories in opulent togetherness, he feels most alone. When in the same speech he compares his friends to instruments hung up in cases, instruments that "keep their sound to themselves," he unwittingly characterizes himself and his longings as much as his friends. They mask their true selves deliberately, and in the process they stifle the free development of his own self even though outwardly they encourage it. His wish to be poorer and thus to come closer to them expresses a hidden desire to put everything at stake in order to break out of his dimly felt isolation and become free. But Timon's remains an "unsounded self" to the very end. Only death brings him health and freedom.

As E. A. J. Honigmann has noted, the theme of loneliness is mirrored in the other characters: it reappears in Apemantus, the professional outsider; in Flavius, whose separateness is evident even when he laments, together with the other servants, the fall of his master; and in Alcibiades' long silences in the earlier parts of the play. These characters do speak with Timon and interact with him in some manner; but they have no close personal relationship with him, and they are quite unrelated to each other. This lack of interaction of the secondary characters, which has been criticized and attributed to the play's incompleteness, emphasizes the non-coherence of the society portrayed. The prevailing tragic pessimism is reflected even in the dramatic structure.

But can a pessimistic tragedy, we are asked, produce a catharsis? Let us leave aside here the question of what Aristotle really meant by this term—purgation, purification, or clarification—and whether he wanted it to be that of the hero, the dramatic characters in general, or the audience. Let us adopt the common conception that the hero's tragic predicament and fall must produce a feeling of pity and fear (or awe) in us that we can relate to our own lives. Does then Timon have this
effect on us? Actually, every reader must answer this question for himself, but I shall keep the editorial "we" here for persuasion's sake. Timon, it must be said, alienates more than attracts us. He never seems much like us, and even if we are rather pessimistic about man and the world, misanthropy in such force bothers us. Yet we are not without some pity for him. This pity, I think, is of a special kind, different from that which we accord to Hamlet, Othello, or Lear but resembling what we feel for Macbeth in some respects and for Coriolanus in others. Macbeth is really not much like us either. Do we really think ourselves capable of murder except in self-defense? Macbeth, of course, overcomes our antipathy by his sensitive moral imagination that makes us aware of man's potential greatness. Although Timon lacks Macbeth's poetic apprehensiveness, he has qualities that we admire in other contexts, and he achieves a rhetorical triumph in his protest against man. He has a total commitment to the two causes to which he dedicates his life, and he shows an uncompromising courage in throwing off the fetters of the society that is bent on his ruin. We feel some pity for him, if for no other reason than that he is born into the exploitive society of Athens. This is a pity similar to that which we feel for Coriolanus for having been born a Roman, a patrician, and the son of Volumnia; Timon, like Coriolanus, is cut off from life-nourishing springs. We feel pity for Timon also because he has something in him that would be admirable if it found a different outlet, a tremendous human power that bestows on him a paradoxical glamor even when he is at his worst. The alienation and pity Timon engenders in us are mixed with awe. His misanthropy is an awesome phenomenon to watch. Much like the fear of Macbeth, it is heightened beyond the human scale and enlarges our comprehension of what man is capable of feeling. He pursues his pessimism with a total consistency to the very end to which we dare not or, shall we say, must not go.

For Shakespeare's audience, there must have been a special catharsis similar to that which the satirists provided. \(^26\) Since the Jacobean were accustomed to think of the fall of Athens, like that of Nineveh, Jerusalem, and Rome, as due to the kind of vice and sin rampant in their own London, they would have applied the purge he gives to Athens to their own city. On the Globe stage, surrounded by the theater walls that symbolized the city walls as well as the frame of the world, Timon's invective, which resembled the fulminations of the preachers of doom and gloom, had a particularly powerful relevance. But I do not think that we are barred from this kind of moral catharsis, and a modern performance might well bring it out. Many of our modern ills resemble the Athenian or, better,
Jacobean ones Timon attacks. Pessimistic and apocalyptic strains have risen in volume and insistence in contemporary fiction and poetry. What is presented on our stages as tragic (although we have become shy of the word) is not the dignity of man and the consoling cosmos but the insecurity, fragility, and smallness of man and the menacing inscrutability of the universe. As we have become greater pessimists because we are plagued with much of what Timon depicts as hateful, we find the tragic misanthropy of Timon less repelling than have preceding ages. If we are to experience a feeling analogous to the play's catharsis for Jacobean England, we must imagine a modern Timon standing in our lands, denouncing the towns and cities for the evil they harbor, and we must feel this evil in us and around us, but also in some measure in him. And if this Timon despairs of a mankind that has created and suffered such conditions, we must feel his predicament—and ours—as tragic. I do not think that this is too difficult an imaginative exercise.

Yet the critic who pleads for accepting Timon as a tragedy, not merely because of an embarrassment about what else to call it but because it truly belongs to this genre, must realize that he will find little echo if its literary and dramatic qualities continue to be underrated. I shall argue in the following chapters that the play's structure, characterization, imagery, and thematic development bear the imprint of Shakespeare's craftsmanship and genius, an imprint by no means inferior to that of his other tragedies. Regardless of sporadic deficiencies in the text, which are undeniable but have sometimes been exaggerated, Timon has an over-all imaginative unity and a grand tragic design. It is subtle, rich, and deep.