Patterns and Images

The imagery of Timon is difficult to describe and categorize. It has a late-Shakespearean compression, multiple allusiveness, and dazzling mobility. In Timon's misanthropic speeches, when the words tumble almost helter-skelter from his mouth, the images fuse into bewildering complexes. Earlier commentators, conditioned to find the play incomplete and defective, found the imagery also confusing and unsatisfactory. However, Maurice Charney has noted in a brief discussion that "the imagery of Timon has an inner consistency that reflects the completeness of the play as a work of the imagination." Charney appropriately links his discussion of major image strands with a general characterization of the play's language and style. Unpleasant images denotive of disease and disgust loom large, and they fit into a general "anti-lyrical" style that aims at shock effects. Even though there are rough spots because of the state of the text, the language also has extraordinary felicities; often speeches pack complex meanings into concise phrases or imitate the sharp realism of colloquial speech.

I too purpose to discuss the imagery of Timon in the context of Shakespeare's verbal strategy and to argue that it is powerful and right for this play. If the test of effective images is that they provide suggestions that emphasize and illuminate themes, support characterizations, and undergird the
plot developments, the images of Timon are highly effective. They have a dramatic dynamism; where they are rugged and tortured, they express cacophonies in the characters' thoughts.

There is something prosaic about the imagery; the pictorial fancy is either subdued or, where it lights up, it does so disturbingly. Timon is a play of ideas, of pessimistic and brutal ideas; the images help to bring them out. Characteristic of the imagery is its alliance with, and sometimes inseparability from, word patterns, that is, iterations of thematically related words; and I shall therefore deal with word patterns and images together here. "Gold" is the example par excellence for their inseparability. The word occurs far more frequently in this play than in any other, and it is imprinted strongly on our imagination, the more so as it becomes a "representational" or stage image when Timon digs up the treasure and hands out gold coins to his callers. Yet it hovers somewhere between a word pattern and an image; Caroline Spurgeon objected to Wilson Knight's calling it a persistent symbol and protested that it is merely a subject around which other images are clustered. But it is surely a powerful symbol, the most powerful of the play. And if by "image" we understand a visually conceived idea, many of the references to gold qualify since they invoke vivid impressions of gold: it is a magnet, a bawd, a slave, a god, a destroyer and a killer. To classify these images under "physics," "servants," "deity," and "criminals" would be ridiculous.

The general direction of the images and speech patterns adapts itself to the dramatic structure and accentuates it. Most of the patterns are established by Apemantus and later appropriated, modified, or energized by Timon. The changeover, which begins at the mock banquet, is completed in Timon's climactic speech outside the walls, the scene that our redrawing of the act division assigns still to the third act as its climax. The Timon who appears in the next act in the woods is a different man who has mastered a new idiom. With this change, the whole style of the play undergoes a "remodeling," as Wolfgang Clemen puts it: "Instead of the consistently quiet manner of speaking only occasionally interrupted by exclamations of uneasiness, we have from the fourth act on a new form of utterance vehement in tone, loose in structure as to syntax and increased in speed."

We may begin with images and patterns particularly associated with Timon. Characteristically, they are kinetic, emphasizing, or magnifying; they convey strength and force. Such are the "flowing" and "flood" metaphors. "Breathe" and "breath" also form a pattern suggestive of the hero's
dynamism. Cosmic images join with these later when the misanthrope reaches for the ultimate in hatred. These images carry him beyond ordinary human dimensions and give his rhetoric, in spite of its negativism, a baroque intensity and exuberance.

The images suggestive of "flowing" and "flood," like the others, are relatively lightly struck in the opening scene, only to become much more emphatic later. The first impression we receive of Timon is that of his magnetic attraction, the "magic" of his bounty (1.1.6.). "This confluence, this great flood of visitors" (42) gathers in emulation of him at the bottom of Fortune's hill. The "flow" and "flood" patterns accompany even more forcefully the movement in the opposite direction when Timon spends and drains his resources: "He pours it out" (275). At the banquet, a lord demands that he "let it flow this way"—a metaphor that occasions Ape­mantus's remark that Timon's guest "keeps his tides well" (1.2.54–56). The steward moralizes that his master knows "no stop" and fails to "cease his flow of riot" (2.2.1–3), and he reminds Timon of "the ebb of your estate / And your great flow of debts" (2.2.145–46). The servant's "eyes at flow" because of the waste and riot make an ironic contrast with the tears that gush from Timon's as he emotes on friendship (1.2.105).

At the banquet, the images of flowing join with those of breathing, perhaps the strand most expressive of Timon's personality and career. Shakespeare used this pattern for characterization and dramatic emphasis also in Antony and Cleopatra, where the Egyptian queen's sexual attraction and power over Antony is vividly portrayed by Enobarbus:

I saw her once
Hop forty paces through the public street;
And, having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
That she did make defect perfection,
And, breathless, pow'r breathe forth.

(2.2.228–32)

The contrast of this Cleopatra with the quiet and cold Octavia, more "a statue, than a breather" (3.3.21) is emphatic. But nowhere did Shakespeare put the breath image to such large use as in Timon, where it lends force and glamor to the lover and hater of men, accompanies his progress through the play, and helps connect the Alcibiades story with the main plot.

The first direct characterization of Timon through this image, when the merchant calls Timon a "most incomparable man, breath'd, as it were, / To an untirable and con-
tinuate goodness” (1.1.10-11), suggests a vigorous application to benevolence as if it were an athletic exercise. But this effort, the steward warns, must finally fail:

... the world is but a word:
Were it all yours, to give it in a breath,
How quickly were it gone!

(2.2.156-58)

And,

Ah, when the means are gone that buy this praise,
The breath is gone whereof this praise is made.

(2.2.173-74)

Insubstantial as the effect of Timon’s breath is, it vivifies his whole being and lifts him, a man not of great intellectual powers, above his entourage. His portrait, as described by the poet, shows imagination not as a light in his eyes, as one might expect, but as an emanation of his mouth: “How big imagination / Moves in this lip!” (1.1.32—33). The projection, at least, is compelling.

In contrast, the breath of Timon’s friends is as nauseating as they themselves; it blows off Timon’s cap, Apemantus intimates later (4.3.214—15), and we feel its unwholesomeness when they pledge their treacherous “healths” to him at the banquet. Apemantus does not chime in because he fears for his “windpipe’s dangerous notes” (1.2.51). The very banquet thus becomes a kind of ritual in which Timon’s life substance, his freedom to live and to breathe, are threatened. Timon’s friends stifle him—the breath imagery is here characteristically accompanied by images of tying and binding, such as J.C. Maxwell has pointed out; these images contrast with Timon’s key word “free.”

In the middle portions of the play, the kinetic verbal images are accompanied by vehement stage movements when the steward and Timon break through the encirclement by the creditors’ servants. The first appearance of the servants makes him plead, “Give me breath” (2.2.38). Besieged in his own house, in which he was “ever free,” he complains bitterly, “They have e’en put my breath from me, the slaves” (3.4.79,102). He rushes through the barrage of bills that prevent his unmolested exit. When during this scene the steward makes his exit “in a cloak, muffled”—the stage direction is repeated verbally (3.4.41)—we feel also how much Timon’s previously resounding breath has become muffled.

At the mock banquet, when Timon hits back at his oppressors, the kinetic movement resumes—with a vengeance. Instead of having wine flow in their direction, he throws water and stones at them, driving them out “all in motion.”
He who let his friends drown themselves in riot shouts now, "Sink, Athens!" (3.6.98–100). Besides whatever else is symbolized by the "smoke and luke-warm water" he throws at his friends and declares to be their "perfection," these materials suggest the hot air, the hypocritical exhalations, the "reeking villainy" that have enveloped him (3.6.85–89).

The mock banquet redirects these and other images as Timon appropriates the Apemantian cynicism and incorporates it into a rhetoric of annihilation. Timon's heated imagination ranges over the whole universe when he invokes the elements and the heavenly bodies as apocalyptic forces. The breath imagery too becomes apocalyptic in Timon's first soliloquy outside Athens: "Breath infect breath, / That their society, as their friendship, may / Be merely poison!" (4.1.30–32). And the image fuses with cosmic curses when the misanthrope bids Alcibiades to become a planetary plague and poison the air with the smoke of guns, the breath of war (4.3.110–12).

The breath imagery also provides a major linkage between the main plot and the subplot. When Timon's freedom to breathe is choked by the encirclement of his house, the senators simultaneously tell Alcibiades, "You breathe in vain" (3.5.60). The general proves quickly that he will not "suffer / The worst that man can breathe" as is the senators' recipe for honorable behavior (31–32). When Alcibiades stands before the walls of Athens, he who had appropriated Timon's grievances before also appropriates the breath imagery we have come to associate with Timon:

Till now, myself and such
As slept within the shadow of your power
Have wander'd with our travers'd arms, and breath'd
Our sufferance vainly. . . .

Now breathless wrong
Shall sit and pant in your great chairs of ease,
And pursy insolence shall break his wind
With fear and horrid flight.

(5.4.5–13)

Alcibiades' breath is given emphasis by his drums, and it is these that impress the Athenians, who were never much touched by the breath of Timon.

The most emphatic of all word patterns associated with Timon points up his uncompromising absoluteness. This is the pattern of "all" and "nothing"—words that occur with greater relative frequency in Timon than in any other tragedy. The early iterations of "all" emphasize the large flatteries and the universal pursuit of fortune; the later repetitions point up the wholesale abandonment of Timon by his friends. "All conditions, . . . all minds, . . . All sorts of hearts, . . .
all deserts, all kind of natures” seek to propagate their states at the base of Fortune’s hill and look admiringly to Fortune’s favorite (1.1.53 ff). The poet rightly predicts that “all his dependants” will abandon him and that not one will accompany his declining foot. “All mankind,” Timon comes to recognize, shows him an iron heart (3.4.82). He, the great generalizer, now throws his “nothing” of defiance against the world’s “all.” Although Apemantus at least slightly anticipates Timon’s use of this word pattern when he strips the pretenses of Timon’s friends down to “nothing” (1.1.190-268), it is Timon who makes it prominent when he prays at the mock banquet:

The rest of your fees, O gods, the Senators of Athens, together with the common leg of people—what is amiss in them, you gods, make suitable for destruction. For these my present friends, as they are to me nothing, so in nothing bless them, and to nothing are they welcome. (3.6.77-81)

The Timon who leaves Athens will take “nothing” from the city but nakedness (4.1.32). For him “There’s nothing level in our cursed natures / But direct villainy” (4.3.19–20). He draws in the end the logical conclusion for himself in an image of disease:

My long sickness
Of health and living now begins to mend,
And nothing brings me all things.

(5.1.185–87)

Timon’s paradox has the ring of an old commonplace. That life is a disease and dying a restoration to health is a topos that traces back at least as far as Plato’s Phaedo; the Christian humanists used it for their paradoxical encomia, although it appears to have struck some of them as a clever rhetorical trick rather than an effective consolation. But Timon shows no interest in a consolation at all. The “all things” he says death brings entail no hope for an afterlife; to read it into the passage is to sentimentalize it. They denote merely the deliverance from the evil that is life and express a bare and emphatic existential nihilism. The preacher of nothingness includes himself in the apocalypse. When in his last words Timon asks that with his own speech all utterance cease, “Lips, let four words go by and language end” (5.1.219), one remembers by contrast the painter’s portrait in which imagination moved the lips in an all-embracing philanthropy. The man who thought that the world was but a word to give away by his breath and then strove to annihilate it by this very breath ends in silence. With the stifling of his powerful breath a soul of potential greatness is muted.

The word pattern most suggestive of Athenian indecency
and corruption is an ironic one, that of “honor” and “honesty.” Timon ranks just below Othello in the relative frequency of “honest,” and if to “honest” and “honor” are added their derivatives and synonyms, this is the most prominent word pattern of the play, one Shakespeare used nowhere else with such insistence. The philanthropic Timon has an old-fashioned belief in honesty and honor, and he is the first to use words from this group. He finds the servant qualified for receiving the gift that enables him to marry the old miser’s daughter because the servant is “honest” (1.1.131). And when the old man demands that Timon “pawn” his honor (note the commercial metaphor), he pledges “My hand to thee; mine honour on my promise” (151). Although Timon is theoretically aware that “dishonour traffics with man’s nature” (161), he treats those around him as men of honor and implicitly believes in their honesty.

Apemantus exposes the charade and gives this word pattern a satirical hue. The apostle of the simple life, he is also the advocate of plain honesty. He is on a campaign against Athenian dishonesty: he satirizes it by his “murderous” quest for the one honest Athenian, he points it up by revealing the poet and the painter as moral counterfeits, and he ironizes it by harping on “honest.” For Timon’s friends, honesty and honor are dissociated and both depend on the marketplace. To the crude Lucullus, honesty is of even less value; it is mere foolishness: “Every man has his fault, and honesty is his,” he says, admonishing Timon’s servant to be “wise” (3.1.27, 40). This is quite like Iago mocking Othello’s “foolish honesty” or Edmund taunting his brother Edgar. The two villains Lucius and Sempronius fashionably protest their honor even as they dishonorably refuse to help Timon. The senators who capriciously banish Alcibiades set themselves up as judges in a matter of honor and mouth honorable maxims that are belied by their verdict. Nor is Alcibiades’ pursuit of honor such as could be elevated into a universal moral law; his questionable idea of what is honorable is brought out by his triumphant conclusion “‘Tis honour with most lands to be at odds”—the country to be added to the list being his own (3.5.117).

Timon takes up the cudgel of Apemantus in the woods. It is he who now uses “honest” with ironic iteration. His treatment of the steward as the one honest man in Athens echoes the cynic’s earlier satiric jest, and the misanthrope twists the whole idea into burlesque when he treats the poet and the painter as the only two honest men. Timon’s quarrel with the world hinges on his friends’ failure to keep promises, and therefore he will have no more promises. His rejection of Alcibiades’ offer of help—one that we understand as being
not altogether altruistic—demonstrates his revulsion to promise-breaking:

Promise me friendship, but perform none. If thou wilt not promise, the gods plague thee, for thou art a man! If thou dost perform, confound thee, for thou art a man! (4.3.74–77)

Shakespeare took pains to confirm that promise-breaking is indeed still the trend of the times in the later words of the painter, which could come right from a page of an Elizabethan or Jacobean satirical tract:

Promising is the very air o’th’ time; it opens the eyes of expectation. Performance is ever the duller for his act; and, but in the plainer and simpler kind of people, the deed of saying is quite out of use. To promise is most courtly and fashionable; performance is a kind of will or testament which argues a great sickness in his judgment that makes it. (5.1.22–29)

For the painter, as for Apemantus, honesty and plainness are associated; but the practice is assigned to the lower classes, the plainer and simpler kind—one thinks of Timon’s servants. We know, of course, whose the “sickness” is of which the painter speaks. We have thus no confidence in the fulfillment of Alcibiades’ plea to the Athenians: “Descend, and keep your words” (5.4.64).

The main images that illustrate Athenian corruption belong to the categories of disease and animality, which are also prominent thematic images in *Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida,* and *King Lear.* In *Timon,* these images enter into alliances with the “honest” and “honor” patterns and add unpleasant associations to the ironies and sarcasms. Just as Athenian society feigns honesty and order, so its members express much spurious concern about each other’s health and well-being. The play begins with the painter’s greeting of his competitor in Timon’s favor, “I am glad y’are well,” and ostensibly everybody is interested in Timon’s continuing bloom. Only Apemantus strikes a sour note when he introduces the disease imagery: “Aches contract and starve your supple joints!” (1.1.247). He highlights the abuse of friendship and the dishonesty of Timon’s well-wishers when he says that the “healths” pledged to Timon will make his state “look ill” (1.2.56). Timon later takes up the cynic’s claim that “ingrateful man, with liquorish draughts / And morsels unctuous, greases his pure mind . . .” (4.3.196–97). He amplifies Apemantus’s strains when he wishes upon the Athenians a whole catalogue of diseases: itches, sciatica, blains, poisonings, and plagues. Once even a servant, Flaminius, chimes in when he calls Lucullus a “disease of a friend” (3.1.53) and hopes that the meat in the villain’s stomach will turn to poison, a wish worthy of the misanthropic Timon. Such
images contribute to making us feel the sickness of society. And this imagery also signals that the Athenian illness threatens contagion and death to the healthy. Apemantus's warning of Timon's future illness is prophetic; Timon, as it were, becomes quasi-ill when he is virtually confined to his house, beleaguered by creditors: "His comfortable temper has forsok him, he's much out of health, and keeps his chamber" (3.4.70–71). Simultaneously, the health of Alcibiades is threatened by the senators, who seek to inflict "wounds" on him (3.5.112).

The second part of the play depicts the struggle of Timon and Alcibiades to rid themselves of the disease. Timon tries to do so by leaving Athens, wishing the disease on the Athenians with multiplying force: "Of man and beast the infinite malady / Crust you quite o'er!" (3.6.94–95). However, his escape does not bring him health and sanity, and contagion follows him to his cave. He is so "sick of this false world" (4.3.378) that his "long sickness / Of health and living" can be mended only by the "nothing" that brings him "all things" (5.1.185–87). Alcibiades seeks to cure his disease by restoring the sick world to health according to his own prescription. He will make war the leech of peace and peace that of war—characteristically, the play that began with a comment on individual health ends with one on the health of the state. But Alcibiades' medical art is drawn into doubt, and the leech image with its unpleasant animal denotation is not reassuring. The ironic and disagreeable tone of the health and disease imagery carries through to the end.

A subspecies of the disease imagery, which becomes prominent in Timon's misanthropy, is that of sexual disease. It may seem surprising that Timon inveighs vehemently against the prostitutes and dwells sickeningly on venereal disease, since neither the disease nor prostitution has anything to do with his misfortune. We may say, of course, that Timon is himself diseased in some manner and that Shakespeare's audience was used to melancholics and madmen on the stage who suffered from sex nausea. Yet the sex-disease imagery also specifically supports the thematic patterns that point up the dishonesty of society. Unpleasant as Timon's behavior to the two prostitutes is, it breaks through the hypocrisy that shrouds his and his friends' sexual attitudes. Before his change, he is reticent about sexual matters, almost puritanically proper, although the letter the page carries from the prostitute to Timon hints rather strongly at his participation in common pleasures, which like other pleasures in this society have a pecuniary base. Timon is even fulsomely polite to the Amazonian ladies at whose promiscuity Apemantus jibes (1.2.148–50). When Timon later attacks the prostitutes.
he has divested himself of societal inhibitions and hypocrisies as has Apemantus before him. He recognizes now that the prostitutes, who pander love for gold, are infected by the same societal and human corruption as his usuring friends. He sees the venereal disease they communicate as emblematic of mankind's illness. Viciously, he exhorts them to spread it everywhere.

The disease imagery is joined by the animal imagery in invoking the unpleasant and disgusting aspects of Athenian and human life. Its pervasiveness has often been noted. There are, of course, the several dog images, which Caroline Spurgeon thought the leading imagery of the play and which, as William Empson has argued, contribute to the ambiguity with which cynicism is treated. It is Apemantus's doglike existence that produces most of them. He is the first to use the word, and, like Diogenes, he knows how to turn the dog joke against his detractors, sometimes by playfully accepting their designation. When the painter calls him a dog, he snaps back, "Thy mother's of my generation. What's she, if I be a dog?" (1.1.201). In the mock banquet, when Timon assumes the role of Apemantus, he also adopts the cynic's leitmotiv. "Uncover, dogs, and lap" he shouts as he serves them the dishes with water (3.6.82).

In the debate with Apemantus in the wood, Timon demonstrates that he can turn the dog image against the cynic. Immediately upon the latter's appearance and his complaint that Timon imitates him, Timon barks: "'Tis then because thou dost not keep a dog / Whom I would imitate. Consumption catch thee!" (4.3.202-3). Why Timon would want to imitate Apemantus's dog is hardly as baffling as Empson seems to think, and it is apt enough as an insult. Timon is saying that he would gladly imitate Apemantus's dog, if he had one, in preference to Apemantus, who is much less than a dog: a beggar, "bred a dog" and an "issue of a mangy dog" (253, 268). The insult mirrors Timon's dislike of having to imitate Apemantus; it does not refute the accusation that the misanthrope has adopted the cynic's idiom with his manners, which is really a quite justified accusation. But then, imitation was the Renaissance key to mastery of style.

Yet I do not think that the dog image has any great thematic significance. Nor do other specific animal images, such as the bird image, suggestive as it is of rapacious animalism. Characteristic of Timon is not the specificity, variety, or even the frequency of animal images—the play is outdistanced by Troilus and Cressida in these respects—but the prevalence of comparisons of men in general to animals. Timon has more such references than any other play—all, of course, are un-
flattering unless one takes the phoenix as an animal. This imagery underlines human beastliness; as Willard Farnham has noted, the word “beast” occurs far more often in Timon than anywhere else.12

Apemantus’s bitter comment that the strain of man has degenerated to baboon and monkey (1.1.249–50) is the first such generalization. The most odious is Lucius’s hypocritical excuse:

What a wicked beast was I to disfurnish myself against such a good time, when I might ha’ shown myself honourable! ... Servilius, now before the gods, I am not able to do (the more beast, I say!) ... (3.2.43–48).

This is an insult to animals; it makes us uncomfortably aware that the true beast is man. As Apemantus says, “The commonwealth of Athens is become a forest of beasts” (4.3.350). All this recalls Montaigne’s attack on the pride and presumption of man in believing himself superior to the animals—an attack echoed by Barckley, among others.13 Shakespeare’s misanthrope transcends even Montaigne’s and Barckley’s pessimism when he emblematically catalogues the passions and vices that make animals approach man in wickedness, showing that the beasts’ too is a dangerous forest: it harbors the guile of the fox, the stealth of the lion, the stupidity of the ass, the pride and wrath of the unicorn, the hatred of the horse, the cruelty of the leopard (329 ff.).

The animal images, as we have noted, fuse with cannibalistic ones when eating is referred to. Even before the banquet, Apemantus makes this kind of association, to which he adds a sexual innuendo. As in Troilus and Cressida, a link between food, sex, and animality is thus established:

Tim. Wilt dine with me, Apemantus?
Apem. No; I eat not lords.
Tim. And thou shouldst, thou’dst anger ladies.
Apem. O they eat lords; so they come by great bellies.

(1.1.203–6)

Timon later achieves virtuoso performances through similar linkages that expose the universal depravity. His awesome sermon to the bandits, for instance, begins with an animal-cannibal association, “You must eat men” (4.3.428), and plays variations on the themes of disease, dishonesty, and abuse, projecting them on a cosmic screen.

Of all word and image patterns, none is a more potent ingredient in the play’s pessimistic milieu than that which clusters around gold. To my mind, gold never glows with the warm brightness and richness Wilson Knight ascribes to
it in the hands of the philanthropic Timon bewitched by a "gold-mist of romance." Rather, the pattern is from the beginning harsh, ironic, and unpleasant. The first occurrence suggests not Timon's universal love but his foolishly energetic disposal: "He pours it out. Plutus the god of gold / Is but his steward" (1.1.275–76). The mythological metaphor ironizes Timon's lack of management; his actual steward is not Plutus but Flavius, who distributes his master's riches reluctantly and who knows that Timon is bankrupt, as we may suspect by this time. The senator who calls in his credit jests, "If I want gold, steal but a beggar's dog / And give it Timon—why, the dog coins gold" (2.1.5–6). Spurgeon would call this a dog rather than a gold image, but whatever the classification, there is something unpleasant, spurious, even scatalogical about the activity to which the image points. Apemantus calls the usurers' servants "bawds between gold and want" (2.2.63–64), using a prostitution image that emphasizes the mercenary and degrading purposes to which gold is put. This is the tune Timon takes up later.

Timon actually never speaks directly of gold until he has arrived in the wood. In Athens, as much as he hands out talents and pearls and other gifts, he seems oblivious to the yellow metal. He is not, however, unaffected by its deification, which is rampant around him and which he later recognizes as idolatry. As R. Swigg has pointed out, Timon uses the computational metaphors that have become habits of speech in Athens. When he enables the servant to marry the old Athenian's daughter, he says, "What you bestow, in him I'll counterpoise, / And make him weigh with her" (1.1.148–49). He betrays even more clearly that, like his entourage, he thinks of wealth as the arbiter of affections when he says "I weigh my friend's affection with mine own" (1.2.214). This is the kind of measuring and weighing idiom that the Athenians continue to use throughout the play, and their hearts are in it. But Timon's is not, or he would not tip the scales in his disfavor. Later when he cries out "Cut my heart in sums," he protests against the commercial mentality with the commercial metaphor (3.4.91), and he uses it satirically from then on.

Timon's first reference to gold comes with the shock effect of an anti-lyrical use of "golden": "the learned pate / Ducks to the golden fool" (4.3.17–18). This is the age of gold, not the golden age. The first of Timon's two great speeches on gold follows immediately as he digs up the metal (4.3.25–45). This and the similar later speech (384–95) were much admired by Karl Marx, who wrote a lengthy gloss on them in his early years, condensing it later into a footnote of Das Kapital.
His reading of Timon evidently played some small part in the evolution of his theory of money and wealth. It should be said that Timon’s basic arguments against gold are quite traditional and hark back to medieval Christian protests; in milder moralistic or satirical form they were voiced frequently in the Renaissance. When Timon takes up the prostitution image and calls gold the “common whore of mankind,” he adopts, together with Apemantus’s tune, that of many Renaissance satirists and moralists. For instance, Agrippa of Nettlesheim in his influential De vanitate artium et scientiarum, translated in 1569 (rpt. 1575), said that the “bawdry of gold brought about unlikely marriages, deflowered virgins, sold widows, perverted old nobility, and bought new titles.”

Timon’s addresses to gold are quite in this vein: “Thus much of this will make / . . . Base, noble; . . . place thieves, / And give them title . . . This is it / That makes the wappen’d widow wed again. . . . Thou ever young, fresh, loved and delicate wooer, / Whose blush doth thaw the consecrated snow / That lies on Dian’s lap!” (28–39, 387–89).

These speeches have a highly ironic effect because of the incongruity between Timon’s encomiastic tone and the horrors created by gold they describe. Shakespeare may have been influenced here by the similar technique of Ben Jonson in Volpone (1606). For both Jonson’s hero and Timon, gold is the great transformer: “Who can get thee, / He shall be noble, honest, wise—” (Volpone, 1.1.27). Jonson’s Mosca later chimes in: “It transforms / The most deformed and restores ‘hem lovely / As ‘twere a strange poetical girdle” (5.2.100–102) —the latter figure being derived from “cestus: the girdle of Venus, into which were woven all her seductive powers,” as Jonson explained in a learned marginal note. Timon likewise ascribes to gold the power of seducing and metamorphosing; he addresses it as if it were a perverse Cupid: “Thou visible god, / That sold’rest close impossibilities, / And mak’st them kiss” (389–91). Whereas Jonson has his characters use unalloyed lyricisms and thus makes their dithyrambic praises into unconscious self-indictments, Shakespeare undercuts the lyrical effects by Timon’s celebrating horrors, such as in “O thou sweet king-killer, and dear divorce / Twixt natural son and sire . . .” (384–85). Timon’s mock-glorification of gold is, like Volpone’s, an indictment of mankind.

These resemblances of thought and technique between Shakespeare and Jonson and the reliance of both authors on a moral tradition should caution us against claiming that Timon’s speeches on gold are Shakespeare’s individual manifesto. Both Shakespeare and Jonson were presenting one side of the story of gold, that is, its abuse, no doubt in the belief that the abuse
was growing. As Barckley and many others said, "Gold and silver of itself is neither good nor evil, but the use or abuse maketh it good or bad." And this brings up the interesting and significant association of the word pattern of "gold" with that of "use"—another word that occurs more frequently in Timon than in the other tragedies.

The two terms are associated from the first gold image on, that of Plutus as Timon's steward. The lord who coins it continues with this further praise of the philanthropist:

No meed but he repays
Seven-fold above itself: no gift to him
But breeds the giver a return exceeding
All use of quittance.

(1.1.276-79)

Of course, "use of quittance" refers to customary practice, but the phrase ironically draws attention to the uselessness of Timon's endeavor to bind his friends to him by gifts. For Shakespeare's audience, a further allusion suggested itself: they knew the word "use" as ubiquitous in discussions of the usury issue. Defenses of usury as well as attacks on it turned on the question of the proper use of money. Not greed but the need of putting their money to use made them charge high interest rates, said the usurers—an argument (not unfamiliar now) that their opponents attacked. An anti-usury tract accused the usurers of employing "use" as a euphemism for usury: these practitioners "will not call it usury lest the word shall be offensive or make things odious. But it shall be termed 'use' or 'usance' in exchange, which are smooth words as oil, never a biting letter in them." Understood in this context, the lord's remark on the "use of quittance" exposes his noxious intention: he and Timon's other friends give in a usuring way because they expect him to remunerate them at a rate exceeding the usual way of borrowing. Laudatory of Timon as these words are on the surface, for Shakespeare's audience, primed to hate usury, they had opprobrious implications: Timon gives in excess of what is customary, and the resulting usury makes him an accomplice, hardly less guilty than the usurer.

We shall take a brief look at the "use" patterns in general before returning to gold. Here again, Apemantus is a focal figure. The emphasis on "use," its synonyms, antonyms, and derivatives, together with semantically related words such as "want" and "need," surely suggested itself to Shakespeare in large part because of the doctrine of the cynics. For Apemantus, as for other members of this sect, the right answer to the question of what men's needs are is fundamental to the conduct of a happy life. This implies a testing of all goods
and then rejecting those not absolutely necessary for life. Why does man need a house? Clothing more than to keep him warm? Delicacies and luxuries that merely make him sick? Gold that only makes him greedy for more? Renaissance moralists, enamored of ancient primitivism and the simplicity of the golden age, sometimes claimed that all problems would disappear if men reverted to the simple life: "Was there ever any man that, to suffice nature, had been constrained to sell his land or to borrow upon interest?"22

The cynics' question about the use of things is posed in Timon by the very presence of Apemantus. His choice of roots and water at the banquet points up Timon's prodigality and his friends' luxuriousness. Later, at the banquet of nature of which Timon partakes in the forest, the misanthrope proves himself a convert to Apemantus's view by adopting the simple life and by showing up the insanity of the uses of the world. Like a true cynic, he preaches to the bandits:

Your greatest want is, you want much of meat.
Why should you want? Behold, the earth hath roots;
Within this mile break forth a hundred springs;
The oaks bear mast, the briers scarlet hips;
The bounteous housewife nature on each bush
Lays her full mess before you. Want? Why want?

(4.3.419–24)

But this is only the most basic way in which the dynamics of wants and uses work themselves out. The theme, carried forward through the ironic playing on "use" by Timon and his friends, develops beyond the rhetoric of cynical philosophy to probe the use and abuse of men even more than of things. This is most obvious in the case of Timon's friends. When they start to collect from him, they allege that their "uses" cry to them (2.1.20)—usurers' language again! And they make sly use of time, money, and men. Even the stranger lord who pities Timon adopts the linguistic usage and the hypocrisy of the times when he protests that he would have helped Timon "had his necessity made use of me" (3.2.84).

Timon does not base his actions on personal needs and wants as does the egotistic society around him; nevertheless, he contributes to the economic and moral malaise by giving to those who are not in need and who want more than they receive. Even his very conception of friendship is infected by the goals of his utilitarian society. He harps on friendship being based on need; friends would be the most "needless" creatures "should we ne'er have use for 'em" (1.2.92 ff.). When his debts catch up with him, he imagines that the uses of his society give him a special advantage; he opines that if he tried "the argument of hearts by borrowing, Men and
men’s fortunes could I frankly use” (2.2.182–83). When he sends out his servants for aid, he does so because “my occasions have found time to use ’em toward a supply of money” (195–96). He is “proud” that he has this “need” and can make this “use” of them!

All this changes in the mock banquet. Timon now prays to the gods that they “lend to each man enough, that one need not lend to another” (3.6.71–72). He goes on to strip himself before the walls of Athens in visible demonstration of his newfound belief that honesty requires the reduction of all human wants—a subject on which he waxes eloquent in the woods. His friends’ ingratitude awakens him to the egotistic uses to which society subjects men and things, uses to which his prodigality contributed. His digging roots, like the mock banquet, is a mimetic and symbolic refutation of the conspicuous waste of the lavish entertainment he provided for his friends. Like Apemantus, he realizes now that gold is a bawd and that, in turn, it creates bawds, destroying genuine relationships. “They love thee not that use thee,” he says to one of the prostitutes who will “do anything for gold” (4.3.84, 152).

The irony of fortune that makes Timon rich again by finding gold does not mitigate his hatred; rather, he turns the gold into demonstrative evidence of the world’s perversion of uses and takes the offensive by making it do its “right nature,” that is, ruin mankind (4.3.42–45). On a symbolic level, we might say, Timon’s behavior dramatizes man’s fall from the grace of the golden age to the pains of the age of iron, which satirists liked to call the age of gold. He leaves his utopian dreams and paradisiacal innocence for cursing and hard labor. In this symbolic reenactment of the history of mankind (which is suggested merely, not allegorized), Timon proceeds speedily to the apocalyptic stage by calling for the world’s destruction.

Gold is the central image of the fourth act as I have defined it, that is, of all the episodes in which Timon confronts his visitors. Gold actually lies on the stage, and the word “gold” sounds again and again with pitiless insistence. Except for Timon’s two great speeches, most of the word patterns are of the “give me gold” and “here is gold” kind and demonstrate the contrast between extreme greed and utter recklessness—a new kind of prodigality. When the issue of gold is raised now, it cuts two ways. On the one hand, Timon takes the cynic stance, making an effective point against the misuses of objects by men. His finding of gold while digging for roots to sustain his life already demonstrates the uselessness of gold by contrasting it with primary human necessities. And he rejects Alcibiades’ offer of gold with “Keep it, I cannot eat it” (4.3.
102), evoking the myth of Tantalus, the archetypical abuser of gold. On the other hand, Timon himself, prodigal and misanthrope, is the most spectacular abuser of this substance, an irony pointed up in his conversation with Aemantius. The cynic poses the question of the use of gold (indicating that, after all, he is not fully emancipated from worldly values): “Here is no use of gold.” Answers Timon: “The best and truest; for here it sleeps, and does no hired harm” (4.3.292–93). Timon knows how to castigate the evil employment men make of gold, but ironically he too seeks to use gold for “hired harm” when he distributes it for mankind’s bale.

Nevertheless, as protests against the uses of the world, Timon’s speeches and actions are impressive. He has no more use for these uses. Death in him is laughing at others’ lives as if it were directing a danse macabre. When the senators offer him “special dignities which vacant lie / For thy best use and wearing” (5.1.141–42), he has a last jest and gesture for them that burlesques their obsession with using things: he invites them to hang themselves “in the sequence of degree” on the tree that “mine own use invites me to cut down” (205–7). It was their “use,” the Athenians alleged, that necessitated repayment of their loans by Timon and prevented them from coming to his rescue. And it was through a specious adherence to “degree” that they disguised their rapacity.

This gesture of Timon’s insultingly points up the illness of man and society, and so does Timon’s final message to the Athenians, his epitaph. We can hardly doubt that his fellow citizens will shrug off the insults, transforming them, as Alcibiades is already in the process of doing, into a not-too-disturbing legend. Timon’s protest will not stop the world from seeking and finding its accustomed uses. “I will use the olive with my sword,” says Alcibiades in the last lines of the play.