

Is Timon Mad? An Answer to Beatrix Hesse*

THOMAS KULLMANN

In her response to Maurice Charney's and my own interpretations of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Beatrix Hesse comments on the supposed similarity between Shakespeare's Timon and Nabokov's Charles Kinbote. While I do not wish to take issue with Hesse's remarks on Nabokov, her assessment of the mental state of Shakespeare's Timon challenges me to some comment. Hesse disagrees with my statement "that Timon perceives reality all too acutely," to suggest that "Timon clearly also shows a mind maladjusted to reality" (115) and that his speech on the moon's snatching "her pale fire [...] from the sun" (4.3.438) "strongly suggests delusions of grandeur aligned with persecution mania" (114). Hesse goes on to state that "Timon's mental operation of projecting his personal experiences and emotions onto the universe strangely resembles Ruskin's concept of 'pathetic fallacy' described in *Modern Painters*" (115) and may be considered an instance of the psychiatric condition called "referential mania" (116).

I should like to argue that this interpretation of Timon's character neither does justice to the text of Timon's speech nor to the uses Shakespeare habitually makes of madness, cosmology, and rhetoric. The Shakespearean passage in question is part of a long speech Timon addresses to a group of bandits who encounter him in the woods,

*Reference: Beatrix Hesse, "On Poets, Poets' Critics, and Critics' Critics: A Response to Maurice Charney and Thomas Kullmann," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 108-34.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/shakespeares-timon-of-athens-in-nabokovs-pale-fire/>>.

where he, after having lost his fortune and been abandoned by his friends, has chosen to live as a hater of mankind:

I'll example you with thievery:
 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. (4.3.435-42)

My first point is that this speech refers to a number of scientific facts: The sun indeed, by "his great attraction," makes particles of sea-water rise from the sea; the light of the moon can indeed be identified as the reflection of sunlight, and excrements (like carcasses) do indeed contain life-giving substances. The "resolving" of the moon "into salt tears" may be the subjective impression of a human observer, but it is brought about by an optical phenomenon subject to the laws of physics. There is nothing "fallacious" (in the sense of Ruskin's concept) about Timon's pronouncements. Timon (or Shakespeare) rather shows himself to be up-to-date in matters of scientific (meteorological, astronomical, and biological) knowledge.¹

It is true that we do not usually consider the sun, the moon, the sea, and the earth to be persons, but I do not think Timon does either. His use of personifications is obviously part of a rhetorical exercise such as may have been common in Elizabethan grammar schools. As the introductory sentence indicates, Timon is going to deliver a series of examples specially designed for his audience of professional thieves. His speech is well-composed and does not constitute a spontaneous outburst.

What is striking, though, is the choice of images used to describe the interaction of celestial bodies and natural elements. The idea of the sun stealing water from the sea is rather peculiar; we could also imagine the sun generously lifting and purifying the water, to send it back to thirsting nature in the form of rain. As to moonlight, the moon

could receive it as a gift from the sun, or at least “borrow” it, as in *Hamlet* (3.2.157), or as Timon says himself in a passage quoted by Hesse (4.3.70). The reflection of the moon on the sea could be perceived as glittering sparkles rather than “salt tears.” The idea of the earth feeding and breeding by a composture of excrements may remind us of Hamlet’s “sun” breeding “maggots in a dead dog” (2.2.181), but elsewhere these biological phenomena are referred to more generously, as by Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet*: “The earth that’s nature’s mother is her tomb; / What is her burying grave, that is her womb” (2.3.9-10), and by Timon himself who earlier in the scene refers to nature as “common mother [...] / Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast / Teems and feeds all” (4.3.177-79).

My suggestion is that, while Timon’s view of the world is certainly informed by his recent experiences with his “friends” and his consequent state of mind, his cosmology neither testifies to a “delusion of grandeur” nor to referential mania. In fact, establishing analogies with the cosmic order is a procedure quite common in Shakespeare. Many characters refer to the world (or to life, or mankind) as a whole, e.g. to make an ethical point, like Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors* (2.1.16-24) or Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice* (5.1.58-65) or to give voice to a particular state of mind, like *Hamlet* (1.2.133-37 and 2.2.297-310) and *Macbeth* (5.5.19-28). The habit of relating individual issues to the cosmic order obviously proceeds from concepts of analogies between microcosm and macrocosm as found, for instance, in Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* (1528, translated 1561),² Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593),³ Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96),⁴ and Sir John Davies in his *Orchestra* (1596), which can be related to what E. M. W. Tillyard believed constituted the “Elizabethan World Picture.”⁵

If we assume that sanity is tantamount to a belief in cosmic harmony, the negative view of the world which Timon shares with Hamlet and Macbeth may well be indicative of a disturbed mind. If this is madness, however, it should rather be classified as a form of melancholy (as with Hamlet and Macbeth)⁶ than as a failure to perceive reality. Indeed, it appears to be a common feature of Shakespeare’s

mad characters that they give voice to aspects of reality which their sane friends have failed to grasp: mad Ophelia reveals sexual fantasies which had been suppressed before (*Hamlet* 4.5.46-66 and 171-72), the Fool in *King Lear* tells Lear the truth about his daughters (1.4.102-04, 171-72) and himself (1.4.231), mad Lady Macbeth confesses to the murder of King Duncan (5.1.33-68). In the state of madness none of them is "deluded," while they may have been victims of delusion before.

This capacity of perceiving certain aspects of reality appears to me to be particularly striking in the case of the tragic heroes, Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth. We may not agree with Hamlet's view of the world as an "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" (1.2.135-36), but we certainly cannot deny that this image aptly summarizes some aspects at least of real life. It is during his spell of despair on the heath that Lear comes to realize that he had taken "too little care" of the "poor naked wretches" (3.4.28, 33) of his kingdom. Macbeth's view that life is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.26-28) may be contradicted by the new king's reassuring speech in the end (5.9.26-41), but Macbeth's words certainly give shape to feelings which most of us will have shared at some stage of our lives.

It is in this context that I would like to place Timon's words on universal thievery. Like Hamlet, Lear and Macbeth, Timon has somehow woken up to an acute perception of certain tragic aspects of life. He may not reach the degree of Lear's self-discovery, but he certainly "sees through particular shams and injustices" he had been blind to before (cf. Ure 46-47 and J. C. Maxwell, qtd. by Ure 47). To Timon, whose "dreams of human fellowship" are "destroyed" (Alexander 184), avarice and hypocrisy appear to be so universal that he cannot help but consider them a natural law, and perhaps "most people some of the time, and some people most of the time" (to borrow Christopher Ricks' phrase; Ricks 1) feel the same. That Shakespeare's contemporaries often felt like this seems to me to be evidenced by the fact that Shakespeare returns to the topic of flattery again and again.⁷ A

central passage is certainly Duke Senior's speech in *As You Like It*, in which the banished Duke appreciates the discomforts of nature: "This is no flattery: these are counsellors / That feelingly persuade me what I am" (2.1.10-11).⁸ Like Duke Senior, Timon perceives his previous life as unreal or fake, but unlike the Duke he does not wish to return to it. As gold was the agent that falsified reality and corrupted his "friends," he now proudly refuses to accept gold, stating that he cannot eat it (4.3.101; cf. Bailey 48).

To interpret *Timon of Athens* as a psychological case study of a person suffering from referential mania would render Shakespeare's tragic universe ridiculous and nonsensical. *Timon*, like *Hamlet*, like *King Lear*, like *Macbeth*, is not about a crazy nobleman of the remote past—it is about us. As with the three heroes of the "great tragedies" mentioned we are invited to follow the career and the thoughts of an alter ego of ours whose tragic flaw, his boastful generosity, causes his downfall and brings about his cynical world view. As with the characters of Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth we are invited to empathize with the protagonist and experimentally share his view of the world, perhaps to overcome and be cured of it at the end.⁹

Universität Osnabrück

NOTES

¹The mechanisms of the water cycle had been widely discussed in the sixteenth century. Usually Bernard Palissy is credited with having first discovered the correct facts in 1580 (Dooge 5). The phenomenon of the evaporation of water had been known from antiquity but was rediscovered and put into a more precise form in the sixteenth century (Brutsaert 12-36).

²See, e.g., Pietro Bembo's speech in Book 4; Castiglione 316-22.

³See, e.g., Book I, ch. 9.1.

⁴This particularly applies to the "Mutabilitie Cantos"; Spenser 714-35.

⁵Both concept and term have justly been challenged as this world picture was by no means a general one in the Elizabethan Age. It should rather be considered as part of a particular intellectual, and aristocratic, discourse which was informed

by the Italian Renaissance and by Italian Neoplatonism; cf. Kullmann, "Courtliness and Platonism" 203-08.

⁶The image used by Timothy Bright to describe the effects of melancholy is quite pertinent: "[...] the body thus possessed with the vnchearefull, and discomfortable darknes of melancholie, obscureth the Sonne and Moone, and all the comfortable planets of our natures, in such sort, that if they appeare, they appeare all darke, and more than halfe eclipsed of this mist of blacknesse, rising from that hidious lake [...]" (106).

⁷Cf. Wilson Knight's remarks on Shakespeare's "obsession" with ingratitude (117-20).

⁸On further parallels between *As You Like It* and *Timon* see Nuttall (109-10).

⁹As Wilson Knight points out, "Timon's nihilism does not, in fact, have a nihilistic result" (133), as the bandits after listening to Timon's speech decide to give up their trade (4.3.450-57). Knight further comments on "Timon's magical personality," whose "poetry acts on us" (133). Cf. also my article on "Pagan Mysteries and Metaphysical Ironies," esp. 49-51.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Peter. *Shakespeare's Life and Art*. London: Nisbet, 1939.
- Bailey, Amanda. *Of Bondage: Debt, Property, and Personhood in Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2013.
- Bright, Timothy. *A Treatise of Melancholy*. 1586. Repr. Amsterdam: Da Capo P, 1969.
- Brutsaert, Wilfried. *Evaporation into the Atmosphere: Theory, History and Applications*. Dordrecht: Springer, 1982.
- Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier*. Trans. Thomas Hoby. 1561. London: Dent, 1928.
- Dooge, James C. I. "Concepts of the Hydrological Cylce: Ancient and Modern" / "Les concepts des cycles hydrologiques: Anciens et modernes." *Colloque International OH₂: Origines et Histoire de l'Hydrologie, Dijon, 9-11 mai 2001 / International Symposium OH₂: Origins and History of Hydrology, Dijon, May, 9-11, 2001*. <http://hydrologie.org/ACT/OH2/actes/03_dooge.pdf>.
- Hooker, Richard. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. 1593. 2 vols. London: Dent, 1963-68.
- Knight, G. Wilson. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Challenge: On the Rise of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*. Washington, D.C.: UP of America, 1981.
- Kullmann, Thomas. "Courtliness and Platonism in the English Renaissance." *Anglistentag 1998 Erfurt: Proceedings*. Ed. Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann and Sabine Schülting. Trier: WVT, 1999. 199-209.

- . "Pagan Mysteries and Metaphysical Ironies: Gods and Goddesses on Shakespeare's Stage." *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 149 (2013): 33-51.
- Nuttall, A. D. *Timon of Athens*. Harvester New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.
- The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. A. C. Hamilton. London: Longman, 1977.
- Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. 1943. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Ure, Peter. *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays*. London: Longman, 1964.