Fixing Timon, Unpayable Debts,

and an Epitaph for the Flawed

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Abstract

Given Middleton and Shakespeare's explicit interest in debt and gift economies in *Timon of Athens*, and scholarship on the play's attention to the role of debt, this essay considers the borrowing and giving relationships between today's theater practitioners and the treasury of Shakespearean drama. I argue that Kirk Lynn and the Rude Mechs, through their attention to plays in need of "fixing," generate a different kind of currency than a standard adaptation and performance. The "Fixing Shakespeare" plays present a mode of adaptation as criticism, grounding a new text in a strong reading of Shakespearean drama. More than a translation, Lynn's script for *Fixing Timon* is itself a project of literary criticism that begins with attentive reading and delivers its argument through forceful characterization and narrative momentum. Thus, they balance the ledger with their source text, paying in as much or more than they borrow.

Introduction

If one were to argue that the text of any Shakespeare play is in need of repair, there is a strong case to be made for *Timon of Athens*. Co-written with Thomas Middleton, *Timon* has a spotty textual history (printed first in the 1623 folio) and no documented performances during Shakespeare or Middleton's lifetimes. *Timon* was the only of Shakespeare's later, unpublished plays not to open or close a section of the First Folio and may have been included only as a placeholder when a rights dispute forced the removal of *Troilus and Cressida* from an ongoing print run (Wayne 2015, 394; Giddens 2016, 2578). The script is "superficially disunified by technical inconsistencies," in the words of A. D. Nuttall (Nuttall 1989, 39), and has only recently been the subject of much scholarly attention.

Timon's textual shortcomings notwithstanding, its depiction of an surprisingly capitalist, though ancient, economy has proven influential, particularly in the German tradition.[1] Karl Klein notes in his introduction to the text that Karl Marx quotes *Timon* throughout his writings, using Shakespeare's language to describe the alienation caused by cash economies (Klein 2001, 9-11 and

60-61).[2] Timon's court reminds one of the financial problems of the Jacobean court, characterized by boundless excess and crippling debt. Recent scholarship on the play has discussed the culture of borrowing and usury, and the limits of an economy of gift-giving in which reciprocation is both expected and foreclosed by economic realities.[3] Of all Shakespeare's economies, that of *Timon* feels nearest to our own: money appears to come from nowhere and to produce nothing except fleeting pleasures and long-term debt.

Because of *Timon*'s explicit preoccupation with giving and debt, this essay will consider the impulse behind the Austin-based Rude Mechs' "Fixing Shakespeare" series as it relates to *Timon of Athens*. Beginning with *Fixing King John* (2013), playwright Kirk Lynn and his company have undertaken a series of efforts to "make William Shakespeare's least produced works useful again," and their equation for calculating "least produced" is simple:

> Ask yourself how many Shakespeare plays you know or have seen, subtract that number from thirty-seven (depending on who you ask), and those are the plays we are working to fix using our patented performance creation methodology, contemporary English, and adding curse words. (Rude Mechs 2016)

It is a delightful project, but given that Shakespeare's appeal has never really derived from his pilfered plots, the method raises some questions. What recuperative work are theater practitioners obligated to perform on behalf of Shakespeare's "broken" plays? To what extent are these new "Fixing Shakespeare" scripts, and the value added through Kirk Lynn and the Rude Mechs' labor, actually in the debt of the Shakespearean originals?

On the other hand, Shakespeare's works seem to give bounteously, taking on new relevancies every generation as they ebb and flow in popularity and critical attention. *Timon* appears poised now for a big scholarly payday, with articles about the once-neglected play appearing in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Modern Philology*, *Exemplaria*, and *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* since July 2017.

First produced in 2016, the Rude Mechs' *Fixing Timon* predated this upsurge of scholarly interest. While Lynn's script subtracts approximately 20 characters and several hundred lines from Shakespeare and Middleton's text, this essay will contend that it places into circulation a cogent reading of the play and a poignant epitaph for both Timon the character and his eponymous drama. Lynn's script streamlines Shakespeare and Middleton's occasionally unwieldy meditations on gift-giving and usury and incorporates women who are not whores into a notoriously male-centric (even for Shakespeare) text.[4]

Fixing Timon, and the "Fixing Shakespeare" series more broadly, locates the salvageable and marketable cachet of Shakespeare production even while acknowledging the originary texts' inherent limitations. But more than this, the "Fixing Shakespeare" plays present a mode of adaptation as criticism, grounding a new text in a strong reading of Shakespearean drama. More than a translation, Lynn's script is itself a critical project grounded in narrative interest. In the program for Fixing Timon, Lynn notes that, "Once I had translated the full play, I went back through cutting it down to 10 characters by any means . . . ." Finally, Lynn "edited the play with no loyalty to the original, simply trying to tell a good story in rich language, and to expose some genuine emotion" (Program 2016).

When a company must add value to the Shakespearean text through the labor or rewriting a script in toto, they are in a position similar to Timon's own: able to draw on stores of wealth for the purposes of a bounteous display. The Rude Mechs undertake a process of refinement. Unlike Timon's borrowing, which places himself in the debt of the very people he entertains, Lynn et al. produce value added to the rough material of the Shakespearean ore, highlighting the original's concerns with usury and loyalty while suggesting an antidote to its universalized misery.

Naming the Messenger

Reading Lynn's script for Fixing Timon, I found myself immediately struck by the economy of its dramatis personae. Shakespeare and Middleton's Timon features an expansive list of speaking parts, with the number of functionaries climbing into the double digits. Even the Poet and Painter, who are central to several scenes in the play and return unexpectedly in the final act, lack names and serve primarily as satiric mouthpieces for their respective professions. Perhaps there are production-related reasons for Lynn's thrift with his dramatis personae, but one imagines that double- or triple-casting could accomplish the same ends if the reasons for combining parts were purely motivated by personnel concerns.

Lynn's adaptation technique does not simply remove functionaries, but rather combines their features to create characters, and this tactic highlights one of the difficulties of Timon of Athens.[5] With the exception of Flavius, Timon's solipsism anonymizes most of those around him. Even Apemantus, the singular cynic of the opening acts, becomes a mirror for Timon himself, who "affects and uses" the philosopher's manners (4.3.200-1).[6] In Lynn's rendering, however, functionaries are individuated; the painter and poet become "Braymount: A realistic painter and an alcoholic," and "Cee Cee: A conceptual poet, an asshole." Apemantus becomes Apemantia, not just a cynic philosopher but also a servant to a senator and the love interest of the senator's son.

The Amazons of Shakespeare and Middleton's masque are distilled into Alcibadia, a plain-spoken warrior and loyal friend to Timon whose murder of a senator catalyzes the play's action.

I have noted that Lynn primarily eliminates functionary roles in his script in favor of combining features of minor characters with major parts, but his casting instructions are not all subtractive. *Fixing Timon*'s script includes a few dozen "extra lines" appended to the end of the script with the instruction that they be given to "friends and relatives who may not be the best actors" (Lynn 2016, 71-2). These lines allow the possibility of adding back in functionary roles, and they are dislocated from particular scenes to allow them to be inserted at a company's discretion. In theory, this seems a great way to involve additional actors and assign them lines that will elicit a few chuckles. For instance, a line for a herald reads, "You can't pay your bills with fuck-offs or else we'd all be rich with anger" (Lynn 2016, 71).

While the dramatic and comic possibilities of these lines are ample, the placelessness of Lynn's functionary speeches displays one of the key differences between Lynn's approach and Shakespeare's. Lynn sees the functionaries as inessential, whereas *Timon of Athens* is primarily populated by these unnamed creditors, false friends, strangers, servants, and senators. Because Timon's giving is about himself rather than his recipient, he needs these anonymous characters as much as he needs the named characters that fail to reciprocate his odd brand of friendship. Timon's largesse is its own end, and a stranger serves the recipient role just as well as an acquaintance.

In eliminating these anonymous recipients of Timon's jewels and baubles, Lynn's script makes Timon's friends' eventual betrayal more personal than in Shakespeare and Middleton. Shakespeare and Middleton's Timon gives indiscriminately and without exception. At the lavish banquet depicted in act 1, scene 2, Timon bestows jewels, horses, and greyhounds on named and unnamed lords alike. In the following scene, a senator remarks that Timon has "No porter at his gate, / But rather one that smiles and still invites / All that pass by" (2.1.10-12). Timon's benevolence creates no loyalty because his wealth is too freely given. He applies the name of "friend" to everyone he meets, pressing the term to its limits and evacuating it of meaning. Similarly, Timon showers his guests with gifts that cannot be reciprocated. His bounty is continually in excess of its recipients' capacity for repayment, and the nameless lords, strangers, and other functionaries multiply his frivolous gift-giving *ad absurdum*. The early modern Timon has no grounds to feel betrayed; he has no meaningful relationship to the lords he enriches.

Lynn's individuation of the drama's unnamed lords and functionaries enables meaningful relationships among characters, but it also personalizes the betrayal that Timon feels when his acquaintances will not fund his bailout. In the case of the poet and painter, Lynn's script lays bare their mercantilism more savagely than Shakespeare and Middleton's. When Timon becomes the

artists' patron, with a sum of $50,000 granted to each of them, the two realize that the "box of money" they've each been given has been incautiously counted.

> Braymount: No. You know what? Timon doesn't know. He's sweet. If I tell him he shorted me five, he'll give me seventeen. So what I should do is tell him he shorted me seven . . . .
>
> Cee Cee: No. No. I got about five thousand clams extra, so I realized: no one counted the money. No one knows if it's too much or too little . . . . We can tell him he owes us anything . . . . Now, go get ready. Get dressed importantly. We're not beggars anymore. We're deservers . . . . I didn't know how much I was worth until I started to be grateful (Lynn 2016, 23).

While Shakespeare and Middleton's artists are parasites, they offer a symbiotic form of parasitism, presenting artistic production and sycophancy in exchange for Timon's bounty. Lynn's artists, by contrast, find themselves unable to produce art when their stomachs are full. Instead, they demand ever greater sums to fund their appetites.

Though *Fixing Timon* strips away the feeble veneer of an artist-patron relationship from *Timon of Athens*,[7] it also creates a friendship between Cee Cee and Braymount that moves beyond their mutual desire to bilk Timon. Their rapport infuses some levity into a profanity-laden script that occasionally borders on *bathos*. In *Fixing Timon*'s final scene, the two are reconciled over the news that Timon has died in the wilderness:

> Braymount: Timon's dead and this is what's written on his tombstone. I was up all night painting.
> Cee Cee: It's beautiful.
> Braymount: I don't even know what it says.
> Cee Cee: Not the painting. You.
> Braymount: Don't say that.
> Cee Cee: A list of all the things you mean to me that you [are] too embarrassed to hear me say.
> Braymount: You forgive me.
> Cee Cee: Come 'ere.
> *Cee Cee goes to Braymount. It is lovely to see them reunited.* (Lynn 2016, 69-70)

Following their previous scene together, when Timon asks them to create for him "a picture of two people in the last moment of their friendship" (Lynn 2016), it is indeed lovely to see Cee Cee and

Braymount reunited. Throughout *Fixing Timon*, Timon demonstrates the power of wealth gained and lost to alienate people from him and each other. In Cee Cee and Braymount, Lynn creates a relationship unlike anything in his mordant source material. The world of *Timon* is relentlessly acerbic, much of its comedy arising from the heaps of abuse its characters pile on one another. To locate true camaraderie in a play that has otherwise eschewed friendship lives up to Lynn's note from the original production's playbill: "Fixing the play it feels a little like we get to pull Timon out of the forest and be the friends he needs" (Program 2016). At the very least, Lynn's fixed play suggests that friendship is possible somewhere in the world of *Timon*.

"Money's been a wall between me and people"

Fixing Timon is a blunt play, but not a bludgeon, as it uses coarseness to increase the impact of its critical contribution and Lynn's method of adaptation as literary criticism. Lynn's bluntness conveys his understanding of *Timon*'s themes with surprising deftness. Reading Middleton and Shakespeare's *Timon* can be disorienting, partially because of the possibly-corrupt textual status of the play, but partially because of the bombastic rendering of the title character.

Timon's toast at his final sumptuous banquet (1.2.81-96) runs across nearly 20 lines of prose and projects Timon's philosophy of charity onto his guests: "We are born to do benefits; and what better or properer can we call our own than the riches of our friends? O what a precious comfort 'tis to have so many like brothers commanding one another's fortunes. O joy's e'en made away ere't can be born!" (1.2.88-94). In this, Timon's imagined community of friends is figured as bounteous and unselfish, as he imagines himself to be. Elsewhere in the scene, Timon comments that "there's none / Can truly say he gives, if he receives" (1.2.10-11), and "methinks I could deal kingdoms to my friends, / and ne'er be weary" (1.2.209-10).

In Lynn's rendering, Timon combines the reflections on giving that pervade Shakespeare and Middleton's scene into a plain-spoken toast:

> Listen everybody, I know you don't understand, but there's an ecstasy in giving. When you get home in the early morning light. Look at your partners and children. Look over all your possessions. Look at all your money in your purse. And then imagine giving it away to better people. People who can love and invest and focus better than you. (Lynn 2016, 21)

More is operative in this simplification than a familiar vocabulary. Lynn's writing dispatches with Timon's overwrought metaphors and replaces them with a keen study of his character's flaws and capacities. Why does Timon distribute his wealth? Because he finds the people around him more worthy of it than himself. In the plain style Lynn employs, Timon's magnanimity feels less

contrived than genuine, and *Fixing Timon* locates important vulnerability in the title character. In passages such as this, Timon's speeches reveal the loneliness and insecurity behind his exorbitant and flashy gift-giving.

Timon's desire to overcompensate reaches its logical limit in his offer to pay the dowry of his loyal servant Flavia. Flavia's character combines a request made by an anonymous "Old Athenian" with Flavius, the only character in *Timon of Athens* loyal to the Athenian lord. Lynn's method of "genderscrewing [the text] toward parity" (Rude Mechs 2018) results in several fully developed female characters in *Fixing Timon*, and Flavia not only knows where Timon keeps his money, but refuses to accept any of it for herself. When it is revealed that a dying senator's last wish is for his son, and Flavia's paramour, to marry his social equal (certainly not Flavia), Timon proclaims that he will give Flavia the biggest dowry in Athens:

> I'm gonna give her a dowry twice as big as any woman in Athens. 500,000. And not just pieces of gold, but 500,000 various, so gold, but also emeralds and other rocks, and ponies, and servants, and probably more gold. But when you count it all up the total items will be 500,000. So that's everything, everything I got, all my stuff when I finally die (Lynn 2016, 9).

Timon's generosity cannot be undermined by the sheer absurdity of his statement. He has publicly proclaimed Flavia as his sole heir, and though the number of items approaches the uncountable, the gesture reveals a finite limit to both Timon's wealth and his ability to give it. Timon cannot imagine himself reaching the bottom of his coffers without also reaching the end of his life. His wealth has always been boundless; even his flight into the wilderness later in the play does not free him from the wealth that pursues him, Midas-like, everywhere.

Following Timon's declaration that Flavia will be his heir, she and her betrothed, Vinnie, attempt to return some of Timon's wealth to him. In this exchange, the best version of Timon's intentions is legible in Vinnie's words. As Vinnie thinks about his deceased father, he wishes the old man an abundance of love: "I hope heaven is full of mom. Like twenty of her. Every time my dad's ghost opens a door in heaven, or a drawer, or an envelope, I wish the Gods would make my mom pop out" (Lynn 2016, 14). Timon's generosity of spirit is shown to have engendered the same generosity in its recipient. As Timon had named an uncountable dowry for Flavia, Vinnie wishes for the wealth of love to replicate itself endlessly. The use of impossibly large numbers characterizes Timon's giving and the largesse it inspires in others.

Timon's generosity and Vinnie's reflection of it reveal, in the end, the impossibility of Timon's mission to buy his way out of loneliness. Timon appears to recognize this, and *Fixing Timon* gives him knowing lines about wealth's ability to dissolve social bonds and cheapen relationships:

> I always like to tip assholes who don't expect it. Did you know, I tip on my taxes? I want the politicians to know I think of 'em as just another batch of servants hired to polish my freedom. So let's throw an extra five grand in the faces of Alcibadia's jailers. I want the judge to feel like a valet bringing me back a friend that got parked in jail. (Lynn 2016, 4-5)

Timon recognizes the power of cash to commodify and devalue civil institutions, rendering them a service industry in which anyone wealthy enough can buy their way out of civic duty. Though he expects his cash gifts to create bonds of friendship between himself and his party attendees, he exercises control over civil servants via the same largesse.

It is this largesse, for Shakespeare and Middleton and for Lynn, that demonstrates the ability of extravagant gifts to create dependency. In a crucial moment for Timon, Vinnie and Flavia attempt to give him back the box of money he had given them previously. For once, Timon is able to be repaid and to give the gift of a settled debt. Instead, he replies, "I would rather burn that box than open it" (Lynn 2016, 15). Given the opportunity to be gracious, Timon spurns the gift that he himself had given. Timon's gift-giving is seldom purposeful or effective in creating bonds of friendship, but when it is, he refuses to dissolve a relationship of dependency upon him in favor of an equal ledger.

Timon's patronage of Braymount, the painter, presents one of the more raw distillations of his views of money. After Timon unquestioningly grants Cee Cee $50,000 to write a book of "conceptual poetry," Braymount offers to give him a painting for free. Timon's response is unequivocal:

> No one's ever given anything to me. Money's been kind of a wall between me and people like you . . . . Here's this. 50,000. Everything I've got left in this money box. Don't worry. This isn't my only money box. I want you to paint this money. I want you to stack it up in your studio and I want you to paint it everyday [sic] for a month. You'll be surprised how it changes day to day. How it grows. How it'll eat away at your ability to paint. How it eats your friends. Money is a very hungry thing (Lynn 2016, 11).

Fixing Timon heaps abuse and curses on everyone in Timon's orbit, but the curse of wealth carries greater force than the dozens of "fuck yous" hurled around by Apemantia and Timon. In this moment, Timon clearly describes the isolation and alienation his wealth has caused him. His

prediction comes to pass, as both Cee Cee and Braymount find themselves unable to create art or maintain their friendship after being granted more money than they have ever had.

Fixing Timon situates wealth as only a cause of and never a solution to loneliness and alienation, both from one's society and one's labor. Marx writes, "does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?" (qtd. in Klein 2001, 7), but Lynn's insight that "money is a very hungry thing" describes the inverse. An excess of money, rendering labor valueless because in excess of need, turns capacities into incapacities.

Conclusion: Timon's Extra Epitaphs

One of the odd textual problems in *Timon of Athens* is that the title character has too many epitaphs. When Timon's grave is discovered by a soldier in the final act of Shakespeare and Middleton's play, the soldier reads Timon's epitaph aloud before declaring that he cannot read what it says. Timon is thus given two sets of commemorative verse. The first: "Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span; Some beast read this; there does not live a man" (5.3.3-4); and a longer, second epitaph:

> Here lies a wretched corse, of wretched soul bereft;
> Seek not my name; a plague consume you, wicked caitiffs left.
> Here lie I, Timon, who alive all living men did hate;
> Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass and stay not here thy gait. (5.4.70-73)

The second epitaph metrically does what the first suggests; it outstretches its span, spilling over into 12- and 14-syllable lines and breaking the regularity of pentameter. Even in death, Timon cannot limit his giving. His verse is excessive, as are the number of epitaphs he composes for himself.

The two epitaphs suggest two alternative futures for Timon's memory. In the first, his name is recorded, but the annihilation of humanity is imagined in the closing, "there does not live a man." This is in concert with Timon's wish that when he dies, all of Athens will have followed him. There will be none left to remember him except beasts. In the second epitaph, Timon directly contradicts himself in his final words: "Seek not my name . . . . Here lie I, Timon." Here he wishes a plague upon his readers, but does not treat their annihilation as a given. His desire to be known as the origin of his curse overrides his desire to be forgotten.

Leaving a totalizing curse as his final act reflects and perverts the bottomless and irresolvable debts Timon's generosity created while he was alive, generating anathema in perpetuity so long as his epitaph endures. His readers cannot return his wish of death, and his tormented writing becomes

a final, self-sustaining attempt to exert power over strangers and friends alike. In this epitaph, Timon realizes a form of boundless giving that needs no creditors.

Lynn's epitaph for Timon departs completely from Shakespeare and Middleton's, but nevertheless captures the truth at the center of *Timon of Athens*. Timon's foremost preoccupation with himself, and his inability to discern between coercive and benevolent generosity, isolated him from both creditors and debtors. Timon failed to account for relationships as meaningful beyond the ledger, and in financial terms, all relationships of borrowing, lending, and giving appear as mostly cyphers.

So it is that for Lynn's Timon, the world becomes a perfect reflection of his myopic outlook, and Timon's disdain for his community is repaid in kind:

> There is no worse realization than this: others think of you the same way that you have spent your life thinking of them. It is *our* hate that's in the world. Not someone else's. The world is the way it is not because we have failed to live up to our true values—the world is the way it is because it is a perfect replica of our beliefs, though we have never been able to put into words anything as dark or hateful as the world we made.
> So says, Timon of Athens. (Lynn 2016, 72)

Following this epitaph, Alcibadia delivers the final two lines of the play: "But he's dead. / Come in" (Lynn 2016, 72). In Rude Mechs performer Ellie McBride's delivery, Timon's death was dismissed brusquely before her warm invitation that the two friends join her. The revelation of Timon's final thoughts directly follows the reconciliation of Cee Cee and Braymount, and the immediate deflation of his memory by one of his only steadfast friends suggests that, for Timon, his epitaph was true. His was a flawed life, seeking meaning through grandiosity but incapable of bridging the distance he created. His final words reveal a deep-seated paranoia and contempt for those around him. He believes the world to be hateful because he was capable of nothing but disdain.

Shakespeare and Middleton's Timon is unable to write an epitaph that conveys the vulnerability that drove him from Athens. Lynn's Timon, however, finally reveals how pitiable he feels himself to be, projecting the bitterness he held within him onto those who were unable to do anything but accept his gifts. As an epitaph to the play *Timon of Athens*, *Fixing Timon* fulfills what commendatory words often attempt: it creates for us a satisfying narrative of a play that, flaws and all, tried to do and say something important, and it celebrates that effort. Lynn and the Rude Mechs, rather than merely accruing a debt to Shakespeare and Middleton, offer a performance that entertains, refines, and critiques. Adaptation at its best should always produce this kind of excess.[8]

Notes

1. See Christian Smith's "Translation and Influence: Dorothea Tieck's Translations of Shakespeare."
2. Cf. Smith 2018.
3. See, for example, Bailey 2011, Gillen 2018, Hershinow 2017, Kahn 1987, Kolb 2018.
4. See Eric Mallin's "Charity and Whoredom in *Timon of Athens*."
5. *Character* is a contested term. *Pace* Aaron Kunin (Kunin 2019), whom I largely agree with, I will suggest for brevity's sake merely that a character is someone whose features extend beyond their job description. See also Elizabeth Fowler's *Literary Character*; Fowler defines character as "how literature expresses the human figure in its social form" (Fowler 2003, 28).
6. Parenthetical references are to The New Cambridge Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, edited by Karl Klein.
7. Cf. Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers" (Marx and Engels 1969).
8. The editors would like to acknowledge the copyediting and markup work of students in Sujata Iyengar's ENGL 4810 class at the University of Georgia in Fall 2019.

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