Revisiting Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* with Leo Paul S. de Alvarez

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That Leo Paul S. de Alvarez was attracted to Shakespeare's *The Life of Timon of Athens* is little wonder, for its focus is on the relationship between political regimes and nature, a theme common in de Alvarez's scholarship and classroom lectures.[1] The fact that the regime in question here is ancient Athens only adds to the appeal. Though given far less attention than many of Shakespeare's other plays, even among those who study politics and literature, de Alvarez's essay highlights its importance for understanding the Bard's appreciation for politics. Whether playing the role of philanthropist for Athens or misanthrope against Athens, Shakespeare never allows us to forget that the title character is *of Athens*. Timon cannot be understood without consideration of the city that raised him, honored him, shamed him, called upon him for help, and then lamented his death. For the first half of the play, Timon lives in what we may follow Plato's Socrates in calling the allegorical cave, and during the

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[1] Leo Paul S. de Alvarez, "Nature and the City: Timon of Athens," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, second edition, eds. John Alvis and Thomas G. West, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 177–202.

second half he lives in a natural cave in the woods. Readers, therefore, have much to gain in following de Alvarez's emphasis upon politics and nature in his fruitful interpretation of the play.

One of the great virtues of Professor de Alvarez's treatment of *Timon* is that he does not begin with the assumption, as so many others do, that Shakespeare never got around to revising it. Instead, de Alvarez analyzes the story without explaining away its more baffling elements by suggesting that it was unfinished, as is common among scholars. The simplicity of the plot brings into sharp focus ancient Athens and "the unpleasantness and harshness of the political itself."[2] Behind the façade of wealth and friendship lies the bitter reality of selfishness and self-interest. We can imagine characters in the play being charmed by displays of bounty and opulence, but as the audience cannot itself take part in the banquets and pleasantries of the stage, we have little reason to be enchanted ourselves. As such, we look upon Athens in much the same way that we look upon the cave—from the outside. Nothing in the play distracts us from or lures us away from this position. As a regime, Athens honors beauty, but in this play—more so than most of his others—Shakespeare does not allow the audience to share in its pursuit. We cannot help but see pleasure, wealth, and fame as mere shadows of beauty, however much they are relentlessly chased by the Athenians.

On the literal level, the story of *Timon* is about a wealthy man who generously shares his opulence with his fellow citizens, people he considers his friends. When his money runs out and he needs assistance, he discovers, to his great dismay, that his compatriots do not share his notion of civic friendship, at least not to the extent that they are willing to act as benefactors rather than beneficiaries. Prior to his coffers running dry, Timon is a patron to nearly everyone who appeals to his generosity. He does not simply give his money away but rather, as the opening scene depicts, he pays full price for paintings, poems, jewels, and whatever else is offered to him in the name of beauty; he pays a friend's debts and sponsors the marriage of his servant; and he opens his home to the public and puts on a lavish feast with live entertainment. Such profligacy cannot last, but Timon ignores his faithful steward Flavius's warnings to take greater care of his accounts. To Timon's mind, limitations on spending imply a limitation on friendship and the common pursuit of beauty:

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[2] de Alvarez, "Nature and the City: Timon of Athens," 177.

> 'O you gods,'
> think I, 'what need we have any friends if we should ne'er have
> need of 'em? They were the most needless creatures living,
> should we ne'er have use for 'em, and would most resemble
> sweet instruments hung up in cases, that keeps their sounds to
> themselves' … (I.ii.89–94)

Timon's view of friendship may be praised by the city, but it is not generally shared. When Timon finds himself in need of help to repay his own debts, those he considers his closest friends refuse to offer any aid. Timon is shocked. To be abandoned by his fellow Athenians is to be abandoned by his city itself. Deep in despair, he leaves Athens and spends his final days cursing the city that reared him, hoping for its fall. He continues giving his material wealth away, this time gold that he has discovered in the ground, but now with the intention of doing harm to his city and fellow citizens. His early speeches praising the Athenian way of life are replaced by speeches denouncing the brutality that lies beneath the city's peaceful veneer.

Timon's conception of friendship at the outset of the play is tightly bound to his understanding of Athenian citizenship. Indeed, he makes no distinction between being a good citizen of Athens and being a good human being. As de Alvarez explains, "Timon looks upon citizenship as linking men together in a special bond of love—all citizens cannot but be friends. The private bond of friendship is made one with the public bond of citizenship."[3] Timon's praise for his fellow Athenians is genuine, extending even to the churlish philosopher Apemantus whose company no one else welcomes. Timon's sincerity, however, blinds him to the harsh reality that he is surrounded by flatterers who care far more for his money than they do his person. The bond that unites Athens is thus different than Timon imagines. Money does not exist to extend benefits to friends; rather, Athenians feign friendship in order to be recipients of their neighbors' goods. They are willing to pursue beauty so long as someone else is footing the bill.

While Timon's misunderstanding of his compatriots' true motives proves disastrous to him personally, his mistake poses no direct threat to the city, at least not initially. Athens has much to gain from citizens like Timon whose liberality reinforces the city's love of beauty—at least insofar as he does not push the principle too far. So long as he can be generous, the city will have reason to praise him. Not all Athenians, of course, are as romantic as Timon in believing that Athenians live in mutual accord with one another or that all private wealth should be used for common benefit. Their love of beauty leads them to take advantage of Timon's generosity. They are far more realist than Timon, for they have not forgotten the distinction between the city and nature; they understand that the wealth and pleasure they enjoy cannot exist outside the city. The gold that Timon later finds in the woods, for example, is of no value outside the city's walls and is only attractive because it can be easily transported back to Athens. So long as wealthy citizens like Timon ignore the distinction between the natural and the political, they are of great use to the city, helping to propagate the ennobling image of selfless civil friendship—but again only insofar as the principle is not taken to its logical limits.

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[3] de Alvarez, "Nature and the City: Timon of Athens," 179.

By contrast, those who recognize that human greed does far more than friendship to bind Athens together threaten to expose the harsh reality upon which the city is founded. Whereas Timon is useful to the city, the philosopher Apemantus and the captain Alcibiades are dangerous. Both have clearer understandings of the relationship between nature and politics than does Timon. In the case of Apemantus, much like Socrates in Plato's dialogues, the philosopher is a threat to the city because of his intellectual honesty and his devoted search for the good life. All regimes make a claim about the good, and philosophic probing of the claim may undermine the city's stability and vitality. Such a person may be accused, again like Socrates, of corrupting the youth and of not worshiping the city's gods. In short, philosophy is problematic from the standpoint of the city because of its tendency to look outside the political for truth. In this regard, philosophy differs from poetry, which tends to reinforce the regime's identity by perpetuating the city's myths (I.i.223–224). Thus, the poet in *Timon* takes his comfortable place next to other Athenian citizens at the banquet table, but Apemantus the philosopher refuses to join in the revelries or pretend that Timon's extravagance is truly virtuous.

Likewise, Alcibiades challenges the city when he pleads for the life of one of his officers who has been accused of murder and is sentenced to die. Alcibiades reminds the senators that Athens enjoys peace because of the military's violence toward enemies:

> Hard fate! He might have died in war.
> My lords, if not for any parts in him—
> Though his right arm might purchase his own time
> And be in debt to none—yet more to move you,
> Take my deserts to his and join 'em both.
> And for I know
> Your reverend ages love security,
> I'll pawn my victories, all my honour to you
> Upon his good returns. (III.vi.73–84)

Emphasizing the senator's love of security serves a double purpose. On one hand, he is framing the argument in terms of a loan, and thereby speaking in a language that cuts to the very heart of the Athenian regime's mode of promoting beauty by the lending and borrowing of money. He is asking the senators to lend the officer more time to live in exchange for further protection to the city. Alcibiades is willing to co-sign on this loan as an assurance. But *security* can also be understood more literally here to mean the security of Athens, which is necessary to preserve the opulent living that takes place within the city's walls. The senators are unpersuaded by Alcibiades's words, probably because murder is more shocking and immediate than the threat of violence from Athenian enemies. They promptly banish Alcibiades from Athens.

Though both challenge the city's devotion to beauty, de Alvarez helpfully demonstrates the important differences between Apemantus and Alcibiades. To put it simply, Apemantus threatens the city by comparing its beliefs to a higher truth, and Alcibiades threatens it by looking beneath it to its violent foundations. As de Alvarez puts it, Apemantus's life is "an imitation of the gods" whereas Alcibiades "is the one man in the entire play who is able to act in accordance with the beastly nature of man."[4] Those imitating the gods and those imitating the beasts will never be content as obedient citizens of the city.[5] Both will seek to rule, but in different ways. Whereas the beast must rule through fear, the philosopher must rely upon persuasion, the difficult calling of the philosopher that Apemantus cannot fulfill throughout the play. De Alvarez focuses our attention on the scene in the woods in which Apemantus attempts to lead Timon back to the city to live a more moderate life. Timon, however, is not inclined to listen to the philosopher and Apemantus's efforts end with Timon throwing rocks at him, driving him away (IV.iii.163). It seems that even among citizens like Timon, the beast is inclined to prevail.

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[4] de Alvarez, "Nature and the City: Timon of Athens," 193–194.

[5] The one exception to this for the philosopher would be in the best regime.

Alcibiades is perfectly capable of making arguments as well, but, unlike the philosopher, he can use force when his words are not heeded. After his banishment, the captain returns with his men to sack his city and take it over. Rather than rocks, Timon throws him gold when they encounter one another in the woods because gold is useful in Alcibiades's efforts to destroy the city. But rather than destroy the city completely, Alcibiades punishes it, and then establishes himself as the new ruler.

According to de Alvarez, the play's ending indicates that Shakespeare agreed with Thucydides and Aeschylus that the historical Athens made a grave mistake by not turning over rule to Alcibiades.[6] If they had done so, they would have likely won the Peloponnesian War and gone on to dominate the Mediterranean world in much the same way as Rome.[7] In the play's closing lines Alcibiades says,

> Bring me into your city,
> 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.
> Let our drums strike. (V.v.86–90)

As de Alvarez points out, Shakespeare's Alcibiades is refounding Athens, and in doing so is moderating the city's ruling principle, the love of beauty, and thereby discouraging other Athenians from becoming like Timon or his flatterers. The new Athens will not solely honor beauty, but oscillate between beauty in peace and honor in war. Moderation is to be found in the bringing together of opposite principles. De Alvarez explains, "Alcibiadean Athens would not remain at rest, for she would understand the harshness of political life and the necessity of acquisition."[8] The political, in other words, would be more firmly rooted in the natural, presumably making it less necessary to maintain mythical pretexts about human nature in order to bind citizens together.

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[6] De Alvarez points us to Aristophanes, *Frogs*, II. 1431–1433; and *Peloponnesian War* VIII.97. He also references Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 227, n .89.

[7] In remarks that he prepared for the 2011 Midwest Political Science Association Convention, George Anastaplo makes special mention of de Alvarez's essay and how "Alcibiades might have best been used to permit Athens to deal sensibly with the grim challenges of the Peloponnesian War." See his "Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, and Philosophy: A Preliminary Inquiry," in *Shakespeare and the Body Politic*, Bernard J. Dobski and Dustin Gish, eds., (Lanham, ML: Lexington Books, 2013), 189–195.

But on de Alvarez's account, even Alcibiadean Athens cannot be maintained without some image of the political surpassing nature. De Alvarez claims that, in the end, it is Timon's death that supplies the city—or more properly speaking, the city's new founder—with such an image. De Alvarez refers to Timon's death as "self-sufficient," presumably referring to the fact that Timon did not depend upon anyone to bury him, to lay his gravestone, or to write his epitaph. The soldier who finds the gravestone cannot read, so he makes an image of the epitaph with wax and takes it to Alcibiades, "An aged interpreter, though young in days" (V.iv.6). The soldier indicates that his captain can both read and understand human language; he will know what to make of Timon's last words. The epitaph reads,

> Here lies a wretched corpse,
> Of wretched soul bereft.
> Seek not my name. A plague consume
> You wicked caitiffs left!
> Her lie I, Timon, who alive
> All living men did hate.
> Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass
> And stay not here thy gait. (V.v.71-78)

Alcibiades's reaction to these words indicate regret that Timon should have died before being reconciled to his city, although it is unclear if Timon would have welcomed reconciliation, even under Alcibiades's new regime. Alcibiades's final remark about Timon is that he shall be remembered. But why? De Alvarez ends his analysis of the play by suggesting that "self-sufficiency is not possible in political life but is made seemingly possible through the conceit of Timon's grave," leading him to ask, “does the new Athens, which would appear to have to be an imperial Athens, require an image of the self-sufficient life in order to be ennobled?”[9] These are Professor de Alvarez’s closing words on the subject. He ends with a question.

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[8] de Alvarez, "Nature and the City: Timon of Athens," 200.

I take it that de Alvarez’s question is not just about the new Athens, but about all political regimes. Does politics require some image of the self-sufficient life in order to be ennobled? Do citizens have to be turned away from the violence at their city’s foundation so that they might have an honorable reason for offering their allegiance to the regime? Alcibiades is taking Athens by force, and will bring the city to heel by decimating it—killing a tenth of its citizens by lot—but is this enough to maintain the regime going forward? Is the possibility of expansion and empire enough? Is something more needed for Athens, and, by like reasoning, for all regimes?

We might further ask what types of images can be relied upon to ennoble political communities? De Alvarez persuasively argues that Alcibiades will moderate the Athenian attachment to beauty, the principle to which Timon was devoted to an extreme. Certainly beauty is an image that ennobles regimes, and yet it also lends itself to an extreme in need of moderation. What then is Alcibiades referring to when he says that Timon will be remembered? If Alcibiades is going to moderate Athens’s love of beauty, Timon will have to be remembered for both his philanthropy and his later misanthropy. He will be an example of what happens when one pursues a principle too far, without moderation or prudence. He will be juxtaposed, in other words, to the reformer of Athens, Alcibiades, who changed Athens rather than being changed by it. Timon’s epitaph offers Alcibiades the chance to offer an ennobling image of a self-sufficient man, but it seems to me that it is not Timon who will be the exemplar of that image, but Alcibiades. Whatever Timon intends to offer through his death, it will be transformed by Alcibiades as part of the refounding.

To elaborate on this point, it might be useful to compare *Timon* to Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. Plutarch, one of the great sources of Shakespeare’s material and thinking, compares the lives of Alcibiades and Coriolanus, both of whom were banished by their cities and thereafter threatened to destroy their former homes. Rome is every bit as dependent on Coriolanus’s militaristic might as Athens is on Alcibiades but resents him greatly in times of peace. So intolerable is Coriolanus to the city, and to the commoners in particular, that he is dismissed from its service as soon as peace seems to be well established. But Rome's enemies are more than willing to aid Coriolanus when he swears to obliterate the city that reared him. Just as Athens in *Timon* must act quickly to save itself from the wrath of Alcibiades, Rome tries everything it can think of to appease Coriolanus's anger and to satiate his appetite for revenge.

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[9] de Alvarez, “Nature and the City: Timon of Athens,” 200.

Unlike Alcibiades, however, Coriolanus cannot be satisfied. He will not forgive Rome nor allow it to continue to live. His friends and even his wife are unable to move him. Not until his mother, Volumnia, makes her appeal to Coriolanus's honor is the great general willing to spare Rome and make peace. But when he reveals his plans for peace to Rome's enemies, they call him a traitor and murder him. Volumnia, meanwhile, returns to Rome in triumph. She is called the patroness and "life of Rome" (V.v.1). She has succeeded not only in saving the city, but in moderating its principled love of honor, which animated the early republic and produced dangerous figures such as her son. Just as Lucritia's suicide set in motion the republic, Volumnia's taming of her son signifies the tempering of the Roman regime. Rome will continue to love honor, just as Athens will beauty, but in a moderated form. To the extent that she has helped refound Rome, Volumnia has more in common with Alcibiades than her son does, at least in Shakespeare's telling of the stories.

Rather than being like Alcibiades, Coriolanus is like Timon. Both personify the leading principle of their regime taken to an extreme. Coriolanus understands that Rome loves the honor associated with martial virtue and exemplifies it to such an extent that he has more in common with the leading generals of Rome's enemies than most Romans. His love of honor makes him incapable of demonstrating civic friendship with all but a small circle of his compatriots. Timon, for his part, represents the Athenian love of beauty taken to such an extreme that he is willing to spend all his money, and go into great debt, in the name of promoting beautiful things. Both are tragic figures because they end up being rejected by the cities that have raised them, educated them, shaped them, and initially honored them. The rejection is necessary because in both cases the political regime cannot maintain itself when its principles are pushed to their outer limits.

The problem with Timon is that he moves from one pole to the other. He goes from extreme philanthropy to extreme misanthropy. Neither position is tenable for political life. Apemantus and Alcibiades both recognize this, and both provide the opportunity for moderation. Apemantus's attempt is by way of philosophy, but his appeals fall on deaf ears. Much like Socrates, his fellow citizens do not know what to make of him. He provokes them, but is easily dismissed as churlish and cynical. He appears to oppose the Athenian way of life early in the play, but then defends Athens against Timon in the second half. If Apemantus is misanthropic, as several characters in the play think of him, his hatred of mankind is far more moderate than Timon's. It is more likely, however, that Apemantus is not against humanity or even against Athens. Rather, he is attached and loyal to Athens, in no small part because the Athenian regime tolerates philosophy, and even unintentionally encourages it. If the Athenian principle is the love of beauty, then the philosopher is the one that seeks the beautiful most intensely. Whereas Timon believes he can best support beauty through patronage, Apemantus pursues it through reason and dialogue. He sees that most Athenians are attached to the shadows of beauty rather than beauty itself, and constantly tries to get them to see the errors of their way. But like the prisoners in the cave, Athenian citizens are not easily persuaded. Perhaps Apemantus's cynicism is the result of his realization that philosophy is unable to moderate the passions of the many. Only one character in the play shares Apemantus's views, a character simply called the fool.

Alcibiades, however, does succeed in moderating the Athenian love of beauty. But rather than depending upon philosophy and dialogue, he refounds Athens with military force. It is the crisis of apparent annihilation that puts the city in a position to alter its leading principle. Beastly though he may be, Alcibiades is savvy enough to know that without competing principles, the city will continue to nurture tragic figures like Timon. Previously Athens has loved peace; henceforth she will love peace and war, with outlets for both beauty and violence. Timon was once considered a noble citizen; henceforth his epitaph will remind Athenians of the danger of ignoring the violent and nasty side of human nature.

Timon will likely remain a too-often-overlooked Shakespearean play, perhaps in part because it is offered too plainly from a philosophical standpoint. It will not please most people, just as Apemantus does not please most Athenians. Athenians prefer poetry, and they are not alone in doing so. But what if poetry can be made to persuade citizens and their regimes to be more moderate? If people will not listen to the philosopher, and if poets will not take greater care with what they produce, political life will forever depend upon those like Alcibiades to bleed cities in order to moderate them. Unlike the unnamed poet who contributes to Timon's tragic fall, Shakespeare's poetry can moderate rather than radicalize political principles.

And yet Shakespeare's efforts will have little more effect than Apemantus's without good teachers helping students interpret them. Most of this teaching happens in classrooms and around seminar tables, but a well written essay can be an opportunity for a teacher to extend his influence beyond time and place. His essay on *Timon* is but one example of Professor de Alvarez's ability to instruct us about political life by interpreting the great poetry of Shakespeare.