The Turn of Fortune's Wheel

Not one accompanying his declining foot

The poet's opening allegory of Fortune falls neatly into two halves: the ascent toward good fortune of a man of signal stature and his subsequent decline. Some commentators have taken this polarity not merely as predictive of the outward fortunes of Timon but as a fair account of the structure of the play. Mark Van Doren, who denies that Timon has a plot in the Aristotelian sense, says, "The play is two halves, casually joined in the middle; or rather two poems, two pictures in swan white and raven black." That the actual structure is not so simple proceeds already from Van Doren's leaving the Alcibiades movement out of account. In terms of the Fortuna iconography, the action of the play does not make me think of the hill but of the old wheel Boccaccio imprinted on medieval and Renaissance conceptions of tragedy. One, in fact, seems to have suggested to Shakespeare the other. In the Pyrrhus speech of Hamlet, the actor asks the gods to take all power away from the "strumpet Fortune," and to "Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel, / And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven, / As low as to the fiends" (2.2.495–97). In Lear, the fool taunts his master by burlesquing the world's customs concerning hill and wheel: "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following, but the
great one that goes upward, let him draw thee after.” (2.4.71-74).  

The structure of Timon is more complex than the rotation of a wheel, but it could be said that roughly the main plot together with the Alcibiades subplot make a full circle. Timon is at the top when the play opens; he falls during its course, and Alcibiades now moves upward. The careers of the two complement each other in the kind of circle formed in Richard II by the descent of Richard and the ascent of Bolingbroke, although, of course, descent and ascent are not brought into causal relationship in Timon. In any case, the progress of Alcibiades is a structural movement; its significance transcends, for instance, the casual take-over of Denmark by Fortinbras at the end of Hamlet.

Although the wheel rhetoric does not determine the structure as such, it provides emotional coloring for it. This becomes transparent if we remember that traditionally Fortune's clients were depicted as being at one time on one of four positions of her wheel: they were either rising, or presiding, or falling, or they were thrown to the ground or sometimes into a grave. This was symbolized by a figure in four different positions: climbing at the left, standing or enthroned on top, falling at the right, and prostrate underneath. The respective mottos for the positions on the walls of medieval churches were: regnabo, regno, regnavi, non regno or sum sine regno. This cyclical motion was surely in Shakespeare's mind when he dramatized Timon's course as a kind of reign and Alcibiades' victory as a replacement of Timon as the figure of prominence. In the first act, Timon behaves as if he ruled from a throne; his “I could deal kingdoms to my friends” (1.2.219) is a regno proclamation. He stays in this position throughout the first two acts; at the end of the second, although already beset with creditors, he still proclaims “Ne'er speak or think / That Timon's fortunes 'mong his friends can sink” (2.2.234-35). His precipitate decline takes place in the third act, where the servant's simile of the sun-like decline of a prodigal's course (3.4.12-14) predicts the end of the downward motion. Simultaneous with Timon's fall, Alcibiades comes into prominence; his defiant declaration “Soldiers should brook as little wrong as gods” (3.5.118) is a regnabo announcement. Timon's regnavi stage is over when he declares, in his last words, “Timon hath done his reign” (5.1.222). His ultimate sum sine regno stage is reached with his death and “low grave” in the fifth act. Finally, Alcibiades' entry into the city puts him in a regno position where, king-like, he will use the olive with the sword.

This indication of a wheel-like movement is accompanied
by a swarm of ironies. Timon feels on top of the wheel or hill in the beginning of the play, and the flatteries of his friends seem to put him there. But the steward knows otherwise, and Apemantus hints in the second scene that Timon’s sun is setting (1.2.141). Fortune’s ironies reach into Timon’s regnavi phase since he rejects the potential new prosperity offered to him by his finding gold and drives away the Athenians who flock to him as if his cave were a court.

If Timon’s fall is not quite what the world understands by this term and is in some sense a victory, Alcibiades’ rise, although genuine, is fraught with uncertainties. The young general rises on the wheel almost at the very moment when the senators seek to condemn him to the non regno position by exiling him, and he becomes the master of Athens in the end; but he is in a more than usually insecure regno position since it rests on a compromise with the senators. The rise of Alcibiades was in any case apt to inspire apprehension since his was one of the tragedies in Boccaccio’s De casibus virorum illustrium, taken over by John Lydgate for his Fall of Princes. He was one of the world’s signal fools of Fortune.

If we look at the structure in the light of the fortune pointers, we see it as tripartite. The first movement focuses on Timon, the spender and giver, and occurs in Athens; Timon here feels on top, but we know that he is on his way down. The second movement begins when the world seeks to put him in the regnavi position in the woods and continues with the world changing its mind and vainly visiting and wooing him; it ends with Timon’s announcement that his reign is over. At the point where Timon’s friends write him off, Alcibiades seems forced into the non regno placement; instead he rises to make himself master of Athens. His ascent is the third movement.

These dramatic movements correspond to the basic structure the Renaissance humanists had extracted from the comedies of Terence and transferred to neo-Latin and vernacular comedies and tragedies. The evolution of the formula and its early use by Shakespeare have been described by T. W. Baldwin;5 Ruth Nevo has shown its relevance to the ways in which Shakespeare’s tragic heroes progress through their plays (she does not, unfortunately, include Timon).6 The formula prescribed an articulation into five acts as well as the general three-phase movement. Regularly constructed Renaissance dramas move from a protasis, in which the background information is given, the characters are introduced, and the action begins (acts 1 and 2); through an epitasis (acts 3 and 4), in which the plot is entangled, errors are committed, and a crisis or a series of crises occurs; to a catastrophe (act 5), the happy ending of the comedies or the turn to disaster and the
final reordering in the tragedies. This, I shall show, is the structural pattern of Timon.

Note must be taken of the tendency of modern critics to see the play's structure as rather different from that of the other tragedies. Wilson Knight, as we observed, senses a quasi-allegorical design. Maurice Charney speaks of a "moral fable." H. J. Oliver finds a contrapuntal technique the secret of the play's construction: Shakespeare sets off against each other the reactions of one man to different situations and the reactions of different men to similar situations. On Harold Wilson, the play makes "a spatial impression like a painting or a tapestry that unfolds in a succession of tableaux"; it is thus "splendidly complete"—but only as "an imaginative conception or as a symbolic poem." Muriel Bradbrook, however, sees the play as a dramatic pageant and emblematic show. There are good reasons why such claims are made, but they are relevant not to structure but to texture and thematic quality, which will be discussed at later points in this study. When, as in the case of Wilson, the implication is that Timon is eccentrically structured, I believe that the claim goes too far.

We shall appreciate Shakespeare's conventional structuring better if we apply Baldwin's and Nevo's analyses to the play—in Baldwin's case, this means applying the structural analysis of the Renaissance humanists. Going over the plot in this manner will provide the opportunity of noting that some of its alleged inconsistencies disappear in a structural reading and that the play is much more sequential than has been alleged. Our overview will also allow us to see how the scenes fit into the acts and how they are constructed as units of dramatic significance. But the emphasis will be on the digestion of the play into acts and on what Nevo has called the inner movement, that is, the stages of the hero's progression from the seminal situation to its logical conclusion, a progression that is flexibly attuned to the five-act articulation.

We must not assume that the act divisions in modern editions, divisions that date back to Capell and other eighteenth-century editors, are in every way correct. In the case of Timon, I think, they have done some outright harm to the appreciation of the play's structure, and I shall suggest revisions dictated by dramatic logic. The most disturbing separation is that of the fourth and fifth acts; it has a way of jarring one's feeling for the continuity of the action and of obscuring the distinction between epitasis and catastrophe since it puts the separating line between the visit of the steward and that of the poet and painter to Timon's lair, followed by the senators. A
quite notable break, however, does exist between the departure of the senators after their failure to receive help from Timon and their reappearance in Athens, that is, between the present 5.1 and 5.2. One must assume that some time has elapsed between the senators' departure and their reappearance, whereas no such interval is evident at the point of the customary act division. The two later scenes are separated also by a shift in location—strikingly so after the long stretch of action at Timon's cave. Logic and common sense demand putting the act division at this point.

Presumably only the shortness of what is left induced Capell not to begin the fifth act here, and it must be admitted that these 112 lines are indeed not enough for an act. Shortness is not the only problem; there is something unsatisfactory about the dramatic movement: the pace is too fast and the action not sufficiently consequential. Here, and only here, do I find myself in agreement with those who say that we do not have all of the play we should have. However, I do not think that this is by itself a proof that the play as a whole is incomplete. It is quite likely that in Macbeth too some passages or even scenes of a longer original version have not come down to us; yet who would say that Macbeth is "incomplete"? Shakespeare seems to have had the habit of writing plays too long for the stage, plays that had to be subjected to cutting for production. It is possible that this happened to Timon; if so, something else must also have gone wrong. Lack of finish does not seem to me a persuasive explanation because the action is brought to a clear and logical, if somewhat hasty, conclusion; I suspect some special corruption in the text, a corruption also responsible for the deficiencies of the text in general. (See "Text" Appendix). In any case, to call this a truncation or mutilation of the fifth act would be to exaggerate. The scene shifts now to the homefront in Athens as expected after the ending of the fourth act (in our realignment); the senators await the return of their ambassadors to Timon and, with their arrival, learn that Timon has rejected their plea for help against Alcibiades. The young general becomes now the focus of the action; he makes himself the master of the city and initiates a reconciliation. Timon's death is reported, his epitaph read by Alcibiades. These are surely developments that make an appropriate catastrophe.

Besides the major realignment of acts four and five, I propose a somewhat less important change of the boundary between acts three and four. The third act, I think, should be extended through what is at present the second scene of the fourth, and the new act should begin with Timon's appearance in the wood. Throughout the following discussion, I shall indicate the placement of the scenes in the proposed re-
arrangement in brackets after the conventional numbering. Divided thus, the play's structure follows closely the Renaissance formula abstracted by Baldwin and unfolds the tragic movement in the fashion outlined by Nevo.

The protasis fulfills the Renaissance theorists' requirement for being, in Giraldi Cinthio's words, "the part that proposes that which is to be treated by the whole play in such a way as to arouse great attention in the spectator." The first act, which according to Giraldi must contain the "argument," introduces all the major characters and numerous minor ones in a way that intimates the tragic situation. The first scene, one of the best of its kind in Shakespeare, is a masterpiece of dramatic movement and compression and conveys an atmosphere of anticipation. The Fortuna poem presented to Timon both illustrates his present eminence and foreshadows his later dethronement. In a few quick strokes, the greed, fulsome flattery, and odious hypocrisy of the society around Timon are sketched, the insouciant spender and philanthropist is introduced, and the cynic Apemantus is given the opportunity to satirize Timon and his friends. It might be argued that Alcibiades, who speaks only two lines, is not given sufficient prominence for his later star role. But if not in reading, at least on the stage, Alcibiades' importance proceeds from his large retinue, the "twenty horse," that is, cavalry soldiers (240), and from the sound of a trumpet (stage direction), the only musical note after the "trumpets" that announced Timon's entry earlier.

The second scene, the tableau of the great banquet, continues the portrayal of Timon and the parasitical society around him. There is music, entertainment, and much fawning, acerbically commented upon by Apemantus. We learn, as we may have suspected, that Timon's decline has already begun: the steward announces in his soliloquy that Timon's coffers are empty and his land is pawned to his false friends.

The first act thus presents the seminal tragic situation. It shows, to use the analysis of the first act of Renaissance drama by the humanist Willichius, "the first tumult already as it were growing [gvisces], the occasion of the play, and the argument." This is the first phase of the hero's tragic progression, in Nevo's terminology his "predicament," that is, what marks his situation as potentially tragic. Timon differs from most of Shakespeare's heroes in having no inkling of what may be in store for him and in being completely content; but then, blindness to his friends' natures is part of his predicament, and we have been shown the threatening result allegorically. We suspect that the intense absolutist will ruin himself absolutely. Apemantus's pessimistic Fortuna moral appropriately concludes the act:
Thou giv'st so long, Timon, I fear me thou wilt give away
thyself in paper shortly. . . .
O that men's ears should be
To counsel deaf, but not to flattery.

(1.2.242–51)

The second act of the protasis, according to Giraldi, must show how "the thing contained in the argument should begin to progress toward the end."\(^{14}\) Nowhere does this happen with greater speed and more persuasive logic than in Timon. The action gains momentum immediately when in the first scene—essentially a monologue of sixty lines by a creditor of Timon's—the first claim for payment of the philanthropist's debts is raised. The speaker views Timon's generosity coldly as mere improvidence and extravagance and dispatches a servant to Timon's house with his demand. Since this creditor is a senator, we get a sense that greed is leagued with politics in Athens, a feeling that is later confirmed when Alcibiades clashes with the senate.

The long and complex second scene succeeds in combining a fast-paced action with a look at a lower stratum of Athenian society, represented by the servants of a variety of masters, that is, of Timon, of his creditors, and of a prostitute. The exits and entrances of the numerous characters, which include Apemantus, the steward, Timon, and Alcibiades, are aptly managed. First, the steward soliloquizes on Timon's financial blindness; then the creditors' servants appear, followed immediately by a sanguine Timon in Alcibiades' company, seeking to refresh himself for the hunt that is to follow. As the servants press upon Timon, the steward tactfully draws away his master; but the servants find their own diversion when Apemantus and the fool appear. This provides a humorous interlude and takes the steward's account of Timon's financial condition off the stage; we already know the tenor. We are shown Timon's reaction to learning the extent of his indebtedness when he reappears with the steward after the servants and the others are sent away. We note his first touches of anger. He interrupts the steward's tale and voices the suspicion that this loyal servant has taken advantage of him but has to admit that Flavius has tried to warn him before. Then he learns of the senators' refusal to come to his help, and he goes so far as to declare these old fellows ungrateful. This disturbance of his optimism, although temporary and slight, is significant dramatically because it prepares us for his later and greater anger. When his ill thoughts have subsided, he expresses his renewed confidence that his fortunes will never sink among his friends and that these will come to his rescue. The steward wisely doubts this, and since we orient our moral bearing by his, we expect the worst.
Thus the ending of the protasis lives up to the Renaissance formula’s requirement that it must show the external conflict brewing without attaining full vigor. This is the stage that Nevo calls psychomachia; it is here generally that the turmoil in the soul of the hero begins as he realizes his dangerous situation and gains an inkling of the nature of the choices he has to make. Shakespeare, however, muted the conflict in Timon’s soul so as to make his awakening from his delusion about the goodness of his friends gradual; Timon does not gain full consciousness of his situation and therefore does not have a marked psychological conflict until the third act. To this degree, the characteristic Shakespearean movement of tragedy is modified here, and it is presumably because of the mildness of Timon’s psychomachia that the act is rather short. When it ends, however, we are fully aware of his situation, of his need to revise or abandon his belief that everybody around him is an ideal human being and to learn something about the reality of evil.

Only when the epitasis begins can the external conflict be joined and the hero’s passion rise to its peak. The epitasis is the part of the structure that, as Giraldi said, must bring “the nexus or rather the knot of the argument, which contains all the turbations [sic] and travails of the action.” Specifically, the third act is to present “the impediment and the perturbations.” And so it is in Timon. The impediment to Timon’s happiness is manifested by the cumulative villainy that erupts in the first three scenes. Lucullus, Lucius, and Sempronius form a kind of ascending scale of nastiness. Lucullus’s “I knew it would come to this” attitude, if awful, is the simplest, and his attempt to bribe the servant is crude and stupid. Lucius’s transparent pretense of being out of money and thus missing the chance of reaping honor by rescuing “such an honourable gentleman” (3.2.56) makes ingratitude a bit more odious by joining it with hypocrisy. It remains for a character whom we have not known before, Sempronius, to add insult to hypocrisy and ingratitude when he pretends to be offended because he, the first to have borrowed from Timon, is solicited last. Some critics have puzzled over why the rejection of Timon’s offer by Sempronius is dramatized here and not that by Ventidius, who has most reason to be grateful to Timon because the latter has released him from debtors’ prison. But by adding a new name and a spectacular villain in Sempronius, Shakespeare heightens our sense of Timon’s large circle of false friends. When Ventidius is subsequently mentioned as also having refused Timon, this heartlessness becomes an offhand ratification of the general turpitude.

The moral significance of each of the three scenes is driven
home by a mirror commentary that reflects the friends' wickedness and Timon's plight. This is done with dramatic variation: the first commentary as well as the third are put in the mouths of loyal servants and conclude the respective scenes; the second is contained in a conversation of two strangers that frames the scene. The first servant, Flaminius, speaks in verse, contrary to Shakespeare's general (but frequently broken) rule of having persons of lower station speak in prose; Flaminius's honesty after the sly crudity of Lucullus is eloquent. Conversely, Sempronius's more elegant villainy rises to blank verse, whereas the servant's commentary is a contrasting ironical prose speech that breaks into verse at the end when his thoughts turn to his deserted master. In these cases of masterful mingling of prose and poetry, we certainly need not think that Shakespeare did not finish what he wanted to write.

The strangers' comments highlight Lucius's hypocrisy in the second of the three scenes; but here the moralizing is undercut by irony. The first stranger's perfect conditional phrase "Had his necessity made use of me, / I would have put my wealth into donation" (3.2.84–85) anticipates Sempronius's excuse, "But his occasions might have wooed me first" (3.3.17). The stranger is quite safe from having to put his conditional kindness into practice, and not only among Athenians do imagined benefits provide satisfaction for the non-giver. The stranger's concluding maxim that policy sits above conscience has an ironic application to the speaker himself.

The three mirrored portraits of villainy are succeeded by a vivid action that dramatizes the prediction of the servant in the preceding scene: "Who cannot keep his wealth must keep his house." Timon, beleaguered by his creditors, is now a virtual prisoner in his own home. Besides two servants of Varro, whose name was mentioned by the senator who called in his credit, and the servant of the odious Lucius, "other servants" appear, two of whom, Titus and Hortensius, are singled out by name; it is almost as if an army, the kind of skeleton army of Shakespeare's stage, were laying siege to a fortress. As the servants clamor, the steward rushes through them, and Timon makes a brief appearance. He is for the first time enraged; but he controls himself. Surprisingly, he gives the order to invite his friends for another banquet.

The development of Timon's hatred, as we noted, is delayed by the beginning of the third arc of the action with Alcibiades pleading, banishment, and decision for revenge. We shall look at Alcibiades and the scene closely later and note here only the effect its placement (3.5) has on the total structure. In terms of plot, its intercalation into the main action allows the
time needed for extending the invitations to Timon's friends and their appearing at the banquet. Critics sometimes think it a fault of the play that we see Timon at one moment as a philanthropist and at another as a misanthrope; but we may assume that his rage is already boiling when he is offstage during the Alcibiades scene. Incidentally, the placement of this latter scene also conveniently explains the general's absence from the banquet as due to his banishment. He could not be present, of course, without considerable loss to his dignity, and dignity is needed for his future position of conqueror.

The emergence of Alcibiades as the hero of the subplot is an unexpected turn of events, but it is hardly more surprising than the sudden transformation of apparently minor characters into movers of the action elsewhere in Shakespeare, such as when Antony in *Julius Caesar* becomes Caesar's avenger or when the Duke in *Measure for Measure* turns into the director of the play's plot. It is often said that the connection between subplot and main plot in *Timon* is thematic in that it pivots on the theme of ingratitude: the Athenians turn against Alcibiades in the same heartless way as they do against Timon. The viewer of the play, however, is more likely to focus on a dramatic connection, not on the ingratitude as such but on the two men's reaction to it, their outbreak of anger. The scene in which Alcibiades faces the senate is so positioned as to form a link in a chain of anger: it is preceded by the first indication of Timon's rising temper and followed by its explosion. In the interposed scene, Alcibiades goes from one emotional stage to the other in his own way. He is not depicted as a hothead, and he argues at first with restrained passion—he has, of course, less cause than Timon for being angry since Alcibiades' friend, for whom he pleads, has indeed broken the law by killing a man in a duel. Only the unprovoked banishment from Athens decreed upon Alcibiades by the senators (angry men themselves) makes the general's temper flare up. He will not take injury without revenge and he decides quickly on purposive action against Athens. The situation is such as to produce a dramatic contrast between the two angry men. The spectator is in suspense about how Timon will react to the evil he has encountered and expects some sort of emotional climax, an expectation ambiguously fulfilled. Timon's pelting of his guests with stones makes a marvelous scene in the theater but is merely a symbolic gesture of revenge; its meaning is quite lost on the guests, who amiably conclude that Timon has gone mad.

As much as Alcibiades outplays Timon on the stage of the world, in which actions count more than words, Timon upstages him in the theater, in which dramatic gestures count sometimes
more than actions. Of course, Timon has learned from a good actor, Apemantus, who like Alcibiades is an absentee at this banquet. Timon speaks now a mock grace as Apemantus did at the banquet of friendship and mutters Apemantian asides about his friends' villainy. Timon is not only an actor here; he is also the director of a play-within-the-play, a function in which he is superb. He directs the mock banquet to contrast mimetically and even musically with the earlier entertainment. A blaring trumpet now takes the place of the ingratiating oboes and lutes and heralds the dissonance and confusion of the scene.

To end the third act with this episode, spectacular as it is (and all modern editions end it here), is to obscure the plan on which Shakespeare designed the *epitasis* and to interrupt the flow of the action. The phase that begins with Lucullus's refusal to aid Timon (3.1) and presents the reversal of Timon's fortune as well as his reaction to it culminates not in the mock banquet but in Timon's departure from Athens and his curse on the city (4.1 [but actually 3.7]). The guests' confusion in the preceding scene permits the misanthrope sufficient time to make his way outside the city walls, at least in the shortened time consciousness of drama; no delay of his flight should be assumed if the gesture is to be Timonesque. After Timon's one-sentence announcement at the end of the mock banquet, one expects that he will execute his intention swiftly. His address to the walls, demanding that they disappear into the ground, is a fitting misanthropic farewell to the city he has just cursed, and his expressive gesture of stripping himself naked to signify his deliverance from the wolves within the walls marks the climactic continuation of his rejection of his friends. His final prayer to the gods announces what will motivate him in the following act: "And grant, as Timon grows, his hate may grow / To the whole race of mankind, high and low! / Amen" (4.1.[3.7.]39–41).

The next scene, a mirror scene that must be thought to occur immediately upon Timon's departure from Athens, should also be assigned to the third act. It connects directly with what goes before, and no time interval is indicated. The house of Timon has fallen, and the servants' laments highlight the pathos of the event. From a structural point of view, the steward's concluding announcement that he will follow Timon to his refuge indicates the direction the action will take in the fourth act. His wish to alleviate his master's misery by gold foreshadows a theme that will be important for the action to come. Again, a gloomy generalization about the effect of fortune is part of the act's last speech, that of the steward:

For bounty, that makes gods, do still mar men.  
My dearest lord, bless'd to be most accurs'd,
Rich only to be wretched—thy great fortunes
Are made thy chief afflictions.

(4.2.[3.8.41-44])

As we look back at the third act in the form here proposed, we see it as the critical phase in the tragedy. The hero is plunged from happiness to misery; from a philanthropist, he is turned into a misanthrope, from a pillar of Athens, into a wreck. His fall is paralleled with that of Alcibiades; his self-chosen exile, with the general’s banishment. There is a double climax, a double peripeteia; but the focus is properly on Timon, the reversal of Alcibiades’ fortunes being dealt with briefly. This act presents the greatest dramatic turbulence, the crisis of Timon’s life that subjects him to a total change of his initial situation—features Nevo calls characteristic of the hero’s progress during this phase. The reversal is nowhere else so spectacularly dramatized. Timon appears for the first time alone on the stage, outside the city in which he has lived surrounded by servants and friends. He rids himself, as it were, of his former self along with his clothes.

Radical and complete as Timon’s change is, it is not unduly abrupt in dramatic terms. A turn of fortune is foreshadowed from the beginning of the play, and the processus turbarum, the sequence of agitations that brings it, is handled skillfully. The full explosion of Timon’s passion is delayed by his being taken off the stage. We get only glimpses of him, only touches of his indignation, as he is pressured by the creditors. The mock banquet, with Timon’s first misanthropic tirade, is delayed by Alcibiades’ banishment, which thematically prepares for Timon’s departure. We may, of course, find Timon too precipitous, too stunned by a development we have seen brewing; but we should not fault the dramatic design that presents purposely a turn from absolute benevolence to total hatred, from all to nothing. This design has allowed us to see and anticipate the reversal. There is a human abruptness here but no structural weakness, no dramatic lapse, no mishandling of the grand design.

Beginning the fourth act after the lament of the servants, as I propose, permits emphasis to fall on a crucial lapse of time. Timon has established himself in a cave in the woods, and the news of his voluntary exile has reached Athens at least by the time Apeamantus arrives, spurred by envy at the competition in cynicism and pessimism given him by the misanthrope. Also, some time must be allowed for the discontented Alcibiades, whose exile was still news at Timon’s mock banquet (3.6.51–56), to gather troops before he enters as the first of Timon’s visitors. From the moment Timon appears in the woods until the action returns again to Athens, a series of episodes rolls off (they could also be conceived as separate
scenes) that are continuous in the flow of time. They end with what in our texts is the first scene of the fifth act, in which the poet and the painter, announced as in sight earlier, and finally even the senators flock to Timon's new dwelling. I shall assign these two episodes, which could also be designated as separate scenes, to the fourth act and consider them, for simplicity's sake, the second scene. From the first to the last, these visits to Timon's cave are cohesive and have a way of commenting on one another; there should certainly be no act division between them.

According to the Renaissance formula, "the fourth act exhibits the desperate state of the matter begun in the epitasis, and in the end is brought forth the occasion of the catastrophe." This the fourth act of Timon as here constituted does. Many critics, however, have felt that the theatrical interest lags in this act. This is a remark not infrequently made about fourth acts, the phase in which Shakespeare's structural conception insists on a certain emphasis and a repetition of ideas and motifs; but it is true that the fourth act of Timon lacks the spectacular incidents common in other tragedies, such as, for instance, Othello's epileptic breakdown or the mad Lear's heartrending meeting with the blind Gloucester. However, if we grant that the act must serve the dramatization of Timon's misanthropy as a tragic phenomenon, I do not think that we can find it ill-designed or weak. Timon's adversary is human nature, an adversary that is in all who come to him and even in himself. There can be no antagonist in the usual sense, just as there can be no foil to detract from Timon's pessimism, and his misanthropy has to erupt primarily in words, in harangues, insults, and curses. What the fourth act lacks in dramatic conflict, it makes up through projection and inclusiveness: it takes in not only the characters who are drawn to his abode but also Athens and all humanity and even the forces of nature and the universe. The invectives grow out of the situations, radiate rhetorical brilliance, and breathe an enormous power. Shakespeare's expert workmanship and imaginative fecundity display themselves in ingenious variations on a single theme.

The sequence of arrivals at Timon's cave creates the impression of being accidental; but this is not from a lack of design. What appears casual is a calculated plan made unobtrusive, a plan that breathes awareness of the unexpected, of fortune's whims. The first to arrive is not the steward, as might be expected from his announcement that he would follow his master, but Alcibiades, accompanied by the courtiers Phrynia and Timandra. Alcibiades has not been mentioned since the mock banquet, and it is dramatically
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appropriate that he should reappear before he fades from the audience's mind. A trumpet announces his entry on the stage, drums and fife provide the martial background—the musical accompaniment here and elsewhere is part of the structural pattern. By the army's march over the stage together with the concubines, Timon is given the opportunity to denounce Alcibiades, war, and lechery, and to prophesy the fall of Athens and the destruction of man. Ironically, although Alcibiades offers Timon money from his meager war chest, it is the general who leaves with his finances improved from the gold Timon has found. Once again what is offered to Timon breeds increase by making him give, but now he gives deliberately for mankind's bane.

After Alcibiades leaves and Timon resumes his quest for the one poor root by which to feed himself, Apemantus, the apostle of the simple life, appears on the scene. The valuing the two undertake of each other contrasts with the valuing of the world that Timon accepted during the days of his glory. There is a double-edged satire in the episode as each scores some hits against the other. But we are made to feel the strength and depth of Timon's pessimism by his decreasing interest in winning the victory. His declaration that he will prepare his grave shows that his sickness of the world is a sickness unto death. Structurally, this announcement points forward to Timon's devising of his epitaph and his "oracle" for Athens during the appearance of his last visitors.

The next to appear are the bandits. Although Apemantus describes the poet and the painter as in sight several minutes before he leaves (4.3.[4.1.].353), the two artists actually do not arrive until the bandits as well as the steward have come and gone. Critics generally see in this delay proof that Shakespeare changed his mind and failed to erase the traces of his earlier intention; this was one of the alleged discrepancies of the text the disintegrators used to demonstrate that two hands were discernible in the play, and it is now, as are some others of these, held to show that Shakespeare failed to revise the play. But a sympathetic reading indicates that Shakespeare's arrangement as it stands has definite dramatic advantages.

It should be noted that the appearance of poet and painter provides Apemantus with a splendid illustration of what Athens is like:

Apem. . . . The commonwealth of Athens is become a forest of beasts.

Tim. How has the ass broke the wall, that thou are out of the city?
Apem. Yonder comes a poet and a painter. The plague of company light upon thee!

(4.3.[4.1.]349–54)

If the two sycophants remain backstage and do not exit until after Apemantus prophesies, appropos Timon’s mentioning his gold, “Thou wilt be throng’d to” (397), they illustrate that prediction too. The arrival of the bandits swells the number of visitors that have come and are announced: Alcibiades, his concubines, and his army; Apemantus; the bandits; the steward; and the poet and painter—a second confluence of visitors to Timon is to occur! There will be an additional, unexpected group: the senators. That the later entry of poet and painter 140 lines after Apemantus sights them is a return rather than a first arrival appears indicated by the painter’s remark “As I took note of the place, it cannot be far where he abides” (5.1.[4.2.]1). The painter then explains that Alcibiades, the concubines, some “poor straggling soldiers” (the bandits), and the steward received gold from Timon; evidently the two artists were not aware of Timon’s new riches at their first entry, which gave them no motivation to press the visit.

This change in the predicted sequence of visits makes the bandits’ appearance, a normal enough occurrence otherwise, into something of an unexpected, out-of-sequence event. Their visit provides the occasion for one of Timon’s most scathing speeches, that on universal thievery. Its awesomeness is attested by the reaction of one of the degenerates: “I’ll believe him as an enemy, and give over my trade” (4.3.[4.1.]457–58). Open criminality, we might say, is more curable than villainous sophistication were it not that the satirical key of the scene undercuts the moral. If the first bandit has his way, amelioration of his softer brother-in-arms will not take place until a later, indefinite time: “Let us first see peace in Athens. There is no time so miserable but a man may be true” (459–60).

Next to arrive is the steward. In interpreting this episode, I am obliged to question the usual, rather sentimental view that sees it as the one point where Timon shows a softer strain. Does he not, we are urged, show a touch of regret when he finds a man “so true” and proclaims him the “one honest man” (4.3.[4.1.]494–501)? Does he not say that the steward’s loyalty “almost turns my dangerous nature mild” (496)? And does he not say, “How fain would I have hated all mankind, / And thou redeem’st thyself” (503–4)? Is not Timon’s whole misanthropy proved unfounded in the face of such honesty and decency? There is an alternative, to me more convincing, of this reading, and this is to consider the episode from the point of view of the savage game the misan-
thope plays with mankind, including the steward. As such it becomes a clever exposé of the pitfalls that lurk in the ideas of honor and honesty. This satirical theme is initiated early in the play by Aemontus's jest of being on his way "to knock out an honest Athenian's brains" (1.1.192)—a vain pursuit for lack of an eligible individual—it continues with Sempronia's mock indignation about the insult to his "honor," is debated between Alcibiades and the senators, varied in a scherzo mood in the bandit's wordly wisdom about the opportune time to be "true," which precedes the steward's entry, and shades off into burlesque after his departure when Timon has his fun with the poet and painter, the "two honest men." Even while approaching Timon, Flavius harps on "honour" and "honest": Timon's fall has brought about an "alteration of honour" (465); Flavius will therefore present his "honest" grief to his master (473). He introduces himself then as "an honest poor servant of yours" (479). When he protests that no poor steward ever bore "truer grief" (484), one remembers the bandit's jest about the time to be true; the steward is aware, over-aware I would say, that this is the time. Like others in the play, he is self-conscious about honor, although he has not yet accepted the commercialized version of honor used by Timon's friends. In any case, Timon is much more concerned with the corruptible honesty of the world than with the loyalty of his servant. He parodies Flavius in harping on "honest." When he proclaims him the "one honest man," he uses the jest he remembers from Aemontus. His irony shows in calling the steward "more honest now than wise" (506). To this "singly honest man" (527), he says, the gods have sent treasure out of his own misery. One remembers that he has called this very treasure the perverter and degrader of mankind. Timon evidently seeks to make gold effect its "true nature" with Flavius, that is, confound and destroy him, just as he does with Alcibiades, the prostitutes, and the thieves. It is not, I think, of paramount importance whether we believe that this strategy actually will work with Flavius or not.

The poet-and-painter episode, which follows, continues the satirical exploration of mundane honesty—another reason that it should not be separated by an act division from the steward's visit. If the steward's self-consciousness and acceptance of gold raise the suspicion that his sense of honesty is vulnerable to perversion, the poet's vulgar exchange of confidences with the painter exposes flagrantly the "courtly and fashionable" honesty of Athens that puts appearance above substance. The two villains find promising preferable to performing; they have come because "it will show honestly in us" (5.1.[4.2.]14). Timon's mounting sar-
casm inundates the duplicate hypocrites with repetitions of "honest" (55, 67, 70, 75, 76, 79, 85). He invites them to kill themselves; instead of the gold they came to seek, he pelts them with dirt and stones.

The next episode, the visit of the senators, is contiguous; one more time, the misanthrope is faced with the world and its pretensions to honesty and honor. It is almost as if the senators came in order to prove the painter's line that "promising is the very air o' th' time" (5.1.4.2.22-23). Their "sorrowed render" is accompanied by the offer of new "dignities" for Timon: the Athenians will provide a "recompense more fruitful / Than their offence can weigh down by the dram," and they will give Timon "heaps and sums of love" that "blot out what wrongs were theirs, and write in thee the figures of their love" (5.1.4.2.149-53). One would trust these protests more if they were not imbued with commercial metaphors that betray a calculating egotism.

Timon's sarcastic comment "You witch me in it" (154) indicates that he sees through the hypocrisy even before he learns the reason for the plea: his restoration to Athens is needed because of the threat of Alcibiades. Stingingly he recommends his solicitors "to the protection of the prosperous gods, / As thieves to keepers" (182-83). He becomes increasingly distracted, concerned with dying rather than living; but the senators' persistence arouses him to one more invective, the offer to the Athenians to hang themselves on his tree. Shakespeare thus kept the most effective vituperative gesture of his sources, the one that was most widely known because it was in Plutarch, for this climactic moment, adapting it neatly to the self-destructive mania of his hero: the hanging tree will have to be felled soon for Timon's "own use" (205)—one thinks of his coffin.

Timon's last speech evokes the nadir of the wheel of Fortune at which, according to the world's judgment, he has arrived. The image of the "salt flood, / Who once a day with his embossed froth / The turbulent surge shall cover" (215-17) recalls the up-and-down movement in the poet's opening allegory of Fortune; but the suggestion of the strong pulsation of the tide also speaks of the harshness of a will that escapes from humanity to an outer edge to which few may venture. Timon has ceased to reign.

If we look back at the fourth act as here delineated, we see how it fulfills the demands both of the structural formula and of the progressive tragic development of the hero. The formula required the protraction and intensification of passion into a summa epitasis or catastasis, which displays "the full vigor and crisis of the play." The departure of the frus-
trated senators and Timon's suicidal frame of mind certainly constitute such a crisis.

As Nevo has shown, Shakespeare gave the passionate selves of his heroes in the fourth act particular emphasis and perspective through irony; here "the subsuming category of responses is irony." Timon's passion is strongly emphasized by ironic situations and behavior patterns, all of them pointing up the ironies of fortune. The whole act is predicated on the overwhelming irony that the bankrupt Timon becomes as much a magnet of attraction as he was in prosperity. The procession to his new domicile has the appearance of a tribute to his mesmerizing invective. Of course, we know that the real reasons of the visitors are of a different kind, and are not unlike those that drew crowds to Timon's hospitable house: the visitors hope for enrichment, or, at least, they combine their concern for him with self-interest. Alcibiades appears to be an exception: he probably comes upon Timon by accident. But he sees quickly his value as a potential ally. Apemantus seeks Timon out in anger about his amateur competition in cynicism. The bandits and the poet and painter are simply after his gold. The steward, it is true, comes to succor his master; but, as I have suggested, a self-centered concern with the mere image of honor also motivates him. The senators, as much as they pretend to love and honor Timon, are driven by their instinct for survival. That they, who first abandoned Timon in his need and precipitated his fall, should have to turn to him in their distress and be rejected is the climactic point of the ironic movement. There are smaller ironies within the larger one: Timon, who seeks roots, finds gold; those who come to offer him gold go away enriched; those who seek gold from him get stones and dirt. And there are comic incidents that set off the passion of Timon, distance us somewhat from it (although I do not think that they diminish it): the sparring match between Apemantus and Timon and the clownish thieves' bewilderment at Timon's harangue. Throughout, he sustains his passion with a baroque power and energy and bends his will adamantilly to the destruction of mankind and himself. Even his abdication from Fortune's wheel is a defiant voluntary act, not a submission.

According to the Renaissance formula, the ending of the epitasis must bring forth the occasion of the catastrophe; and this conclusion of the fourth act of Timon does so clearly. After Timon's rejection of the senators, the action requires a bifurcation and a double solution, one for Timon, another for Alcibiades and the senators. The first is signalled by Timon's announcement of his coming death, proof that his perturbations are heightened to the "desperate state"
expected at this juncture; the tragic catastrophe is thus anticipated. But Shakespeare seems also to have had the version of the dramatic structure in mind that applied to comedy; from it, after all, the structure for tragedy was derived and modified. It stipulated that in the fourth act "there should begin a way of giving a remedy to the troubles." Timon conceives this remedy for himself in his own transvaluating manner: "My long sickness / Of health and living now begins to mend, / And nothing brings me all things" (185–87). For the senators, Timon sarcastically offers several solutions: to hang themselves together with all other Athenians on his tree, to let Alcibiades harass them and harass him in return, and to be "mended" with the rest of the degenerate world by infection and the plague. The question is, just how will the senators extract themselves from their predicament? The ending of the fourth act thus creates the proper suspense for the catastrophe, which, according to the formula, must bring the "outcome of the desperate plans." A senator appropriately says at the end of the act, "Let us return, / And strain what other means is left unto us / In our dear peril" (225–27).

We cannot here deal fully with the structural function of the fifth act as the catastrophe because it depends in large manner on the role of Alcibiades, yet to be discussed. The act, as we noted, is too short, and it moves in a staccato fashion until the last and very effective scene. The first short scene (the second in the customary divisions), in which the senators return to Athens after their abortive mission to Timon, is abruptly followed by the short speech of the soldier on finding Timon's grave and epitaph. An intermediate scene may have been lost, and there may also have been some abridgment or rewriting of the soldier's speech, since it is slightly confusing. We cannot be sure whether his lines "Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span: / Some beast read this; there does not live a man" (5.3.[5.2.]3–4) are the soldier's personal comment or an inscription on Timon's tomb, followed by an epitaph in a language he cannot read. However, I do not think that the idea of taking the epitaph in wax so that Alcibiades can decipher it must be held unworthy of Shakespeare. It is true that it is a rather palpable device for having Alcibiades read the epitaph at the end and comment on it, but it is not so different from implausible expedients, such as letters that turn up conveniently, with which Shakespeare effects the endings of other plays. And having Timon's death reported through a messenger's speech fits with the slightly classical aura of the tragedy.

Certainly, everything that concerns Timon in the ending is handled skillfully. It is appropriate for the misanthrope who
has rejected the world to die away from it. His death, to use Charney’s phrase, is left “poetically obscure.” After Timon’s willful and desperate search for self-destruction, it must be due to suicide of some sort, but the sting of the deed is lessened by its occurring offstage and by not being described. If the hero does not appear any longer in the fifth act (as defined here), he is evoked as a potent memory, a powerful legend, and a force to be reckoned with in settling the fate of Athens. The focus, however, is on the manner in which Alicibiades shapes this legend.