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"Earth's bounty and the circuit of borrowing in Shakespeare and Middleton's Timon of Athens 4.3" by Gabriel Egan

Abstract

Reduced by penury to the epitome of the asocial man, Timon's long scene in the forest outside Athens gives the dramatists an opportunity to explore the familiar theme of man's natural state. The 500-line scene is full of imagery of the natural world, and in particular of the relationships between realms on Earth (the soil, the air, the oceans) and the wider principles operating in the sublunary and superlunary spheres. Forced by hunger into elemental petition, Timon's plea for the Earth to supply him with an edible root is apparently answered by provision of the last thing he needs at this point, exchangeable gold. A Marxist reading of this scene would tend to stress the natural state of human sociability, from which Timon repeatedly fails to escape, but an ecocritical view must attend to just how Earth's bounty is characterized here. Timon himself gives an account of the repeated borrowings in nature: by animals from sustenance of plants, by plants from the soil's nutrients, by the soil from the atmosphere, the atmosphere from the ocean, and thence the larger motivating forces of the moon and the sun's operation. What emerges from all this is a sense of cosmic interconnectedness that seen in one light is close to the kinds of official doctrine about a Great Chain of Being that was surveyed by Arthur O. Lovejoy, popularized by E. M. W. Tillyard, and roundly condemned as scholarly wish-fulfilment by New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics. However, this Great Chain--we may choose to consider it under the more recent name of Gaia--is shown in this scene to be markedly indifferent to human concerns, and this might alert us to the ecocritical possibilities for characterizing nature without falling into anthropocentrism. The natural world's indifference to Timon might be the most positive thing the play has to show to us today.

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Karl Marx famously found in scene 4.3 of Shakespeare and Middleton's Timon of Athens, where Timon digs for roots and hits gold, a moment that summed up the peculiar transformatory power of money. Marx wrote:

Shakespeare stresses especially two properties of money:

(1) It is the visible divinity--the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things: impossibilities are soldered together by it.

(2) It is the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations.
[. . .]

That which I am unable to do as a man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of money. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not--turns it, that is, into its contrary.

(Marx 1977, 122-23)

Marx was responding to Timon's comments about what gold can do, which begin:

[TIMON] Thus much of this will make
Black white, foul fair, wrong right,

Base noble, old young, coward valiant.
(Timon of Athens 4.3.28-30)

Timon goes on at length about the power of gold to alter human relations, but we should not be so quick as Marx is here to associate gold with money, for in his splendid isolation Timon expects to be in no networks of circulation that enable a simple metal to become money.

That gold is not inherently money is, of course, Marx's point when in the first volume of *Capital* he discussed 'Exchange':

The truth of the proposition that, 'although gold and silver are not by Nature money, money is by Nature gold and silver,' is shown by the fitness of the physical properties of these metals for the functions of money. . . . An adequate form of manifestation of value, a fit embodiment of abstract, undifferentiated, and therefore equal human labour, that material alone can be whose every sample exhibits the same uniform qualities. On the other hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money-commodity must be susceptible of merely quantitative differences, must therefore be divisible at will, and equally capable of being reunited. Gold and silver possess these properties by Nature. (Marx 1954, 92-93).

Marx here tried to explain how gold and silver, albeit mere commodities possessed (like all their kind) with exchange-value, came to be universally accepted commodities and thus media for exchange in general. His main point was that gold and silver merely have useful characteristics that enable them to be widely accepted as generalized money: they are relatively hard to win from the earth (and hence the labour congealed in them is densely packed), they are uniform, and they are easily divided and rejoined.

To make this point, Marx oversimplified his argument, for the gold one usually finds in the ground is not uniform and nor is it easily divided and reformed but rather it has to be refined before it has these properties. Gold is, in general, hard to win from the earth, and Timon might seem just absurdly lucky to happen on a large quantity for so little effort of digging. What kind of gold does Timon find, though? John Jowett surveyed the theatrical preference for it being a hidden hoard of someone's refined gold rather than the unrefined ore (Shakespeare 2004, 55-56), although the text, as Jowett rightly pointed out, wants to have it both ways. That is, the gold has to be "Yellow, glittering, precious" (4.3.26) and yet within a minute of stage time the same stuff is "damned earth" (4.3.42). This ambiguity, Jowett observed, captures the ambiguity of Timon's relation to society: "he finds himself in the very middle of economic culture at the very point when he was most sure that he had escaped it" (Shakespeare 2004, 56). Timon goes on to use the gold he had found as though it were money, and since only refined gold is money, he must have dug up refined gold. And yet, as Jowett remarked, although theatre directors have interpolated scenes of the precedent burying of the gold, the play text is silent on the matter.

The opening lines of this scene might bear the answer to this problem, and if so the matter is essentially alchemical. Renaissance alchemy had a practical end, the transmutation of cheap metals into gold, but it was underpinned by a complex and subtle model of the universe derived from Aristotle and significantly modified by Paracelsus in the early sixteenth century (Debus 1977, 63-126). The philosophical purpose of turning base metal into gold was to prove a theory about the nature of matter, according to which "all metals are made from the same basic matter and grow within the crust of the earth like a giant tree or plant" (Abraham 1998, 'gold and silver'). Gold, in this model, is merely the most refined kind of metal, one that cannot be transmuted further, and hence unalterable even by fire. But it is also a fiery principle in itself:

In the microcosmic-macrocosmic law of correspondences, gold is the metallic

equivalent of the sun, the image of the sun buried in the earth. The sun in turn is the physical equivalent of the eternal spirit which lodges in the heart (the 'sun' of the human microcosm). (Abraham 1998, 'gold and silver')

The sun's rays, penetrating the earth, were thought to provide "the generative warmth to ripen such imperfect metals as iron, copper and lead into the perfect metal, gold" (Abraham 1998, 'sun'). The microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence mentioned here is part of a supposed cosmological and ideological system shared by all educated Elizabethans that was outlined by E. M.W. Tillyard during the second world war (Tillyard 1943). As intellectual stock Tillyard's claimed Elizabethan World Picture has fallen precipitously since the 1980s, but I find much of value in it and elsewhere attempt to argue in its favour (Egan 2004, 62-68; Egan 2006, TBA).

In the opening lines of the scene, Timon calls upon the sun to do its work of separating elements:

TIMON

O blessed breeding sun, draw from the earth
Rotten humidity; below thy sister's orb
Infect the air. Twinned brothers of one womb,
Whose procreation, residence, and birth
Scarce is dividant, touch them with several fortunes,
The greater scorns the lesser.
(Timon of Athens 4.3.1-6)

Timon hopes for the evaporation of moisture from the ground to make unhealthy air, but what seems achieved is the transformation of ordinary matter into gold. Timon's first sentence here refers to the sun and moon, but the second is tricky and only after the subjunctive sense of "touch them" has been grasped does it resolve itself into a call for dissention to be sown between brothers. An easier sense, and one made almost irresistible by the collocation of a "breeding sun" and its sister (the moon) with "Twinned brothers" and a "womb", is that the celestial family of the first sentence is still being elaborated: as with identical twins, so with the heavenly bodies. With this talk of the procreative nature of sun, moon, and earth, it is not surprising that Timon in his alienated and socially-inverted state (without the walls of home, outside of social circuit) thinks of the earth and its products in terms not of healthy but of debased sexuality: "damned earth, | Thou common whore of mankind . . . Thou'rt quick; | But yet I'll bury thee. He buries gold" (4.3.43-46).

Timon's unmotivated sexual hostility towards Timandra also speaks of his anxiety about production and reproduction, but a clue about how Timon sees the Earth in all this is his peculiar encouragement to Alcibiades: "Follow thy drum. | With man's blood paint the ground gules, gules" (4.3.58-59). The word "gules" is an heraldic term for red, but it was also an eighteenth-century spelling of 'gold' meaning marigold, the gold-flower (OED gold2), a form confined apparently to the north of Britain. Even without this link, however, it is not hard to trace how blood and gold were related in Shakespeare's mind, as I have shown (Egan 2003) and as W. A. Murray traced in relation to the celebrated image of the murdered king in Macbeth (Murray 1966). Murray showed that ideas about alchemical transformation were made topical by the controversy about the new sixteenth-century medicine of Paracelsus, and argued that the context in Macbeth is primarily religious: Duncan's blood is special because he is a saintly king. However, I would observe that in alchemy blood has strong associations with the principle that metals must 'die' in the original forms to be reborn as gold and with the life-giving red elixir (synonymous with the philosopher's stone) achieved after the white (silver) stage, featured in alchemical treatises with the attendant associations of moon and sun, and of virginity giving way to fecundity, that one might expect (Abraham 1998, 'blood', 'rubedo').

Of course, the word 'blood' itself is highly polysemous and when King John acknowledges that "There is no sure foundation set on blood" he immediately glosses his meaning as "No certain life achieved by others' death" (King John 4.2.104-5) but the opposite meaning is equally active: there is no certainty based on "lineage, descent" (blood n. 9a). After the inconclusive offstage battle of the English and French between the first two acts of King John, the English herald sickeningly describes the once "silver-bright" armour now "all gilt with Frenchmen's blood" (2.1.315-6), and we might ask why Shakespeare likens gold-plating to painting in blood. An alchemical explanation is not necessary since there is an equally viable alternative in the inescapable 'guilt' of being caught red-handed, that is being caught in the act of murder with the damning evidence, the red blood of one's victim, still on one's hands. Of course, Macbeth should have merely bloodied hands to literalize the Scottish legal expression meaning "having the evidences of guilt still upon the person" (OED red-handed a., red-hand a. and n.), which kind of 'guilt' suggested to Shakespeare's associative mind its homophone 'gilt' and hence he put together images of blood-painting and gold-plating. Thus we can explain Lady Macbeth's "I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, / For it must seem their guilt" (2.2.54-55), although Macbeth's "His silver skin laced with his golden blood" (2.3.112) does also suggest an alchemical influence in its linking of death, the transformation of silver to gold, and the red elixir.

So, returning to Timon of Athens, we may say that Timon imagines that the blood let by Alcibiades's soldiers will paint the ground gules because this blood is the source material for a transformative process triggered by the sun and culminating in the production of subterranean gold. The idea of spilt blood productively enhancing the ground might seem strained, but Shakespeare uses it elsewhere, as in Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy that in the coming Wars of the Roses "The blood of English shall manure the ground" (Richard 2 4.1. 128). Such an image of change in the ground suits the play's pivotal scene of change in Timon himself, who links his alteration to the cosmological cycles:

ALCIBIADES

How came the noble Timon to this change?

TIMON

As the moon does, by wanting light to give.

But then renew I could not like the moon;

There were no suns to borrow of.

(Timon of Athens 4.3.66-9)

As Scott Cutler Shershow pointed out, a useful way to understand what is going on in the circuits of exchange in Shakespeare was opened up by the work of George Bataille (in *The Accursed Share*) and Jacques Derrida work (in *Writing and Difference*):

He [Bataille] suggests that the central problem of all material existence is how to expend the surplus energy that flows unceasingly to the Earth from a Sun that 'gives without ever receiving' (Bataille 1991: vol. 1, 28). This literal surplus of energy in the terrestrial biosphere cannot, in principle, be fully expended, and so 'can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning' (cited in Derrida 1978: 270). (Shershow 2001, 247).

Shershow developed this line of thinking to show that whereas intellectual economies since ancient philosophy have attempted to produce meaning (as though we were in an 'restricted' intellectual economy), we should be accepting the absence of all 'aim' and the reality of surplus meaning via a poststructuralist 'general' economy. From this view, Shakespeare came to be thought of radically generous and non-economistic as part of the process of sealing off the areas of artistic creation from other discourses, especially business. Derrida reads the restricted/general economy distinction not as a simple choice but an axis always

available in any economy, and Shershow pointed out that in the Bible and in medieval theology there is always an injunction to thrift and an exhortation to give things away (Shershow 2001, 248-49).

Brilliant as I think Shershow's essay is, I disagree with one of its premises. Contrary to Bataille, the sunlight bathing the Earth is not quite the free plenitude it seems to be. Although we should not credit Shakespeare with a direct appreciation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, it is noticeable that Timon speaks of the moon's renewal coming not from a free gift of sunlight, but specifically from a borrowing. While the Earth and moon might seem to be recipients of the sun's free gift of light, there is, we now know, a cost to this giving. The local decline in entropy that we enjoy on Earth is at the expense of an increasing entropy at the core of the sun as hydrogen atoms fuse to make helium. Although we like to speak of energy from sunlight as a renewable resource, taking the widest frame of reference it is another version of the hydrogen economy and distinctly irreversible. Although we habitually reject alchemical thinking as folly, it is worth noting that the atomic model of the universe is entirely compatible with the transmutation of elements. When Dmitrii Mendeleev ordered the known elements by their atomic weight in 1869 he left gaps for elements predicted by his model but which had not been discovered, and when in due course they were found (and with just the characteristics he predicted) Mendeleev's Periodic Table gained wide acceptance. Mendeleev was, however, unshakeably convinced that the elements were, as their name implies, immutable so that a material occupying one position in his table could never be altered to occupy another. Work on the natural radioactive decay of elements by Mendeleevs' French contemporaries Henri Becquerel, and Marie and Pierre Curie led Ernest Rutherford to demonstrate the first artificial disintegration in 1919: collision with an alpha particle turned an atom of nitrogen into an atom of oxygen and an atom of hydrogen. One of the many peculiarities of twentieth-century science--one of the many ways in which it challenges Enlightenment thinking--is that it makes alchemy a perfectly respectable way to think about transmutation.

For all his desire to remain outside circuits of exchange and to remain unchangingly froward, Timon gets hungry. This recurrent human transformation (satiety->hunger) infuriates Timon because it requires him to be dependent on the bounty of the Earth:

TIMON

That nature, being sick of man's unkindness,
Should yet be hungry! He digs the earth Common mother - thou
Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast
Teems and feeds all, whose selfsame mettle
Whereof thy proud child, arrogant man, is puffed
Engenders the black toad and adder blue,
The gilded newt and eyeless venom'd worm,
With all th' abhorred births below crisp heaven
Whereon Hyperion's quick'ning fire doth shine -
Yield him who all thy human sons do hate
From forth thy plenteous bosom, one poor root.
(Timon of Athens 4.3.177-87)

All nature, human and animal, is united in this reliance upon the "mettle" (we can also read 'metal') of the Earth, and to that extent digging up a root is no less an act of dependency than is the digging of gold. One cannot eat gold, as Midas famously learnt, but actually not many people can eat nature's bounty in its raw state either. As the thieves point out in response to Timon's claim that "The bounteous housewife nature on each bush | Lays her full mess before you", they as humans "cannot live on grass, on berries, water, | As beasts and birds and fishes" (4.3.422-5).

The thieves insist upon the necessity of what we would call the food chain:

the lower creatures consume the raw bounty of nature, and the higher creatures consume the lower. Timon objects that actually, as thieves, they position themselves so highly in the chain that they effectively "eat men" (4.3.427). But their insistence upon the chain gives Timon the idea that the food chain is just one part of a larger, cosmological, chain of being that manifests the same principle of borrowing:

[TIMON]

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea. The moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun.
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears. The earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n
From gen'ral excrement. Each thing's a thief.
The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power
Has unchecked theft. Love not yourselves. Away,
Rob one another. There's more gold. Cut throats;
All that you meet are thieves. To Athens go,
Break open shops; nothing can you steal
But thieves do lose it. Steal no less for this I give you,
And gold confound you howsoe'er. Amen.

THIRD THIEF

He's almost charmed me from my profession
(Timon of Athens 4.3.438-452)

The scene's principle of contrarious effects is epitomized in the final line above: if thieving is a universal principle of all human society and of the cosmos, the true thief turns into an honest man. Effectively the same dark irony underlies Timon's next social encounter, when his former servant Flavius tries to recover his old position even if he has to reverse the circuit of payment:

FLAVIUS

I beg of you to know me, good my lord,
T' accept my grief, [He offers his money] and whilst this poor wealth lasts
To entertain me as your steward still.
(Timon of Athens 4.3.488-90)

For a moment the flow seems reversed, but still money is, as Marx remarked, a power for transmutation of anything into its contrary: here, the servant seeks to be his own paymaster. We might read this as a distinctly social phenomenon but I suggest that the thrust of the scene is that the social must be but a manifestation of the wider cosmological situation regarding exchange. Timon does not take his former servant's money, for if he did he would truly be within a circuit of borrowing, which differs from ordinary taking in that there is an implied obligation to later give what is borrowed back to the lender. Timon starts this scene thinking of the moon's light as a borrowing of the sun's--which itself is closer to the mark than Bataille's notion of the sun gifting its energy--but by the end he has revised this to a principle of thieving because, of course, the moon does not return the energy. Nature, Timon says, is not founded on exchange, upon loans later repaid, but rather energy flow is uni-directional and irreversible. Thinking ecocritical about our world we may want to model human relations on natural ones, and if we do we ought not to wish away Timon's realistic and materialist characterization of nature.

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