Apemantus and the Others

That numberless upon me stuck

Timon of Athens is in a very eminent way Timon's play. Among Shakespeare's tragic heroes, only Hamlet ranks higher in his relative share of words; but there is no character in Timon comparable to the significance of Claudius, no antagonist properly speaking, and even the three most verbal characters after Timon—Apemantus, Flavius, and Alcibiades—merely achieve the verbal level of such secondary characters as Polonius and Horatio. Timon is not only the overpowering voice, he is also even more signally the center of the thought of his play than Hamlet is the center of his. Apemantus, it is true, has a role in initiating major themes, but he serves very largely to introduce the Timonesque view of society before the protagonist turns misanthrope.

Since Timon amplifies and varies the cynical notes struck earlier by Apemantus, the two reinforce each other; and whatever we may think of them as characters, we find it hard to disprove their pessimism. There are no major characters with whom we can sympathize fully and without reserve: no Banquo, no Cordelia, no Virgilia even. Shakespeare's sympathetic characters are often women, and Timon has no major feminine role; its women are objects of pleasure, dancers and prostitutes, and the dramatic statements made through them are derogatory and unpleasant. Timon's loyal servants, particularly Flavius, attract some sympathy; but
since they have no major part in the action, they have only a limited influence on our moral bearings. Shakespeare evidently was intent on painting a comprehensively dark picture of Athenian society without giving strong dramatic prominence to anyone but Timon. In no other play is there such a collective anonymity of minor characters. We do not know who was responsible for the imposing full page of “The Actors Names” in the First Folio, but it certainly shows this tendency clearly; it lists “certain senators,” “certain maskers,” “certain thieves,” and “diverse other servants and attendants.” The Folio lists dramatis personae for four other plays; none of them has anything comparable. In the text itself, when the names of minor characters are given, it is often for situational identification rather than for individualization. For instance, Lucilius is singled out as the one among Timon’s servants who wants to marry the greedy Athenian’s daughter (1.1.114, 117); after this scene, in which he says next to nothing, he disappears from the play. Ventidius is identified as the friend whom Timon keeps out of debtor’s prison, and we are made to keep him in mind by his offering to pay back Timon, so that a later mention of his name as one who has refused to help Timon suffices to recall the gratitude that he owes and to which he fails to live up. But he is not individualized; in the Folio list he is rightly designated as “one of Timon’s false friends”: he is an outstandingly odious representative of an odious group.

Shakespeare used names in such a referential way generally only to conjure up the existence of armies, and in Timon too he evidently wished to create a semblance of large numbers with a small number of actors. We must assume that Timon has many servants, although we learn the names of only four (including the steward); and we must believe that Timon has many false friends, although again only four are identified by names. Adapters and producers of the play have often tried mistakenly to establish more “order” by conflating roles, e.g., that of the steward with one of Timon’s other servants or those of the merely numbered lords at the banquets with Timon’s named friends. But Shakespeare seems to have aimed at producing the impression of disorder rather than order; Athenian society presents a frighteningly anonymous, almost Kafkaesque, chaos. For instance, in the first scene, we encounter two unnamed lords, Alcibiades with his “twenty horse,” and “certain senators” who pass over the stage. Surely on Shakespeare’s stage the number of members of groups like the senators, Timon’s guests, and the bandits would have been increased beyond the speaking roles assigned according to the availability of actors. As much credibility as possible would have to be given to Timon’s
complaint that "the mouths, the tongues, the eyes and hearts of men" stuck upon him "numberless" (4.3.263–65) and also to Apemantus's prediction that Timon will be "thronged to" in the forest (397).

In the first three acts, the method of mentioning names resembles that of mentioning sums given and owed by Timon: the actual names, like the actual sums, are significant only for creating a cumulative impression of Timon's large giving and large indebtedness. When the unnamed senator counts up Timon's debts, he refers to Varro and Isidore (2.1.1 ff.). Neither the senator nor these two creditors appear in order to collect from Timon, but the servants of the latter do, and they are joined by Caphis, an unknown creditor's servant, in importuning Timon (2.2.10 ff.). When the usurers' servants beleaguer Timon in his own house, we learn four new names: Titus, Hortensius, Philotus, and Lucius (the latter presumably being the servant of the Lucius whom Timon singled out for special favors and who refused to aid him). Just as the sums mentioned increase, so does the number of creditors.

In the large degree of namelessness and in the frequent use of professional or class designations, Timon resembles Coriolanus with its first, second, and third senator, first and second soldier, and several numbered but unnamed citizens. In both plays, such non-individualized characters help to create a panorama of a society, and the picture is unpleasant. It is, however, more so in Timon: corruption and degradation penetrate here all segments and strata: the worlds of art, commerce, trade, and politics are all deeply corrupted. What need is there to give names? Change a name or a face, the total impression remains the same. No wonder that Brecht liked the play.

The method of denigration by numbering is most apparent and most brilliant in the case of the senators. Although, when added together, they speak more lines than Alcibiades, we never learn a single senator's name, and except for the one senator who starts the avalanche against Timon, they always appear in numbers. No matter whether the same or different actors were used in Shakespeare's time for their various appearances, they must have worn identical robes, which tended to make the audience identify one group with the others. They are a collective anonymity that we come to associate with usury and greed. The senators who seek out Timon in the woods and those who supplicate Alcibiades to pardon Athens cannot help but evoke the previous senatorial meanness, particularly since they still speak in a language larded with commercial metaphors. Only the circumstances have changed; the mental habits remain the same.
However, when it suited Shakespeare's dramatic purpose, he characterized even minor figures sharply. He did so in the three scenes in which Timon's friends and exploiters—Lucullus, Lucius, and Sempronius—come to Timon's aid (3.1–3). These scenes invite comparison with the handling of a similar situation by Thomas Heywood in A Woman Killed with Kindness (pt. 1607), when Susan Mountford appeals to three relatives and friends to help her bankrupt brother and is turned down in quick succession. I venture to think that Shakespeare was induced by this scene of Heywood's (3.3) to demonstrate what he could make of such a simple situation; characterization by contiguous triplicity was not usually his method. Some of the commonplace refusals of Heywood's characters seem to be echoed and varied by Shakespeare's. The second stranger's comment "Men must learn now with pity to dispense, / For policy sits above conscience" (3.2.88–89) resembles Old Mountford's "This is no world to pity men"—not a bad line for Heywood. Lucullus's "this is no time to lend money, especially upon bare friendship, without security" (3.1.41–43) has the same tune and might have been written by Heywood except for the "especially" and "bare." But there is no differentiation of the three refusers in Heywood; they stay on one level of platitudes. In Timon, however, the lying evasion of Lucius goes a step beyond the crude refusal and open scorn of Lucullus, and it is trumped by the odious self-righteousness of Sempronius.

In addition, Shakespeare provided mirror commentaries subtly varied in inflection, vocabulary, imagery, and prosody. The plain but poetic eloquence of the servant Flaminius shows up the commonplace vulgarity of Lucullus, and both contrast with the more refined moralistic idiom of the two stranger lords. Lucius's distortion of honor is generalized by them into a perversion of religion and a metamorphosis of the world's soul. The servant's concluding comment on the refined villainy of Sempronius is even stronger in its recoil from villainy: "The devil knew not what he did when he made man politic; he crossed himself by it: and I cannot think but in the end the villainies of man will set him clear" (3.3.29–30). "Politic" man is worse than the devil for this servant who speaks in the idiom of the people and makes us like it. Altogether, the mirror commentaries combine with the episodes on which they comment to create differentiated but cumulative accounts of villainy.

However, only Alcibiades, Apemantus, and Flavius can be said to be really individualized. Flavius is perhaps a borderline case since he is often understood to be merely a type of loyal servant who warns his master and seeks to aid
him in distress. It is sometimes claimed that Shakespeare quickly forgot that he had named the steward Flavius since he used the name only once for him (1.2.153) and later, by mistake, for another servant (2.2.189). But this latter error was presumably the compositor's rather than Shakespeare's, and the one mention of his name is certainly sufficient for identification.

Flavius has a surprisingly large share of words; he is only slightly behind Apemantus, who, as a satirist and philosopher, is expected to trade in words, and he is considerably ahead of Alcibiades. This relative verbosity, I think, comes from an individualizing feature of his character that is generally overlooked: a fondness for sonorous phrases and noble commonplaces. It shows itself most in the scene just after Timon's departure from Athens when the steward laments with three other servants the fall of Timon's house and decides, by himself, to follow his master. There is genuine pathos here, but also, on the steward's part, sentimental exaggeration. He wants it to be recorded "by the righteous gods" that he is as poor as the other servants (4.2.4-5). Actually, he still has something left: "The latest of my wealth I'll share amongst you" (23). What he says about a possible future meeting, in which the servants might come together and shake their heads as a "knell unto our master's fortunes" (26), borders on the ludicrous. The steward exaggerates also when he claims that he is distributing to the servants the "latest" of his wealth; he evidently has enough gold left to take some to Timon. I am not suggesting that Flavius is a humbug or deceiver; he is kind and well-meaning, but he likes pathos and sinks into bathos. This is most notable in the long soliloquy, longer by ten lines than any of Alcibiades' speeches, that ends the scene. These lines read almost like eighteenth-century sentimentalism. One must not of course expect Flavius to evaluate Timon impartially; but he gives Timon much too noble a character when he attributes his fall to "goodness," and he talks merely nonsense when he sees in it a simple natural law according to which glory must produce misery.

When the steward finally arrives at Timon's lair (does he have to persuade himself to carry out his intention?), he self-consciously protests his honor, honesty, and truth—a protest that provides the cue for Timon to play a sly game with him. Flavius's endeavor to help Timon and in the process show himself honorable is bathed in situational irony; he is unaware that his wish that his master should have "power and wealth / To requite me, by making rich yourself [Timon]" (4.3.525-26) is already fulfilled. If we were to have faith in his abiding sense of honor, he should not ac-
cept the gold given to him with pernicious advice. Timon knows his servant’s weakness for sentimental paradoxes and exploits it by saying that the gods have sent treasure out of Timon’s misery—it is hardly honorable to build on somebody else’s misery. Since Flavius does not protest against the idea, one may well wonder how long even the best of the Athenians will pursue honor beyond his financial interests. It may be symptomatic that he, man of property himself now, reappears at Timon’s cave, contrary to the misanthrope’s wishes, as a guide to the senatorial delegation.

A moral ambiguity is also evident in the portrait of Apemantus. There is no doubt about his being individualized: he is unforgettable, and his character is built up carefully and gradually. He gives at first the impression of a total, if rough, integrity; he keeps apart from the contagious society around Timon, and he warns him against his flatterers. However, in practice, Apemantus too depends on Timon and uses him, even if not in the crude manner of his friends. The poet need not be believed when he says that Apemantus “drops down / The knee before him, and returns in peace / Most rich in Timon’s nod” (1.1.61–64); actually Apemantus is quite insulting to Timon even though what he says is true, and he pays him homage only to the degree of considering him worthy of receiving his warnings, whereas he has nothing but scorn for his friends. But his singling out Timon for attention is not mere altruism; Apemantus likes to be right, and his smug attitude after Timon’s fall gives one the feeling that he has been looking forward to seeing his philosophy proved true. If Apemantus does not belong to those whose mouth is stuck on Timon, to adapt Timon’s fanciful figure, his eyes and tongue are.

Apemantus, like Timon, was essentially Shakespeare's own creation. The little about him in the sources was useless for Shakespeare’s purposes. Plutarch conceived him as the misanthrope’s confidant: “This Timon would have Apemantus in his company because he was like to his nature and conditions and also followed him in manner of life.” Cicero in De amicitia suggested Apemantus was Timon’s misanthropic ally: “Nay, even if anyone were of a nature so savage and fierce as to loathe the society of men—such, for example, as tradition tells us a certain Timon of Athens once was—yet even such a man could not refrain from seeking some person before whom he might pour out the venom of his embittered soul.” Shakespeare was wise not to follow Plutarch and Cicero in these points: a friendly Apemantus had no place at the side of a prosperous and optimistic Timon, and if Shakespeare had made Apemantus into the receptacle of Timon’s misanthropic effusions, he would have
committed a mistake similar to Shadwell's and Cumberland's when they provided him, respectively, with a lover and a daughter.

Apemantus is sometimes said to be in the pattern of that other railer against Greek society, Thersites in Troilus and Cressida. But the two share little more than a few tricks, and the scurrilous commentary and sarcastic repartee in which they both excel are used for different purposes. Thersites has no moral fervor; he is no cynic but an allowed fool, and if he lives in the gutter, he does not do so because of philosophical principles. More pertinently, Jan Simko has noticed that Apemantus's function resembles the fool's in Lear by uttering truths unpleasant to the tragic hero and criticizing his actions.¹

Apemantus, more than the fool and much more than Thersites, sets himself apart from the society on which he comments. This is evident even in his manner of speech. It is often as if he were addressing no one in particular; his contemptuous muttering gives some of his remarks the quality of asides without their being that in the technical sense of the word—the banquet offers examples. The very rhythm of his speech differs; as Bryan Vickers has noted, many of his lines have a status between prose and verse, tending toward twelve-feet doggerel. He hardly ever speaks more than two lines of blank verse before he falls into doggerel or prose.² No other character talks in such a skipping manner—an idiosyncracy surely due to deliberate characterization rather than to the play's lack of finish. The gruff Apemantus, philosopher of low-keyed pessimism, does not think mankind worthy of the passionate idiom that modulates Timon's misanthropy. Often, he caps his dicta with pessimistic morals about human nature, morals that have a proverbial ring but that, at least in Apemantus's sarcastic form, cannot be found in traditional proverb lore. He is in his element at the banquet: "Those healths will make thee and thy state look ill, Timon" (1.2.56–57); "Feasts are too proud to give thanks to the gods" (61); "Men shut their doors against a setting sun" (141); "O that men's ears should be / To counsel deaf, but not to flattery" (250–51).

A general model for Apemantus can be discerned in the picture of the cynic philosopher as the Renaissance conceived him.³ John Lily had established the dramatic prototype by the Diogenes of his Alexander and Campaspe (1584) who talks back to Alexander somewhat as does Apemantus to Timon. Also, as Peter Pauls has noted, the popular Renaissance Diogeniana provided a rich mine of anecdotes about the cynics and sayings by them of which Shakespeare seems to have been aware. One of these sources was Richard
Barckley's Discourse with its short Timon biography. The satirists, in particular, found Diogenes a convenient mouthpiece for their discontents with their own time. Thomas Lodge in Catharos: Diogenes in His Singularity (1594) had Diogenes criticize usurers, false friends and flatterers, divines, lawyers, and merchants with quite contemporary applications. Arthur Warren in The Poor Man's Passions and Poverty's Patience (1605) wondered what "cousin Diogenes" would say in this "frozen-hearted age" were he alive. Diogenes' popularity as a satirist helped give Athens a bad name; owing to the analogy with England, he was also a kind of contemporary critic of morals. Apemantus is a relative of this Diogenes and as such also a relative of Elizabethan-Jacobean satirists.

As a member of the cynic family, he is a "dog-philosopher": "cynic" was held to be derived from Greek kunikos, "doglike,"—an etymology that, together with the cynics' life-style, earned them the epithet of "dogs". Diogenes wittily returned the compliment; Apemantus smartly anticipates it in his first words of the play, before the others have the opportunity to call him a dog, as they amply do later:

Tim. Good morrow to thee, gentle Apemantus.
Apem. Till I be gentle, stay thou for thy good morrow,
When thou art Timon's dog, and these knaves honest.

(1.1.180–82)

"Honest" is one of Apemantus's key words as it was one of Diogenes'. His opener to Timon is a purposive boorishness, which after the elegant flatteries of the jeweler and others goes to demonstrate the plainness of honesty. Apemantus puts his satirical spotlight on the general dishonesty by wanting to "knock out an honest Athenian's brains" (192)—an impossible endeavor because of a lack of candidates with honesty and brains. Like Diogenes, Apemantus is a great expositor of the truth hidden beneath appearances. He demonstrates this skill first with the painter and the poet: the former is but a filthy piece of work and the latter a feigner and flatterer. The merchant is next: traffic is his god. He continues his campaign against dishonesty with a characteristic answer to a question about the time of day: "Time to be honest" (256).

Apemantus's credentials as a cynic are clearest in his insistence, by word and example, on the need to lead a simple, frugal life. For Apemantus, this is but another side of plain honesty. When Timon asks him how he likes a jewel, he answers, "Not so well as plain-dealing, which will not cost a man a doit" (1.1.210–11). He shuns meat and wine for roots and "honest water" (1.2.59–71). During the dance, he...
contrasts the madness and the glory around him with the "little oil and root" necessary to sustain life (1.2.130-31). Apemantus lives according to nature and reduces his needs in order to escape the corrupting influence of civilization. His self-sufficiency contrasts with the luxury, hypocrisy, and disorder around him. He fittingly exposes the myth of friendship and harmony at Timon's banquet and during the masque, and what he says about the ensuing dance is moral commentary in the best cynic vein. Here again, Diogenes pointed the way in a sentence attributed to him by Diogenes Laertius, according to which he was surprised when hearing music that "the musicians should tune the string of the lyre while having the disposition of their own souls discordant." John Lily gave his Diogenes a very similar comment on a dancing lesson: "The musicians [are] very bad who only study to have their strings in tune, never framing their manners to order" (Campaspe, 5.1). This is the seminal idea for Apemantus's great speech that comments on the dance:

What a sweep of vanity comes this way.
They dance? They are madwomen.
Like madness is the glory of this life,
As this pomp shows to a little oil and root.
We make ourselves fools, to disport ourselves,
And spend our flatteries to drink those men
Upon whose age we void it up again
With poisonous spite and envy.
Who lives that's not depraved or depraves?
Who dies that bears not one spurn to their graves
Of their friends' gift?
I should fear that those that dance before me now
Would one day stamp upon me. T'as been done.
Men shut their doors against a setting sun.

(1.2.128-41)

Denunciations of dancing were common in Shakespeare's time, but this one takes an unmistakably Apemantian turn by effectively undercutting the theme of the masque with its celebration of societal harmony. A masque of Cupid and Amazons was presumably intended to symbolize the reconciliation of love and war, Venus and Mars, and the concluding dance would have reenacted the creation of order and beauty through love; it was through love, after all, that man had learned how to dance and to imitate by his graceful movement the ordered universe, which itself was held together by a cosmic dance. So, at least, optimistic humanism had it. By his sarcastic comment on the dance, Apemantus makes a ceremony glorifying order into a mocking exposure of disorder. One might even say that Apemantus speaks in the tone of the grotesque anti-masque, which in the full Jonsonian form preceded the orderly masque; in this form the
antic show ended when the main actors appeared. But Apemantus’s commentary demonstrates that Athenian life itself is a kind of disorderly anti-masque. The dance in Timon’s hall is not a cosmic-societal celebration but a dance of fortune, a motif used by the emblematisists.

Apemantus signally lives up to the reputation of the cynics as angry and furious creatures. Medieval and Renaissance writers saw in this anger some of the sparks that ignited the just anger of the prophets: excessive as this wrath was, it betrayed a fervor for moral purity. It is characteristic of the failure of the Athenians and of the liberal Timon to see no alleviating features in Apemantus’s churlishness. Timon even lectures Apemantus on his “humor,” which does “not become a man,” and finds him a contradiction to the maxim “Ira foror brevis est” (the Horatian phrase is an amusing anachronism); Apemantus is “very angry,” which, of course, means here also “always angry” (1.2.26–29). These lines strike for the first time the theme of wrath, and they point forward to the later irate competition the two have at Timon’s cave. It will be Apemantus then who thinks Timon infected by a humor (4.3.204). Timon’s characterization of Apemantus and the Horatian tag set the stage for paralleling and comparing two angry men, and Alcibiades’ quarrel with the senate adds a third. Timon’s wrath will become greater and more ingrained than that of his two foils; it will ironically prove the truth of his own phrase that anger is a short madness since it will be brief and self-consuming.

Apemantus is true to cynic form in his demonstrative asceticism. This preoccupation of the cynics had been looked upon by ancient and medieval writers with a mixture of awe and scorn. The anecdotes about the cynics showed them in an ambiguous light, humble and yet arrogant in their humility. Diogenes Laertius, for instance, quoted Plato as saying, “How much pride you expose to view, Diogenes, by not seeming to be proud.” And Apemantus embodies a similar paradox. Early in the play he shows a certain satisfaction about being a cynic, and we are given a progressive revelation of his professional pride. When Apemantus says to Timon, “I’ll lock thy heaven from thee” (1.2.249) he indicates his belief that he has the power to administer and to withhold the truth; one realizes that he is looking forward to revealing heaven to Timon later.

Apemantus’s self-complacency shows just a little more in his conversation with the fool, an episode built on a double irony: the usurers’ servants happily approach Apemantus and the fool because they expect to poke fun at them, but Apemantus turns the tables and has his sport with them.
However, he too is bested—by the fool, of all people. Although this fool is not one of Shakespeare's great ones—but then we are not allowed to enjoy him long—he has something of the paradoxical wit and appealing honesty of wise folly that transcends the wisdom of the philosophers. He knows that the world is full of fools and that foolishness and wit are relative: "As much foolery as I have, so much wit thou lack'st," he says to a servant. This elicits from Apemantus the admiring comment: "That answer might have become Apemantus" (2.2.120—22). Apemantus's is the ultimate compliment, and it betrays self-admiration. That the philosopher who tells the servants that they do not know themselves (68) should have this blind spot in self-knowledge is one of the subtler ironies of the play.

Apemantus's professional vanity shows mightily in his visit to Timon in the wood. Benevolence is not totally absent from Apemantus's motives—he has brought some food for Timon—but competitive envy appears the main reason: he has heard that the misanthrope affects his manners and uses them (4.3.200—201). His "Do not assume my likeness" (220) is an indication of pride in his image. Apemantus enjoys having a monopoly in pessimism and cynicism, much as earlier Timon had enjoyed his monopoly of giving, and he sees it threatened.

In the debate itself, the central dialectic of ideas in the play, Apemantus does score some hits, or else it were not a good match; but there can be little doubt that Timon wins. Apemantus begins well by rubbing in Timon's subjection to flatterers and by asking him to try being a flatterer of Nature now. But Timon gives him his own medicine by accusing Apemantus of flattering misery (236). Then Timon asks Apemantus why he has come, and when the latter denies any altruistic motive by saying that his purpose is merely to vex Timon, the misanthrope calls this pursuit "always a villain's office, or a fool's." Timon then elicits from the cynic the concession that he is pleased with this role—it is evident now, if it was not before, that the poet was quite wrong when he said that Apemantus loves to abhor himself; he should have said that he loves to abhor others and man in general. Timon can easily turn Apemantus's admission of pleasure in his role of gadfly into a confession of knavery: "What, a knave too" (239—40).

Timon has the edge not only by laying effective traps but also by using arguments on human needs, which should be the cynic's forte. Apemantus has the disadvantage of not having seen the gold or he would not argue that Timon has put on "the sour cold habit . . . enforcedly" (241—43). Ap-
mantus seems to be trying to live up to the etymology of his name, apemantos, “the one unharmed by fortune”; but his axiom that “willing misery / Outlives uncertain pomp, is crown’d before” (44–45) has a touch of competitive vanity and suggests that he would like to wear a martyr’s crown—comfortably. By comparison, Timon’s contrasting of his own temptation by fortune with Apermantus’s protection from it by poverty and hereditary roguery is a good argumentum ad hominem, which counts in this context. Also, Timon’s question “What hast thou given?” evokes his own past generosity and hints appropriately at egotism in his opponent (272).

Apermantus’s best retort comes when Timon vaunts his suffering and insults Apermantus because of his beggary:

Apm. Art thou proud yet?
Tim. Ay, that I am not thee.
Apm. No prodigal.
Tim. I, that I was
Apm. I, that I am one now.
Were all the wealth I have shut up in thee,
I’ld give thee leave to hang it. Get thee gone.

(279–82)

Apermantus does convict Timon of pride. But this is a pride inseparable from tragic glamor; Timon is the center of the action as both lover and hater, and Apermantus fails to move him from this point of gravity, fails to make Timon admit to the truth of the “heaven” he once showed and withheld from him. Timon’s prodigal recklessness of giving, both in love and hate, dwarfs Apermantus’s self-centered wariness.

Apermantus does not improve his position by accusing Timon of extremity, the extremity of both ends, because the accusation draws into question whatever moral benefit Apermantus derived from his own position at the fringe of humanity. And another of Apermantus’s better points, his showing that Timon’s escape into nature is an invasion of a hostile realm, is bested by Timon’s proving that Apermantus’s view of nature is sentimental in its core: the cynic, who would rather be a beast with beasts, has not considered that there is a mutual enmity among animals—even animals are their own worst enemies, they too have their dishonesties, villainies, and cruelties, and possess in fact a kind of human depravity (325–47). Although Timon believes that animals are kinder to men than men are to themselves, he has no illusions about beasts in their own habitat.

The prize might still go to Apermantus if his quarrel with Timon were conceived as a contest on how to live. By his new mode of life, Timon has in practice accepted the argument that living according to nature’s simple plan is preferable to wealth and luxury. But through Apermantus’s competitive-
ness, the contest becomes one about the deeper anger, the more abiding pessimism. In this, Timon wins, not the least by his indifference to Apemantus and by his death-directedness. He does not need man, not even himself. As his thoughts turn to death, he envisages the end of all men so that “beasts / May have the world in empire” (394–95). He speaks these lines abstractedly as he looks at the pernicious gold beneath him. Apemantus’s words that draw him back to the world are comical in betraying an instinct for self-preservation and enjoyment of cynicism: “Would ‘twere so! / But not till I am dead” (395–96).

The shouting match is an appropriate climax of the dynamics of pessimism that has developed between the two haters. Attitudes are here more important than issues. Both men are subject to pride, but that of Apemantus carries a professional handicap and lessens the effectiveness of his cynicism. As a fighter against vanity, Apemantus has acquired his own vanity. He is proud of what he does well, even if this comes close to saying that everything and everybody deserve to perish except himself. Wanting to do what one does well may be a universal human desire, but it is something of an indulgence for one who preaches restraint from all indulgence, a surrender of honesty for one who demands absolute honesty, too human a stance for a man “opposite to humanity” (1.1.272). Apemantus’s wish to see the world find its destined end is undercut by his professional need of the world for his livelihood.

We may find it difficult to say what all this proves ideologically. Here as elsewhere Shakespeare was no ethical propagandist. The debate certainly does not proclaim cynicism or, for that matter, any kind of primitivism or asceticism as a panacea for the world's evil. If the debate suggests anything about remedies, it is that whatever is attempted, the human attitude with which these remedies are sought is more important than the measures themselves. If we focus on Apemantus, we may go further and say that unfortunately those who seek to reform the world are human beings whose personal flaws cannot be dissociated from their reforming efforts. We should hesitate to extract from this Shakespeare’s ideas about human reform in general; if we did, we would have to say that he had no great faith in saints and human reformers.

As we look back at the dramatic role of Apemantus in the play, we see him raising some disturbing questions about men’s conduct of their lives and giving a strong direction to the play’s pessimism. In the first two acts, when Timon is in his optimistic dream, Apemantus is the deadly accurate commentator on, and satirist of, Athenian corruption. We would understand the degradation of Timon’s friends and
parasites without Apemantus, but he highlights it and puts it in ironic perspective. His barbs and churlish sayings prepare the ground for the later, more vehement onslaught of Timon, and they do so by anticipating most of the images and themes in the misanthrope's curses and diatribes. It is no exaggeration to say that Apemantus is the inventor and director of most of the play's characteristic images and word patterns. He either initiates these or gives them a pessimistic focus before they are taken up by others: the steward, the servants, Timon's creditors, Alcibiades, and, most of all, Timon when he turns misanthrope. The turning point occurs when Apemantus is not present, at the mock banquet. Timon now adopts Apemantus's attitude and copies even his speaking style when he comments sarcastically in muttered asides on the baseness of his friends. His prayer, a parallel to Apemantus's ironic grace at the first banquet, asks the gods not to let themselves be injured and disappointed by thankless men. Timon is therefore in a sense Apemantus's pupil, and Apemantus is his master; but the disciple outstrips the teacher in their contest at Timon's cave. Timon has now the greater power of invective, the greater contempt of man.