

## Timon and Mining

John JOWETT

*The Shakespeare Institute (Stratford-upon-Avon)*

### ABSTRACT

In the background of this paper lies the work of Keith Thomas (1993) in *Man and the Natural World* and Jonathan Bate (1993) in his ecocritical study *The Song of the Earth*. This article seeks to contribute to a history of environmental awareness that can be extended back not only to Shakespeare but also to classical times. More specifically it seeks to place *Timon of Athens* within a history of early modern environmentalism. It is not self-evident that there is such a phenomenon. Thomas's book draws on a wide range of material covering several centuries and is primarily a work of historical scholarship. Though he is a Shakespearian scholar, Jonathan Bate has little to say about Shakespeare in *The Song of the Earth*, which, understandably, centres itself on the Romantic movement from Rousseau onwards. Conversely, Bate's *Shakespeare and Ovid* has little to say about ecology. There is, however, a significant space between Bate's two influential books for an account that takes Ovid as its starting point and finds, in no Shakespearian play more than *Timon of Athens*, an exposition of society as belonging to an Iron Age, and as a consequence alienated from a potentially vengeful nature.

Ovid's account of the fall from the Golden Age provides the *locus classicus* for identifying human impiety and human violence with the extraction of minerals from the earth, thereby describing humankind's denatured and violent relationship with the natural world, and with itself. The fiction of the Golden Age throws these characteristics into relief. It describes a Utopian society that needed no laws: "which of it selfe maintaine / The truth and right of every thing unforc'd and unconstrain'd". There was harmony with nature in a world with no use for trade by sea or for agriculture:

The loftie Pynetree was not hewen from mountaines where it stood,  
 In seeking straunge and forren landes, to rove upon the flood...  
 The fertile earth as yet was free, untoucht of spade or plough,  
 And yet it yeelded of it selfe of every things inough.  
 And men themselves contented well with plaine and simple foode,  
 That on the earth of natures gift without their travail stooode,  
 Did live by Raspis, heppes and hawes, by cornelles, plummes and cherries,  
 By sloes and apples, nuttes and peares, and lothsome bramble berries,  
 And by the acornes dropt on ground, from Joves brode tree in fieldes.  
 (I.109-21)<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare remembers this passage in several plays, but he has little time for prelapsarian Utopias. In both *As You Like It* and *Timon of Athens* he stresses the harshness of the natural world. In Shakespeare's wild, men suffer "the penalty of Adam" (*As You Like It*, 2.1.5); it is a place of savage beasts, "the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter's wind" (2.1.6-7), and frost-edged brooks.<sup>2</sup> And in *The Tempest* Gonzalo's evocation of an ideal commonwealth based, indirectly, on Ovid's Golden Age, is given short shrift (2.1.149-75). We may not approve of Antonio and Sebastian's treatment of Gonzalo, but they do seem right in regarding his Utopia as merely fatuous, not least because it is contradicted by an Iron Age premise about political authority. Despite their rejection of the Golden Age, these negative examples still bear witness to Shakespeare's fascination and engagement with the prelapsarian ideal.

If the Silver Age brought the four seasons, the Iron Age brought all that is bad in human behaviour, and it all follows from the discovery of metal: gold for wealth, iron for cultivation, mining, and warfare, and brass for the "brazen tables" of the "threatning lawe":

Not onely corne and other fruites, for sustnance and for store,  
 Were now exacted of the Earth: but eft they gan to digge,  
 And in the bowels of the ground unsaciably to rigge,  
 For Riches coucht and hidden deepe, in places nere to Hell,  
 The spurres and stirrers unto vice, and foes to doing well.  
 Then hurtfull yron came abroad, then came forth yellow golde,  
 More hurtfull than the yron farre, then came forth battle bolde,  
 That feightes with bothe, and shakes his sword in cruell bloody hand.  
 Men live by ravine and by stelth: the wandring guest doth stand

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are taken from Nims (1965).

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare plays other than *Timon of Athens* from Wells and Taylor (1986).

In daunger of his host: the host in daunger of his guest:  
And fathers of their sonne in laws: yea, seldome time doth rest,  
Betweene borne brothers such accord and love as ought to bee.  
The goodman seekes the goodwifes death, and his againe seeks shée.  
The stepdames fell their husbandes sonnes with poyson do assayle.  
To see their fathers live so long the children doe bewayle.  
All godlynesse lies under foote.  
(I.154-69)

Bate demonstrates the recurrent influence of this passage on Shakespeare's writing. To come closer to my perspective here, he describes the second half of it as "Timon-like" (Bate 1993:171).

In *Timon*, this worst-of-the-Iron-Age picture of humanity is both contrasted and correlated with the dystopian and wintry state of Iron-Age nature. When Timon is visited by Apemantus in the woods beyond Athens, the committed city-dweller Apemantus points to the bleak air and the cold brook candied with ice, preferring the comfort of a bed at home. Such is the view from the position Apemantus claims to represent, that of the "middle of humanity" (14.302).<sup>3</sup> Timon for his part sees human nature as beast-like and irredeemable. Iron-age savagery dwells in Athens. His life in the woods offers a restricted kind of salvation. Timon tests the theory that one can be sustained by mother earth without becoming involved in the extravagance, the abstraction from nature, and the detestable sociality of living in the city.

This is implicit in his rejection of Athens to live in the woods, and becomes explicit in his search for roots to eat. It is given fullest expression in lines that echo the first passage I quoted from Ovid:

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 briars scarlet hips.  
The bounteous housewife nature on each bush  
Lays her full mess before you. Want? Why want?  
(14.416-21)

Even if Timon is not so naive as to think that thieves will abandon their trade and live on berries, his words undeniably relate to his own life in the woods. However, the match is far from perfect. One of the Thieves to whom

---

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from *Timon of Athens* from Jowett (2004). The present paper gives fuller expression to ideas explored in the Introduction to the edition.

the speech is addressed objects that “We cannot live on grass, on berries, water, / As beasts and birds and fishes” (14.422-3). Timon himself lives on more than the grass, berries, and water of the Ovidean Golden Age. Timon digs. He uses an implement characteristic of the Iron Age, and engages in the Iron-Age activity of breaking open the ground, in contrast with the Golden Age when the ground was, in the words of the passage from Ovid I read before, “untouched of spade”. It is this digging that leads to an iron-age outcome, the discovery of gold.

So the wished-for root is, as it were, transformed into gold. The passage not only alludes to the Ovidean myth of the Iron Age but also invokes the Ovidean trope of metamorphosis. The tenets of Christian thought are even more clearly to the fore. Proverbially, and echoing the words of Christ, “Riches are the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). That thought clearly underlies the correlation of the root and gold. The stage-picture of Timon digging is translated from an image of a hungry man to an emblem of the biblical text. The biblical train of thought is underlined in Timon’s suggestion that the heavens are “clear”, that is to say innocent, if they grant him roots. Of course, they have actually just played the sardonic trick of providing him with the root of evil instead —literally a joke, like the prophecy that turns out to be true but in the way that is least anticipated, because it is based on an unexpected fulfilment of “Earth, yield me roots” (14.23). Instead of finding his lunch, Timon becomes a miner.

Shakespeare would have found Timon’s discovery of gold in Lucian’s satire “Timon”, though in the satire *Plutus* has already foretold how his efforts will be rewarded:

Come on then, my good mattock, strengthen thyself for me, and be not tired with provoking treasure to show himself openly out of the bowels of the earth.- O miraculous Jupiter, and ye friendly Corybantes, and auspicious Mercury, how should so much gold come hither? Or is this all but a dream? I doubt I shall find it to be but coals when I wake up. Nay, certainly this is pure gold, ruddy, weighty, and lovely to look upon.<sup>4</sup>

Lucian’s Timon does not respond to the discovery in the same way as Shakespeare’s Timon. Far from aiming to “Make large confusion”, in Lucian he proposes to continue his solitary life, but now in a state of luxury.

---

<sup>4</sup>Lucian of Samosata, ‘Timon, or, The Misanthrope’, in *Certain Select Dialogues*, trans. F. Hickeys (1634), as edited in Jowett, ed., *Timon of Athens*, Appendix B.

Shakespeare instead offers an extravagant and savagely ironic reworking of the biblical warning about the evil effects of riches. In this variation on the source there are, I suggest, clear echoes of the allegorical account of Mammon in Spenser's *Faerie Queene Book II*, canto vii. We can be all the more secure in suggesting the influence of this passage on Timon of Athens because it is generally accepted that the same passage influenced Shakespeare's account of the wedges of gold and heaps of pearl lying at the bottom of the sea in Clarence's dream in *Richard III* (1.4.26-8). I believe that I can offer this as a new minor source for the play.

"Mammon", the word that gives Spenser's character his name, means "riches". More literally, the biblical word means "that which is hidden", and this establishes just how the word configures the riches it refers to. It reminds us that precious metals as they circulate in human society are a product of violent excavation and extraction, and also that they are subject to hoarding. In Spenser's picture of Mammon personified, Guyon finds Mammon in a hidden place, in a glade "Couer'd with boughes and shrubs" in a "desert wilderness", presiding over his vast pile of wealth (sts. 2-3). Mammon here represents neither the gold in itself as it might lie buried, nor the metal circulating freely as a commodity, but the point of threshold at which gold is gleaming with possibility but as yet inert. He is a kind of global banker for whom the earth itself is his bank, operating outside the everyday economy but potentially affecting it severely.

In himself Mammon is as antisocial as Timon. He is presented as the opposite of civil man, "An vncouth, saluage, and vnciuile wight" (st. 3). "Uncouth" means both "strangely unpleasant" and "unknown", "saluage" invokes the heraldic "salvage man" surrounded by leaves as well as meaning "uncivilized"; "uncivil" means both "savage" and "rude, indecorous". Mammon's anti-civil appearance indicates his malign bearing on the world in which gold circulates. When he sees Guyon, Mammon hurriedly pours the gold "through a hole full wide, / Into the hollow earth" (st. 6), the cavity suggesting both the mine from which the gold was originally extracted and a hiding place. Timon has the same first but provisional reaction. When he hears the drum of Alcibiades he says to the gold, "Thou'rt quick; / But yet I'll bury thee" (14.45-6). But both Mammon and Timon soon overcome this purely retentive attitude to their treasure when they go on to use the gold to tempt the visitor to enhance his earthly power. Mammon offers Guyon a beguiling vision of wealth and authority, whilst Timon offers Alcibiades the power to strengthen his army so that it can march on Athens and destroy it.

The rude man cloistered in the wild woods surrounded by a mass of gold he has extracted from the earth, which he first hides from a visitor and then uses to tempt him: this is already enough to suggest that Timon is in this scene an iconographical reworking of Spenser's Mammon. I would go further. As a god of riches, Mammon is equivalent of the classical god of riches, Plutus. Plutus is one of the gods who in Lucian's dialogue visits Timon in the remote "corner of the earth" where he digs as a common labourer. Plutus accuses Timon in the days of his wealth of "prostituting me basely to lewd and vile persons that bewitched you with praises so to get me into their fingers". *Timon of Athens* specifically registers the figure of Plutus and correlates him with Timon. Of Timon in his days of wealth it is said: "He pours it out. Plutus the god of gold / Is but his steward" (1.279-80). To swing the trajectory from Mammon to Plutus back once again, the allusion to Plutus uses words recalling Spenser: "I me call, / Great *Mammon*, greatest god below the skye, / That of my plenty poure out vnto all" (st. 8).

Both texts are, of course, dealing with the dangers of wealth, with *Timon of Athens* showing first the corruption of human relationships in a world awash with high living, and then the power of gold to unleash destruction on that same society. *The Faerie Queene*, like *Timon of Athens*, blends expositions based on Paul's "root of evil" lines in 1 Timothy and Ovid's account of the Iron Age. Spenser leads towards the Shakespearian conflation in which the "root" stands not only for food, not only for riches as a source of evil, but also to gold's own origin in the ground. In Guyon's phrase, riches are "the roote of all disquietnesse". As he elaborates:

Infinite mischiefes of them do arize,  
 Strife, and debate, bloudshed, and bitternesse,  
 Outrageous wrong, and hellish couetize...  
 (st. 12)

He accuses Mammon, "But realmes and rulers thou doest both confound" (st 13) and moralizes the needlessness of wealth:

But would they [men] thinke, with how small allowaunce  
 Vntroubled Nature doth her selfe suffise,  
 Such superfluities they would despise,  
 Which with sad cares empeach our natiue ioyes...  
 (st. 15)

He continues his defence against Mammon by retracing the Ovidean fall from the original state of humanity to the age of greed and metal:

Timon and Mining

The antique world, in his first flowring youth,  
Found no defect in his Creatours grace,  
But with glad thankes, and vnreproued truth,  
The gifts of souereigne bountie did embrace:  
Like Angels life was then mens happie cace;  
But later ages pride, like corn-fed steed,  
Abusd her plenty, and fat swolne encrease  
To all licentious lust, and gan exceed  
The measure of her meane, and naturall first need.,

Then gan a cursed hand the quiet wombe  
Of his great Grandmother with steele to wound,  
And the hid treasures in her sacred tombe,  
With Sacrilege to dig. Therein he found  
Fountaines of gold and siluer to abound...  
(sts. 16-17)

Mining the fountains of gold and silver is both violent and sacreligious. The idea that the steel of implements such as the spade wounds Mother Earth is echoed in *Timon of Athens*. As he digs, Timon calls the earth “Common mother--thou / Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast / Teems and feeds all” (14.178-80). The phrase “common mother” means shared female antecedent, as one might speak of Eve as the common mother of humanity, and is virtually synonymous with Spenser’s “great Grandmother”. Here, with Spenser specifically coming out with the rhyme “wombe” and “tombe”, and Shakespeare dealing in the same concept of the maternal but burying earth, human intrusion into the earth is given a specifically gendered and sexualised figuration. As Carolyn Merchant (1982) has shown, figurations of the earth as a sentient, living being can be traced back to the Stoics, and specifically to Cicero and Seneca. The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows the expression “mother earth” entering the English language in the late 1580s —Spenser’s *Fairie Queene* provides one of the earliest examples— but the Latin *Terra mater* goes back to antiquity —for example, to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In alchemical belief, it was not only living creatures that owed their origin to the earth. Metals were supposed to grow and to transmute from base to pure within the womb-like ground, fed by mineral juices that flowed through the earth (Merchant 1982:25). Spenser’s “Fountaines of gold and silver” reflects this vitalism, with the metals, as it were, bleeding from the ruptured veins.

Merchant (1982:30) traces a tradition of ethical objection to “the extraction of the metals from the bowels of the living earth”. Pliny urged

that “It is what is concealed from our view, what is sunk far beneath her surface, objects, in fact, of no rapid formation, that urge us to our ruin, that send us to the very depths of hell”. And he asked, with rhetorical premonition, “when will be the end of thus exhausting the earth, and to what point will avarice finally penetrate!” Georg Agricola’s *De re mettalica* of 1556 was the standard textbook on metallurgy for two centuries, and along with Ovid evidently a source for Spenser’s treatment of Mammon. Agricola contrasted earth as “a beneficent and kindly mother” who “yields in large abundance from her bounty and brings into the light of day the herbs, vegetables, grains, and fruits, and trees” with her retentive treatment of minerals, which “she buries far beneath in the depth of the ground”. He goes on to summarize what we might call the early anti-mining lobby’s criticism of the pollution caused by mining operations. From this perspective, the extreme efforts and severe damage exemplify the lengths to which miners go to defeat the earth’s purpose of hiding her minerals. Agricola’s purpose is, however, to answer these objections, in terms familiar to us from the passage I have quoted already: without metals, men would “return to the acorns and fruits and berries of the forest” —for Agricola, clearly an undesirable development.

Pre-eminent among early modern representations of miners is, of course, the descendent of Spenser’s Mammon, Milton’s Mammon in *Paradise Lost*. Alasdair Fowler (1968) notes that (like Shakespeare) Milton “had a special admiration for Spenser’s account of the Cave of Mammon”, and the passage influenced Milton’s account on Mammon in *Paradise Lost* following I.684, perhaps the finest and best known early modern poetic description of mining:

by him first

Men also, and by his suggestion taught,  
 Ransacked the centre, and with impious hands  
 Rifled the bowels of their mother earth  
 For treasures better hid. Soon had his crew  
 Opened into the hill a spacious wound  
 And digged out ribs of gold. Let none admire  
 That riches grow in hell; that soil may best  
 Deserve the precious bane...  
 Nigh on the plain in many cells prepared,  
 That underneath had veins of liquid fire  
 Sluiced from the lake, a second multitude  
 With wondrous art founded the massy ore,  
 Severing each kind, and scummed the bullion dross:

## Timon and Mining

A third as soon had formed within the ground  
A various mould, and from the boiling cells  
By a strange conveyance filled each hollow nook.  
(I.684-707)

And so, by mining, by purifying the ore, and casting the refined metal, the devils begin to construct the massive and ornate golden palace of Pandemonium. The line from Spenser to Milton confirms that Mammon is not only a devil but also a miner, that mining itself is a hellish act of violence against mother earth motivated by pride and greed.

There are strong indications that the gold Timon discovers does indeed belong to nature. As I have suggested, the earth was thought actively to produce metals by a process equivalent to the generation of animals and plants. Timon associates mineral gold with growing roots as products of the earth, and in a speech I'll be considering in more detail shortly he associates gold with wild animals in a similar way. The poetics therefore imply that the gold Timon discovers is a naturally occurring mineral. A find such as this is unimaginable in the woods of England or even, one might hazard to say, in the woods of Athens—though the plenitude of gold emanating from the supposedly savage realms of Central America might have made it imaginable that a scene such as this might have taken place in these regions.

Back home, as William Barclay Parsons (1968) and others have clearly demonstrated, some of the most sophisticated machinery was devoted to the extraction of metals and minerals, in particular to solve the problems of hoisting, pumping, and ventilation, and to the “strange conveyances” to which Milton refers (Parson 1968). The mining of copper and coal, though operating on a small scale as compared with the eighteenth century and later, was a significant example of organized industrial activity in early modern England; it required specializing labour, and the extraction of metal from ore involved advanced technology. From this point of view it is sheer fantasy to see Timon with his spade as a miner. One begins to understand the speculations of those who have tried to explain how Timon stumbles not on a vein of preternaturally pure gold ore, but on a hoard of stolen gold that thieves have buried in the woods.

Timon's discovered gold therefore is and is not an immediate and natural product of the earth, and as such a sign of plenitude in nature. By another take, it is and is not a product of earlier extraction, purification, moulding, economic circulation, and perhaps, indeed, theft—a product of human culture as we see it elsewhere in the play. This indeed is the case in Lucian's dialogue, where we are told that the treasure consists of “coined

gold”. In Timon’s own account in the play, it is at once, within sixteen lines, “glittering” (14.26), as though purified and polished, and “damnèd earth” (14.42), as though physically as well as morally filthy and impure. This ambiguity is crucial to the play’s representation of nature in its relation to human activity, and perhaps ultimately even to our reading of Timon himself. After all, if nature is prodigal, Timon is more justified in being prodigal himself; he was then earlier in the play a Plutus indeed who poured it out as though by destiny because, apparently at least, fortune favours him in this way, and because the generosity of the earth can be limitless. On the other hand, if Timon stumbles on someone else’s hoard, the total resources available to humanity have not increased, Timon recirculates wealth that has circulated before, and so paradoxically he finds himself in the very middle of economic culture at the very point when he was most sure that he had escaped it.

These speculations may seem to be guilty of thinking too precisely on the event. But the instability of nature’s relationship to human culture lies at the heart of Timon’s very language. The most critical speech in this respect is his soliloquy in between the visits of Alcibiades and Apemantus, the root-finding speech that lies at the core of this paper (Passage 2). As we have seen, Timon begins petitioning the earth for a root by celebrating her generous fecundity:

Common mother—thou  
Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast  
Teems and feeds all...

The following lines give examples of the physical and moral diversity of living creatures who spring from the earth:

...whose selfsame mettle  
Whereof thy proud child, arrogant man, is puffed  
Engenders the black toad and adder blue,  
The gilded newt and eyeless venomèd worm,  
With all th’ abhorrèd births below crisp heaven  
Whereon Hyperion’s quick’ning fire doth shine—  
(14.180-85)

The language here is Ovidean, a reminder, then, of the Ovidean mode of the episode in the other respects already mentioned. The debt to Ovid can be located precisely in the word “crisp”, which is used in a puzzling sense

that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites nowhere earlier than *Timon of Athens* except in Golding's translation of *Metamorphoses*. The imagery in the catalogue of beasts is more sustained, with strong antecedents in the Ovidian lyricism of Shakespeare, particularly in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and other writers of a decade earlier such as —once again— Spenser. The earth produces objects like elaborate jewels: black toad, adder blue, gilded newt. If we want to be realistic about such figures we would have to say, I think, that Shakespeare is describing not their overall colouration but specifically their black, blue, or gilded eyes; in accordance with this reading of the passage, the creature to whom no colour is ascribed is “the eyeless venomèd worm”. But the effect of artifice is strong nevertheless. Like the glittering gold itself, the gilded newt seems on the one hand natural, on the other hand refined and objectified.

Shakespeare places these creatures on the borderline of the natural in another respect too. They are associated with “all th' abhorrèd births below crisp heaven”, in other words the creatures that are monstrous, prodigious, and unnatural. The catalogue of reptiles and amphibians focuses on animals that were considered poisonous or physically abnormal. Timon is therefore making two related but rather contradictory statements. The first is based on antithesis: that proud humans come from the same earth as the most humble creatures. The second is based on similitude: that the perverse vices of man find a correlative in animals of unnatural or distorted form and poisonous nature. The address to the earth therefore sees her as a general mother to all living creatures, “in the sequence of degree / From high to low” (to borrow from Timon's words about humankind at 14.743-4); but also, more narrowly, as a mother fit for the iron age who produces only creatures fit to range alongside vile humankind. Timon's desires towards the earth are contradictory. On the one hand he petitions her humbly for the merest root to sustain his life. On the other hand he digs and extracts gold to excess, as an act of violence —sexually inflected violence at that, for it is directed against the womb. On another hand still, he enacts a kind of reversed rape that will violently cover over the earth's openings and unsex her here.

The conflicting impulses to hide and extract the gold are enacted over the episode as a whole as the visitors ebb and flow. The conflicting impulses to dig the earth and to seal up the earth are evident within the soliloquy itself, in the lines that follow the initial address to the earth. The speech exemplifies those traits in the play's language that have been taken as indications that Shakespeare left the play unfinished, as in Hermann Ulrici's (1846:238-239) comment as long ago as 1839 that “The thoughts

are frequently huddled and packed together without order or connection; the turns are striking and sudden”. The conduct of this speech does not, I believe, have anything to do with Ulrici’s diagnosis that “the piece may have wanted the author’s last finishing touch”, for sudden and striking turns are intrinsic to the manner of the speech, and consistent with sudden wrenches that typify Timon’s enraged language elsewhere. And the highly polarized quality of the writing in this speech and elsewhere is of a piece with Apemantus’ observation that Timon does not know “the middle of humanity”. To extrapolate, he does not comprehend the middle ground in any area of possibility. Timon’s whole character is built on occlusion of the in-between.

I will quote the following lines of Timon’s speech in full, without omission, but interjecting comments to mark the speaker’s switches of impulse. Timon begins by petitioning the earth to produce, minimally, but nevertheless in line with her characteristic trait of fertility:

Yield him who all the human sons doth hate,  
From forth thy plenteous bosom, one poor root.  
(14.186-7)

He then radically contradicts himself, calling on the earth to make herself sterile:

Ensear thy fertile and conceptious womb;  
Let it no more bring out ingrateful man.  
(14.8-9)

And then suddenly he is imploring the earth neither to produce a poor root nor to ensear her womb, but to “Go great” and “teem”:

Go great with tigers, dragons, wolves, and bears;  
Teem with new monsters whom thy upward face  
Hath to the marbled mansion all above  
Never presented.  
(14.190-93)

Then he finds a root. Now he forgets about wanting a whole zoo-full of new monsters and reverts to the position of wanting the earth to become sterile, developing the very image of the enseared womb that he had abandoned in favour of its opposite:

O, a root! Dear thanks.  
Dry up thy marrows, vines, and plough-torn leas,  
Whereof ingrateful man with liquorish draughts  
And morsels unctuous greases his pure mind,  
That from it all consideration slips!  
(14.193-7)

The constant is Timon's antagonism to what he calls, in both speeches, "Ingrateful man". Nevertheless, there is no consistent logic to these violent and anguished mental convulsions. They come from a figure traversed by emotions that definitively cannot be fixed and have no consistency. Though Timon is digging for food, sustenance is perhaps the least urgent of his concerns. Rather, he places himself at an emblematic point of intersection between humankind and the earth as providing nature, desiring the earth to act with different and incompatible kinds of malevolent agency against humanity.

The scene as a whole reworks on very different terms the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet*. Here too we find the device of using the trapdoor in the stage floor to represent an opening in the earth that is also a profound opening into ontological questions of human existence. Here too the earth yields symptomatic objects —not gold but the skulls of dead men. Each class of object becomes the focus for each play's examination of human life in relation to an Other —death in *Hamlet*, feminized nature in *Timon*. Both scenes investigate the idea of material recirculation between things buried in the earth, and living, social humanity. Both scenes meditate on topics traditional in sermons and in secular literature: the *memento mori* and, as in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale", the moralization on the destructiveness of riches. Both scenes are penultimate: if not literally, at least figuratively so. They stand at just one remove from the main character's final encounter with death. All this stems from the stage device itself, the rupture of stage surface that can take the actor's body wholly or partly below the stage, meaning into the ground, and then out again, a sequence with few parallels in the drama of the period (those who fall into the pit in *Titus Andronicus* 2.2 are brought out dead). Timon, like Hamlet, is aware that we are all in a sense merely borrowed from the earth. He too strongly anticipates his own burial. The specific quality of the scene in *Timon of Athens* is that it correlates borrowing and stealing from the earth with the idea of economic man. For Timon at this stage in the play, borrowing is simply a euphemism for theft, and indeed all motion and exchange including the functions of nature are

forms of robbery: “The sun’s a thief...”, the acts of humanity have put nature itself on the wrong side of the laws engraved in brass.

Thus Timon as the Mammon-like gatekeeper regulates the flow of riches from the earth to humanity. He acts extempore, but always in accordance with his anger at humanity, indulging in ironized forms of gift-giving. As in the first half of the play, giving destroys him, though now in another way. The excess of invective, and of angry expulsion from the earth, drain his will to live. The gold is taken (without the advice that goes with it), and Timon is left quite literally exhausted, or, in the term he applies to the earth, sere<sup>d</sup> up. The buck stops with Timon, and it might be said that he pays for the final peace, an outcome he didn’t authorize, with his life. So the play seals up the wounded earth with Timon’s body in it, and allows the crisis of thought about the iron age uneasily to subside as the warriors, the law-makers, and the merchant capitalists come back into alignment with each other and make friends. But Timon’s thoughts cry out from the grave like projected stones or lumps of gold in the form of epitaphs. Moreover, the play’s final imagery of peaceful closure is unstable in connotation:

And I will use the olive with my sword,  
Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each  
Prescribe to other as each other’s leech.  
(17.83-5)

The golden-age fruit of the olive is co-opted to join with the iron-age weapon of the sword. Blood is reciprocally exchanged from body to body —just as the image of the ebb and flow of the tide over Timon’s grave has contrived to suggest an endless weeping that is miraculously without any expense. The uneasy kind of flowing within a sealed double body that is implied in acting as each other’s leech escapes the dangers of profligacy and debt. It achieves a stable symbiotic economy at the expense of becoming surreal and utterly revolting. The soft glutinosity of both olive and leech abates the edge of war like aid packages for refugees, but this is still, inevitably, for all the reassertion of civic ideology, an iron age ruled by money, law, and the sword.

It is perhaps only from a present-day perspective that we might see in Timon’s fleeting visions of a sterile earth an anticipation of environmental degradation leading to catastrophes of a kind now becoming familiar. Yet, the idea that the earth might take apocalyptic revenge on humanity for greedy extraction of her products and abusive use of them is clearly present. The

nightmare of a nature that simply ceases to be fertile and to produce inevitably means something different to us, living at a time when the technological mastery of nature faces increasing strain and even the possibility of collapse, than it would have done in the early modern period, when the immediate necessities of life were wholly dependent on nature producing a good annual harvest. But there is also contiguity between the prospect of a failed harvest in a local early modern agricultural economy and the wider prospects of climactic change, flooding, deforestation, and desertification that are familiar now. In some ways we have been returned to a sensibility that would have seemed in decline if not outmoded a few decades ago. Few now would unreservedly say, with John Danby in 1948 (Danby 1948:20), “For us Nature is a source of raw power which we can use. If only we are clever enough we can make it serve our purposes”.

The point at which Timon’s invectives are quite startlingly modern is where he sees earth’s imagined infertility as a direct consequence of humankind’s misuse of her produce. The story of the vengeful god who destroys humanity for its wickedness goes back at least as far as the Book of Genesis, but in this respect too *Timon of Athens* has a modern take on the story, substituting the male and controlling figure of Jehovah with the feminine earth, generous by nature, and merely reactive when not so. This is different too from *King Lear*, where Lear calls on the instruments of the male Jove, thunder and lightning, to “Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ th’ world” (3.2.7), so that the natural storm becomes an image of God punishing the earth. It is different again from the Christian masterplans of Spenser and Milton, where the sins of the iron age will ultimately be punished and the virtuous will be saved. Timon’s vision is without redemption, and without much evidence of masculine deity, with the possible exception of the wicked gods who provide the root of evil instead of basic sustenance.

Shakespeare’s characterization of his tragic heroes depends on their assaulting the audience with attitudes and behaviours that oscillate violently between the empathetic and the disgusting. In the cases of Timon and Lear, a harmonization of response to their various utterances is the last thing we should look for. Shakespeare’s characters take shape at points of intersection between grace and despair. Timon is Shakespeare’s most despairing character—he would not see the feather move, nor would he buckle his armour on. But for us it can be no small grace in him that he articulates something of value about the Iron Age, making *Timon of Athens* a core text in the early modern discourse of the environment.

## References

- Bate, J. 1993: *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Oxford: Clarendon.  
\_\_\_\_\_. 2000: *The Song of the Earth*. London: Picador.  
Danby, J. 1948: *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of 'King Lear'*. London: Faber.  
Jowett, J. ed. 2004: *Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
Merchant, C. 1982: *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Fransisco and London: Harper and Row.  
Milton, J. 1968: *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler. London: Longman.  
Nims, J. F. ed. 1965: *Ovid, Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567*, ed. John Frederick Nims. New York: Macmillan.  
Parsons, W. B. 1968: *Engineers and Engineering in the Renaissance*. (c. 1939; repr. Cambridge, Mass., 1968).  
Spenser, E. 1909: *The Faerie Queene*, J. C. Smith, ed. , 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, repr. 1978.  
Thomas, K. 1993: *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. London: Allen Lane.  
Ulrici, H. 1846: *Ueber Shakspeare's dramatische Kunst*. Halle, 1839, trans. by Alexander J.W. Morrison as *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art* (London: Chapman, 1846).  
Wells, S. & Taylor, G. eds. 1986: *Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon.

### *Author's address:*

University of Birmingham  
The Shakespeare Institute  
Mason Croft  
Church Street  
Stratford-upon-Avon CV37 6HP, United Kingdom  
J.D.Jowett@bham.ac.uk