The Life of Timon of Athens

Timon of Athens is first mentioned in the 1623 First Folio (F1). The play can be dated any time between the latest definite source, North’s translation of Plutarch in 1579, and the publication in F1 in 1623.

Publication Date

Timon of Athens is one of eighteen plays in F1 which had not previously been published. Timon was entered into the Stationers’ Register on 8 November 1623 alongside other plays as “not formerly entred to other men”:


The play is entitled THE LIFE OF TYMON OF ATHENS on the title page but the running title is simply Timon of Athens. Many commentators have followed Chambers who believed that the play was unfinished. The text is very poor, with “many small confusions and inconsistencies”, and may have been an early draft. The verse is uneven and “cannot be the complete and jointed work of Shakespeare”. Several scenes involving Alcibiades have little relevance to the main plot. Characters are inconsistent within the space of a few lines. There are two epitaphs, one of which – probably the first – Shakespeare presumably intended to omit (Oliver).

Performance Date

According to Jowett, the earliest known performance of Timon was in 1674 by Thomas Shadwell. His adaptation, The Manhater, was published in 1678. Soellner suggests that from the evidence of its academic references, the play was intended for performance at the Inns of Court.

Attribution

It is usually proposed that the play was written jointly. Some have argued that Shakespeare revised an existing play by another author (e.g. Wilkins, Chapman or Day). Others believe that Shakespeare's original play was revised by another (e.g. Heywood, Chapman, Middleton or Tourneur). In these suggestions, it is usually accepted that the play was revised (not co-authored) and also unfinished. Although commentators have not consistently divided the play up between Shakespeare and the other author, the usual basis has been a literary judgment as to whether a particular passage was worthy of Shakespeare or not. Oliver (who rejected co-authorship) noted that such divisionists treated the play like a plum pudding, giving all the plums to Shakespeare. Later scholars, e.g. Nuttall and Klein, continued to argue for Shakespeare’s sole authorship and an unfinished play.

Vickers, in a long, vigorous chapter, has studied these arguments about the "unusual mixtures of rhyme, irregular verse, and prose in

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suspect scenes”, concluding that *Timon* was co-authored with Thomas Middleton (1580–1627). About one third of the play is usually allocated to Middleton.5 Dawson and Minton agree, saying: “It is certainly not impossible that they, like the two of us working on this edition, sat down together on occasion and worked through scenes that needed tinkering.”6 It remains possible that the second author revised the unfinished manuscript of the earlier author, without bringing the work to a satisfactory end.

**Sources**

Bullough cites Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* (1579) as one of the principal sources for *Timon*; it was also the principal source for other classical plays: *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The historical Timon is mentioned in ‘The Life of Antony’ and referred to again in ‘The Life of Alcibiades’. Unlike in the other classical plays, here Shakespeare also used a more detailed classical source, Lucian’s Greek dialogue, *Timon the Misanthrope*. Lucian was not translated into English until 1634, so Shakespeare seems to have made use of a Renaissance translation, probably Thomas More’s Latin text in 1506 (with subsequent reprints). Lucian was also adapted into various European versions: Boiardo wrote a play in Italian c. 1487; Pedro Mexia produced a Spanish story in 1542; this was translated into French by Gruget and into English by William Painter as novel 28 in this was translated into French by Gruget and Pedantoius produced a Spanish story in 1542; 1487; Lucian was also adapted into various European versions: Boiardo wrote a play in Italian c. 1487; Pedro Mexia produced a Spanish story in 1542; this was translated into French by Gruget and into English by William Painter as novel 28 in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1566). Shakespeare seems to have confined his use of Lucian to *Timon*. Jonson, on the other hand, made extensive use of the Greek satirist.7

Most commentators now accept that Shakespeare used an anonymous play extant in manuscript and known now as *Old Timon* (Dyce MS 52, Victoria and Albert Museum). Chambers believes that Greek quotations and other pedantries suggest an academic audience for *Old Timon*, but that Shakespeare is unlikely to have seen it. Bullough notes the similarities between *Old Timon* and a play called *Pedantius* performed at Cambridge in 1580. The date of *Old Timon* is uncertain: Chambers hazards 1581–1590; Bulman (1974: 126–7) argued for a date of 1601, which the V&A accept. Since the *Old Timon* mentions a London inn called ‘The Seven Stars’, not known to have existed before 1602, some scholars have dated *Old Timon* post 1602. The influence of *Old Timon* on Shakespeare’s play is apparent in the detailed treatment of Timon’s generosity: both the *Old Timon* and Shakespeare’s play give more prominence to Timon’s life before he becomes bankrupt; Plutarch and Lucian only mention it in passing. Similarly two important details, the faithful steward and the mock banquet, are in the *Old Timon* but not in Lucian or Plutarch. Chambers believes that Shakespeare is unlikely to have had access to this manuscript (or its performance in academe), suggesting that both plays depended on another source, now lost. Bulman (1974), however, has argued that the *Old Timon* greatly influenced Shakespeare and most subsequent commentators have been thus persuaded.

Shaheen discusses (1999: 242) the many Biblical references in *Timon*, compared to the relatively few allusions in the sources. He notes that at 4.3.172–3, the interchange between Timon (“Yes thou spok’st well of me.”) and Alcibiades (“Call’s thou that harm?”) recalls the wording of the Geneva Bible at Luke 6.26: “Wo be to you when all men speake well of you.” Other versions use the word “praise”. Allusions to English literary works are rare, but include Lyly’s *Campaspe* (1584). Shakespeare himself refers to the historical Timon in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (usually dated 1590–5).8

**Orthodox Date**

Chambers suggested 1608 since *Timon of Athens* “clearly belongs to the tragic period” which he proposes as 1605–1609. He asserts that since Shakespeare was “busy with *Lear* and *Macbeth*” in 1605–6, *Timon* can be dated in 1608, alongside *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, other classical plays based on Plutarch. Bullough concurs. Oliver agrees with Chambers but observes that Shakespeare may have worked on *Timon* spasmodically and over a period of time, a theory he calls “plausible but difficult to substantiate”. Soellner concurs (1959: xlii) with 1607–8 but “would not be surprised” if it turned out to be earlier or later (1979: 201). Maxwell believes that *Timon* precedes *Lear* and prefers a date c. 1605, while Wells & Taylor assign 1604. Against Chambers’ assumptions, three observations may be noted:
there is no external evidence of “a tragic period” in 1606–09;
not all tragedies belong to this “tragic period” anyway (e.g. Romeo, Titus and Richard III are usually dated to the 1590s);
another classical tragedy based on Plutarch, Julius Caesar, is usually dated c. 1599.

Furthermore, we could argue that although Timon is placed among the tragedies in F1, it does not seem to have been intended for that position, or even considered as a tragedy. Since the title page calls the play The Life of Timon of Athens, it might have more affinities with Merchant of Venice (usually dated c. 1596) in its concern for “affectional and monetary bonds . . . material and intangible goods” (Katherine Maus, in the introduction to the play in the Norton Shakespeare). Bulman, however, argues for a date c. 1601, due to similarities with Jonson’s ‘comical satires’ (1974: 126). Wiggins dates this play to 1607.

Internal Orthodox Evidence

Various metrical and other stylistic tests have placed Timon of Athens as among the later plays in the canon. However, as there is doubt about the sole authorship, tests remain unreliable.

External Orthodox Evidence

Bevington argued (1999) for a general comparison between James I and Timon, but this view has not attracted many adherents. Dixon Wecter attempted to link events in the play to the treatment of Essex, generous nobleman, let down by friends with a later rebellion. He suggested that the play dated from 1605. Sandra Billington argued for an earlier date about 1600, coinciding with Essex’s fall from grace. She argued for allusions to Timon in Marston’s Jack Drum’s Entertainment (1600). The Prologue to Jack Drum states that the audience will have to endure “mouldy fopperies of stale Poetry, / Vnpossible drie musty Fictions”, which possibly refers to a recent production of Shakespeare’s play. She suggests that when Essex, under house arrest in May 1600, wrote to Elizabeth that “shortly they will play me upon the stage”, he was alluding to a forthcoming production of Timon of Athens. She believes that this production was unsuccessful, and therefore more likely to have been in 1600 (when Middleton was untried) than 1605 when he was more successful. Bulman argues (1974) for a similar date based on similarities with Poetaster and other plays of Jonson around this time as well as the parallels in the legal references between Twelfth Night (performed at the Middle Temple in 1602) and Timon, as well as Old Timon.

Oxfordian Dating

The usual dating from an Oxfordian perspective is between 1592 and 1604, when Oxford, the disillusioned and impoverished nobleman, withdrew from fashionable society and presumably devoted his time to embellishing his plays. He was described by Chapman as being, during his youth, as “liberal as the sun”, but by 1586 he was virtually bankrupt. The later action of Timon’s isolation and exile accord well with Oxford’s later life. It is likely that Oxford never intended the play to be performed, perhaps to be confined to a reading group. It would thus have been left among his papers at his death, later revised to some extent by Middleton, but not even finished by the second author.

E. T. Clark proposes an earlier date because of the dramatist’s use of Plutarch. Oxford had bought a copy of Amyot’s French translation in 1569, ten years before North’s translation. She dates an original version to 1576 when The History of the Solitary Knight was performed at court. This play, however, may have been based on Chaucer’s ‘Knight’s Tale’.

Conclusion

The play can be dated anywhere between the latest source, North’s translation of Plutarch in 1579 (possibly Amyot’s translation of Plutarch in 1559) and the publication in the First Folio in 1623.

Notes

2. Soellner (1979: 148) suggests that the appeal of Timon to young lawyers would have suited it
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Other Cited Works


Bulman, James C., Jr. “Shakespeare’s Use of the Timon Comedy”, Shakespeare Survey 29 (1976): 103–16


Soellner, Rolf (ed.), Timon of Athens: Shakespeare’s Pessimistic Tragedy, Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1979


