Review by William Rampone

Dawson, Anthony B. and Gretchen E. Minton, eds. *Timon of Athens*, Arden Shakespeare Third Series. London *et al.*: Arden Shakespeare, 2008. 450 pages.

Anthony Dawson and Gretchen Minton have tackled one of the least known and most textually knotty of Shakespeare's and Thomas Middleton's collaborative works. Middleton was known for his concerns with "modern urban greed and economic relations" (3), and Dawson and Minton opine that Shakespeare may have solicited the help of Middleton because this play required a "sardonic tone and a vivid attention to the grittiness of city life" (3). The play was probably completed by 1606-07, and the editors estimate that Shakespeare wrote 65 percent of the play. The publication of *Timon of Athens* is enigmatic, for John Heminge and Henry Condell did not intend to include it in the *First Folio*. Dawson and Minton speculate that perhaps they made that decision because it had never been performed and that it was a collaborative endeavor.

While *Timon* may never have been performed on the early modern stage, that did not prevent Thomas Shadwell in the 1670's and Richard Cumberland in 1777 from producing versions that stressed the tragic possibilities in the play. Timon, while he is the protagonist in a tragedy, lacks the psychological coherence that Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear, and other tragic figures possess. Dawson and Minton describe him as "a figure on the outer edge of representation, something that Shakespeare's richer tragic characters must both include and get past" (47). Noting his lack of psychological integrity, they assert, "Timon remains somehow unintegrated, partly because of his social position—in both halves he is both central and peripheral, but always alien" (47).

Certainly, two of the main thematic issues in this play concern debts and gifts. Consequently, a Marxist perspective would be quite useful as the play treats of the making and repaying of loans as well as the giving of gifts. Marx considered *Timon of Athens* one of his favorite plays (71). Indeed, this is a play

replete with monetary exchanges as well as exchange of goods, an economy which is defined by the "overtly competitive individualism of the false friends, who refuse help when it is needed and instead send servants to demand repayment of outstanding loans" (72). Dawson and Minton assert that *The Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens* reflect the transition from feudalism to emergent capitalism; *Timon of Athens* focuses on the "economic basis of credit and its focus on debt, [and]…its depiction of the extravagance of gift-giving and aristocratic largesse in general, which in turn relates to critiques of King James' court and his lavish, wasteful behavior" (78). From a cultural materialist perspective, *Timon of Athens* was as much a social reflection of James' court as was *Macbeth*, a play that is often mentioned in association with James because of his interest in witchcraft.

In the chapter entitled, "Endings, Epitaphs, and Editors," Dawson and Minton undertake the most vexing textual issue of this play: the epitaphs for Timon. A soldier first comes upon an epitaph in the woods. He stops and looks about himself, and asks, "What is this?" (5.4.2). He answers his own question when he reads what he sees: "Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span, / Some beast read this, there does not live a man" (5.4.3-4), but then the soldier stops and pauses again and asks another question: "What's on this tomb / I cannot read. The character I'll take with wax" (5.4.5-6). Dawson and Minton note: "These lines are not distinguished in *F* by italics or quotations marks, which led earlier editors to assume that they were part of the soldier's own speech instead of some thing he is reading" (331). Most editors agree with Dawson and Minton that the soldier has found some kind of message but wonder why he then says that he cannot read what is on the tomb. Editors have decided that perhaps a second epitaph is in Greek or Latin. Some scholars think that Shakespeare might have changed his mind but kept the original verse in the play, but Dawson and Minton note, "It's not that Shakespeare changed his mind; rather, his purpose seems to have been to provide continuity between this scene and the next (and final) one: to keep Timon's memory of the audience's awareness through to the very end, maintaining the somber tone and emphasizing the feeling of loss" (103). At the same time the change may have been simply a textual oversight on the part of the compositors or editors.

The stage history of *Timon of Athens* is yet another conundrum of sorts in that stage historians have no record of any early modern performance. Stage historians' first record of the play is Thomas Shadwell's Restoration version in 1674-1675 when he rewrote the play by introducing a romantic trio involving Timon and two women, one faithful and the other one unfaithful. This particular version of *Timon* was performed until the 1740's. Shadwell's version of the play represented Timon not so much as a hater of humanity but rather as man who had been betrayed by a deceitful gold digger (110). Not until 1816 did George Lamb restore much of the original text, and he felt compelled to remove prostitutes as well as all references to venereal disease from the play in order to refine it (113).

The 1990's saw two significant productions of *Timon of Athens*. The first of the two was Michael Langhan's at Stratford (Ontario) set in the 1920's with flappers and a night club like atmosphere, reminiscent of the great Gatsby. Trevor Nunn at the Old Vic produced a version of the play set in the present with a multitude of computers and other gadgetry, which Peter Holland said made the production appear cluttered. In the previous year in Bochum, Germany, the director Frank Patrick Steckel staged a version for which the painter Dieter Hacker designed masks for each of the play's characters. Each mask had an allegorical significance. Dawson and Minton assert that the characters behaved as if they were from a morality play. Because the masks were so heavy, actors' movements across the stage were substantially slowed. The BBC Shakespeare also produced *Timon of Athens* for its series; like many productions in this series, this one was blandly conventional.

Dawson and Minton bring their survey of performances to an end with the 2004 Stratford (Ontario) production by Stephen Ouimette in which Peter Donaldson played the role of Timon. This particular production confronted problems similar to past ones: for example, the question of what becomes of Timon after he goes into exile is resolved by the directorial decision to have him starve to death, which makes sense and is ironic because during his life he dined on wonderful food (141). The cave in which Timon lived in exile looked like a grave where he spent his last days. As Timon's mind drifts into incoherent imaginings, his servants provide him with food. By the end of the play, many actors lie as dead or

wounded soldiers from the previous battle in which Alcibiades participated (144-145). Dawson and Minton make a particularly astute comment in the final paragraph of their introduction: "The demands it makes on its main actor, its often contorted language, its ragged edges and insufficiently integrated plot elements, all create obstacles that most of Shakespeare's other plays do not" (145).

All in all, Dawson and Minton produced an extremely fine introduction for a very knotty play, filled with textual as well as dramatic enigmas. The edition includes no less than seven appendices, the seventh of which provides a performance history of all significant productions of *Timon of Athens* from 1922 until 2006, a most helpful aspect of this edition. The Arden Shakespeare's editors have produced a dazzling edition of *Timon of Athens* that scholars of this play will use for many years to come.

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