

A nature but infected : Plague and Embodied Transformation in *Timon of Athens*

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1. In 'The Theatre and the Plague', the 1934 essay that features as the opening salvo in Antonin Artaud's book *The Theatre and its Double*, the chaotic, incendiary power of the plague is harnessed to express Artaud's desire for a theatre that assaults the minds and bodies of its spectators. The process of acting, in particular, is figured as a kind of infection:

The state of the victim who dies without material destruction, with all the stigmata of an absolute and almost abstract disease upon him, is identical with the state of the actor entirely penetrated by feelings that do not benefit or even relate to his real condition. Once launched in fury, an actor needs infinitely more virtue to stop himself committing a crime, than a murderer needs to perpetrate his crime. (16)

Artaud advocates the cathartic purging and affective capacity of the stage; the plague is a psychic entity transmitted by almost invisible means and to him theatre is itself a plague, an infectious madness, capable of infecting and transforming both mind and body (17). Above all, he argues, we must agree stage acting is a delirium like the plague, and is communicable (18).¹ Despite his radical tone, the ideas being espoused by Artaud were far from new. In fact, his formulation of theatre-as-plague harnesses centuries-old anxieties about the dangers of acting, sourced from Plato and St. Augustine (the latter is directly cited by Artaud), seeing in the supposed negative power of theatricality an opportunity for revelatory change.² Indeed, he could virtually be quoting verbatim from the Renaissance antitheatricalists whose repetitive puritanical ravings hounded the playmaking enterprise throughout the entire period in which the business of theatre thrived in London's teeming suburbs. Seemingly exploiting the constant threat of playhouse closures that loomed whenever plague deaths increased, the authors of antitheatrical tracts rhetorically associate playing and plague at every opportunity.

2. Most pertinent to the present study is the work of John Rainolds, whose *The Overthrow of Stage-Playes*, published in 1599, was a compilation of the author's correspondence from the Oxford debates of 1592.³ Convinced of the perilous nature of acting, Rainolds is principally concerned with

the hurt which it breedeth, principally to the *actors*, in whom the earnest care of lively representing lewd persons doeth worke a great impression of waxing like unto them; next, to the *spectators*, whose maners are corrupted by seeing and hearing such matters so expressed. (O4v)

The impression that personation leaves on the actors' being is explicitly figured in Rainolds's treatise as an infection: the lively representation of lewd persons corrupts the actors' body and mind and, crucially, this state is transferable to the spectators, who are contaminated merely by watching. Later, he paints teaching the craft of personating as dangerous, because in acting "[t]he venom and poison whereof goeth about to spread it selfe abroad through more parts of your body by means that you likewise instill the same humour into the rest of your players, their teachers and instructors, and in conclusion your whole house" (E4v-F1r). The construction of acting as contagion recalls the early modern understanding of plague as a venomous poison spreading through the air and invading the porous bodies of its victims. The metaphorisation of theatre as plague is confirmed in his conclusion where he laments "how the manner of all spectators commonlie are hazarded by the contagion of theatricall sights" (X4r).

3. It is the contention of this paper that such correlations between theatre and plague, between acting and contagious infection, were circulating in early modern culture not just in the work of the enemies of the play-making enterprise, the antitheatricalists, but in the plays themselves. In the context of these correlations, the paper considers the significance of the protagonist's extreme transformation from philanthropy to misanthropy in *Timon of Athens*. After his precipitous change, Timon spends the second half of the play in a kind of disease-induced frenzy, an impassioned delirium of fury, ranting some of the most vitriolic speeches in all of Shakespeare. Timon's metamorphosis divides the play into two seemingly irreconcilable halves and often leads critics to dismiss it as fragmentary, psychologically incoherent, and possibly even unfinished. Yet this radical emotional shift is not merely psychological—it is also physical, repeatedly rendered in the language of the play as an external manifestation of changes happening inside Timon's body. Critics that suggest Timon's identity shift is too absolute and abrupt for an audience to accept fail to account for the numerous instances where his transformation is foreshadowed in the play, and ignore the conscious organization of onstage and offstage fictional spaces that affect a more gradual and comfortable transition in performance. Moreover, Timon's transformation from philanthropist to misanthropist is constructed as an imitation of another character, and becomes the butt of a metatheatrical joke. That character, Apemantus, accuses him of imitating his misanthropic demeanor in a manner that recalls the antitheatrical identification of theatre as plague, identifying Timon's impersonation as "a nature but infected" (4.3.202). In Apemantus's confrontation with Timon, the audience sees not only a dialogic exchange between fictional characters, but also a contest between theatrical figures in which the conflicting and temporal notions of role and identity are simultaneously asserted and questioned. Through an examination of the embodiment of Timon's transformation in relation to the play's preoccupation with theatricality and disease, this paper will argue that not only is the change entirely consistent with early modern medical understandings of the body's impact on the passions, but that *Timon of Athens* deliberately stages antitheatrical fears about the plague of acting even as it parodically dismantles them.

Plague, Annihilation and Transformation

4. The transformative capacity of the plague was certainly recognized by the abundance of plague pamphlets that circulated during major epidemics. Writing without the benefit of the scientific understanding of plague's microbiological transmission, of fleas and their rat hosts, and of the deadly bacterium *Yersinia Pestis*, early modern plague observers generally subscribed to the theory of an invisible, venomous vapour in the air, that, whether caused by divine influence, malignant astrological conjunction, or stinking pools of stagnant water, was thought to enter the body through the pores of the victim's skin, corrupting the delicate humoural balance therein.⁴ Thomas Lodge's *A Treatise of the Plague*, published during the devastating epidemic of 1603, attests that the Plague proceedeth from the venomous corruption of the humors and spirits of the body, infected by euil vapours, which haue the propertie to alter mans bodie, and poyson his spirits after a straunge and daungerous qualitie. He argues that the plague is communicable by everyday means like breath and touch, and that the infected has an euil and vitious disposition engendering one and the same disposition in him to whom it is communicated (B2v).⁵ Once the contagion takes hold of an individual, its virulent affect on the body is devastating, inside and out. The body's boundaries are transgressed: copious amounts of vitious matter and noxious fluid streams from various orifices and vulnerable pores, internal organs swell, the senses become inflamed, the flesh changes colour and dissolves, the victim experiences extremes of heat and cold simultaneously, while engulfed with excruciating pain. Lodge lists the changeable and, at times, contradictory symptoms of the plague in the infected individual, including:

alienation, and frenzie, blewnesse and blacknesse appearing about the sores and carbuncles, and after their appearances the sodaine vanishings of the same, cold in the extreame partes, and intollerable heate in the inwarde, vnquenchnable thirst, continually soundings, urines white, and crude, or red, troubled and blacke: Colde swet about the forehead and face; crampes, blacknesse in the excrements of the body, stench, and blewnes, the flux of the belly, with weaknesse of the heart, shortnes of breath, and great stench of the same, lacke of sleepe, and appetite to eate, profound sleepe, chaunging of colour in the face, exchanged to palenesse, blacknesse, or blewnesse, cogitation or great vnquietnes. (C3)⁶

Lodge reveals how the disease was seen to violate all facets of the body; turning its victims a myriad of colours and inducing feelings of alienation, frenzy and insomnia as it reduced them to an insubstantial mass.⁷ Physicians like Stephen Bradwell also noted that plague patients were prone to extreme changes in demeanour, identifying Loss of memorie Foolish behaviour Delirium, or Frenzy, as advanced symptoms of the disease (G1). Victims were known to wander the streets raving and dazed. In *The Wonderfull Yeare* (1603), Thomas Dekker captured the madness and terror of the plague-stricken city when he advised that if one were to venture out into still and melancholy streets at night one would surely encounter the loude grones of rauing sicke men (C3v). As Colin Jones has argued, victims of the plague were aggressively reduced, sometimes within the space of a single day, to a formless shell of their former selves: Racked with extreme, swiftly changing, paradoxical and poly-chronic symptoms, the sufferer lost the outward appearances of identity to

become the hapless site of a fluidity transcending the normal boundaries of the body (97). Plague transformed the behaviour and outward appearance of its victims, leaving little vestige of their previous identities. When someone succumbed to the plague everything associated with them – from clothing to the most meagre of possessions – was destroyed; their houses were purified, and virtually no trace of their existence remained (Slack 19).

5. The threat of social dissolution in early modern culture was usually expressed as a fear of indistinction. René Girard has argued that in literature and myth, plague has generally been presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities. The reciprocal affinity between plague and social disorder, he suggests, lies in the plague's perceived ability to disrupt categories of difference, particularly social hierarchies, which are first transgressed, then abolished (Plague 136). The distinctiveness of the plague, he states, is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness. The plague overcomes all obstacles, disregards all frontiers. All life, finally, is turned into death, which is the supreme undifferentiation (Plague 137). The plague was a violent eliminator of difference among the living – young/old, male/female, rich/poor – erasing all signs of individuality; reducing everything to its own image of death. Girard also identifies a recurrent pattern that develops during epidemics, involving a series of inversions of normative hierarchies that prefigures the collapse of social order:

The plague will turn the honest man into a thief, the virtuous man into a lecher, the prostitute into a saint. Friends murder and enemies embrace. Wealthy men are made poor by the ruin of their business. Riches are showered upon paupers who inherit in a few days the fortunes of many distant relatives. (Plague 136)

The sudden experience of seemingly indiscriminate death *en masse* induces radical transformations in the identity of individuals.

6. The Girardian notion of a chaotic undifferentiation, and its association with contagion, can be witnessed in many English texts of the period in which plague is a major theme or concern.⁸ Thomas Dekker, in *Newes from Graues-end* (1604), reports of the levelling impact plague had on one wealthy individual:

There's one, who in the morne with gold
Could have built Castells: now hee's made
A pillow to a wretch, that prayde
For half-penny Almes, (with broken lim)
The Begger now is aboue him;
So he that yesterday was clad
In purple robes, and houely had
Euen at his fingers becke, the fees
Of bared heads, and bending knees,
Rich mens fawnings, poore mens praiers
 loe, (now hee's taken
By death,) he lies of all forsaken. (E3v-E4r)

The transmission of plague, whereby breath and touch were believed to carry infection, forced familial hierarchies to be subverted. Normal modes of

communication and domestic interaction were suspended. Dekker here neatly articulates this frozen, silenced, fearful community lamenting the fact that Owne brother does owne brother scorne, / The trembling Father is vndone, / Being once but breath d on by his sonne (E2v). The disease overtook households, decimating entire families; and individuals waited in paralysed horror for the contagion to reach them.

7. *Timon of Athens* offers a similar but perhaps more despairing and vehement evocation of plague as chaotic undifferentiation. The play is suffused with disease imagery, containing no less than fourteen uses of the word 'plague' and its variant forms. The text is also filled with dozens of references to and metaphorical applications of the language of illness and medicine. After Timon leaves Athens for the sanctity and isolation of the nearby woods, forsaking his former philanthropy and adopting a misanthropic identity, he proceeds to spit a series of rancorous tirades at the society that betrayed him. His soliloquy outside the walls of Athens becomes a rant in which he calls for a plague-like chaos to reign over the city. This pestilence primarily consists of precisely the kind of catastrophic inversions and behavioural transformations identified by Dekker and Girard:

Matrons, turn incontinent!
Obedience, fail in children! Slaves and fools,
Pluck the grave wrinkled Senate from the bench
And minister in their steads! To general filths
Convert, o th instant, green virginity!
Bankrupts, hold fast!
And cut your trusters throats. Bound servants, steal!
Son of sixteen,
Pluck the lined crutch from thy old limping sire,
With it beat out his brains!
Lust and liberty,
Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
That gainst the stream of virtue they may starve
And drown themselves in riot! (4.1.3-10, 13-15, 25-28)

Youth subverts age, virgins become common whores, the lowly slave overthrows the powerful, bankrupts slaughter their creditors – a litany of disruptive reversals is conjured to crush the Athenian state. Elsewhere in the speech Timon intones that all possible differences be collapsed; all institutional structures be destroyed:

Piety and fear,
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
Domestic awe, night rest, and neighbourhood,
Instruction, manners, mysteries, and trades,
Degrees, observances, customs and laws,
Decline to your confounding contraries
And let confusion live! (4.1.15-21)

The fabric of the social order dissolves as each construct inverts itself, becoming its confounding contrary. Crucially, Timon explicitly characterises this deconstructive process in terms of a contagious epidemic:

Plagues incident to men,
 Your potent and infectious fevers heap
 On Athens, ripe for stroke.
 Itches, blains
 Sow all th' Athenian bosoms, and their crop
 Be general leprosy! Breath infect breath
 That their society, as their friendship, may
 Be merely poison (4.1.21-23, 28-32)⁹

The notion of an infectious, poisoning breath demonstrates Shakespeare's appropriation of the understanding of plague in medical discourse as communicable contagion, making regular modes of social intercourse a deadly exercise. Timon's speech harnesses fear of undifferentiation and fear of plague. Contagious disease is intrinsically connected with processes of social dissolution—the levelling of degree, abandonment of social customs and observances, and the chaotic inversion of hierarchies.

Playing, Contagion and the Passions

8. By the sheer violence and terror it evoked, the plague offered a powerful metaphorical weapon to the antitheatricalists in their war on the players. Artaud's conception of plague and theatre as psychic maladies, with a capacity to infect actor and spectator alike, is striking in its similarity to the arguments repeatedly levelled at the players by antitheatricalists in early modern London. The recent work of Tanya Pollard on drugs and the use of medical and pharmaceutical metaphors in the debates surrounding the early modern stage has convincingly shown that the enemies of theatre were obsessed with the pathological qualities of playing, and that a similar anxiety was expressed in many plays of the period. She provides compelling evidence that "[a] chorus of voices—from both attackers and defenders of the theatre, as well as from playwrights themselves—saw the theatre not only as a vehicle for representing drugs and poisons, but as a kind of drug or poison itself" (9). While Pollard's formulations of theatre-as-drug and theatre-as-poison are undoubtedly among the resounding tropes of antitheatricality, it can be demonstrated that in antitheatrical literature the minds and bodies of the players and spectators were not merely poisoned or altered by the potential narcotic efficacy of theatre, they were *infected* and, crucially, imbued with a powerful capability to infect others, to spread the disease of theatricality with an efficiency as dangerous as any plague epidemic. The frequent use of plague language in antitheatrical tracts is almost entirely unconsidered in Pollard's work even though the discussion occasionally hints at notions of infection and contagion.¹⁰ In part an extension of Pollard's important study, this paper is concerned with the repeated metaphorisation of theatre-as-plague in antitheatrical documentation and in plays like *Timon of Athens*, and argues that the threat of contagion is the most potent anxiety circulating in the debates about theatre at this time, recognized by antitheatricalists and playwrights alike. The consistent association of theatre with lethal epidemic disease transposes fear of theatre as the fear of plague.
9. The puritanical pamphleteers and civic officials obsessively figure the theatre as a kind of Artaudian plague, assaulting mind and body, polluting both the doer and the beholder. ¹¹ In 1564, Edmund Grindal, then bishop of London, suggested that

the playgoers literally took their infection from the impure mouths of the players, when he stated:

ther is no one thinge off late is more lyke to have renewed this contagion, then the practise off an idle sorte off people, I meane these Histriones, common playours; who now daylye, butt speciallye on holydayes, sett vp bylles, whervnto the youthe resorteth excessively, & ther taketh infection: besydes that goddes worde by theyr impure mowthes is prophaned, and turned into scoffes (qtd. in Chambers 4: 267)

The contagiousness of the players' foul breath in this instance is synonymous with the foul language and ideas carried by it: the disease of theatre is here seen as a communicable entity in a sense remarkably similar to Artaud's suggestion that plague and theatre are communicable. To William Rankins, just being near the view of the player's vitious exercise was enough to spread the infectious poison of theatricality into the vaines of their beholders (F1).¹² Like Artaud's psychic entity, the theatrical plague occurs by stealth, the spectators are unconsciously contaminated without their consent or knowledge. Stephen Gosson argued that the body of the spectator is assaulted by a theatrical pestilence, entering through the eyes and ears, which are figured as orifices vulnerable to infection.¹³ But the transference of theatrical disease occurs covertly, even though the spectator can see what is being presented, since the impressions of mind are secretly co[n]ueyed ouer to [the] gazers, which [the] plaiers do cou[n]terfeit on [the] stage (Gosson G4r). Gosson thus equates this process to the secret, invisible, passage of plague contagion. Once infected, the spectators then spread the theatrical contagion to the rest of the populace. As William Prynne wrote of those who resort to plays:

Such lewd companions that of a most infectious captivating, ensnaring qualitie they will quickly corrupt all those who entertain their friendship making them as vitious as themselves The Playhaunters are contagious in quality, more apt to poison, to infect all those who dare approach them, than one who is full of plague-sores (152).

Like the victims of vampires, the vitiated spectator is transformed, becoming a vector through which the theatrical epidemic can be spread. In similar fashion to the explanation of plague in Lodge's *Treatise*, theatre is metaphorised and defined as an invisible substance, a filthy thing or evil malignancy, that not only gets into the body, but can be transferred from body to body. Theatre is simultaneously a psychic and bodily contagion.

10. Antitheatricalists are also concerned about the impact of playing on the passions. Counterfeiting and imitation are the words most frequently used to describe the craft of acting in antitheatrical discourse, and both are seen as emphatically plaguy. Gosson, who labels theatrical events brainesick assemblies (B5r) and admonishes their spectators for sitting in the chaire of pestilence (B7r), is disturbed by the potentially transformative impact of the stage's transgressive practices such as the use of cross-dressed boy players. That performing transvestism becomes an effeminising process for player and spectator alike in antitheatrical discourse, blurring and potentially altering gender difference, has been well established in early modern criticism.¹⁴ The potential danger for the young male actor lay not only in the imitation of feminine exteriority: the outward signes of gate gestures

voyce and apparell but that he must put on the passions of a woman which together like the wreathynges, and windinge of a snake, are flexible to catch, before they speed; and bind vpe cordes when they have possession (E3v-E4r). The words poison and infection echo throughout this tract and Gosson laments the potentially lasting effect of tragic scenes on the bodies of the playgoers because they driue vs to immoderate sorrow, heauiness, womanish weeping and mourning [which are] the enemies of fortitude (C5v-C6r) He further illustrates such concerns with a tale of pagan Gods in an ancient Roman city who command to be honoured in the form of plays, in return for which they will bring an end to the plague afflicting the community (C1v). While the citizens succeeded in stopping the epidemic, yet did not the Sicknes of bodie surcease, because the delicate phrensie of playeing entred, but the craftines of wicked spirits foreseeing that the pestilence shoulde haue an end, tooke aduantage hereby to infect not the bodies, but the manners of the Citize[n]s with a greater plague (C1v-C2r).¹⁵ The frenzy noted in plague pamphlets as a symptom accompanying the latter stages of the disease is here invoked, but the citizens are infected with a more pernicious Sicknes the contagious phrensie of playing has entred and lingers long after the material contagion has departed.

11. Nowhere are such connections between acting, contagion and the passions more apparent than in the work of John Rainolds. The Oxford debate presents a particularly useful case for revealing the nature and practice of early modern acting since, as Eve Rachele Sanders has shown: Unlike writers of other such tracts, who rely largely on fanciful anecdotes, Gager, Gentili, and Rainolds analyze actual stage productions involving actual individuals (388). Echoing the Artaudian conception of acting, Rainolds characterises the actor's representation of a dramatic role as a means of catching an infection, when he suggests:

[H]ow much greater outrage of wickedness and iniquitie are the actors and players them selves likely to fall into? Seeing that diseases of the mind are gotten far sooner by counterfaiting, then are diseases of the body: and diseases of the body may be gotten so, as appeareth by him, who, faining for a purpose that he was sick of the gowte, became (through care of couterfeiting it) gowtie in deede. So much can imitation and meditation doe. (D2v)

Merely pretending to have a disease and imitating its apparent symptoms can make that disease manifest in the body, and so the process of imitation can infect the actor with an even more disorderly array of ailments. Watching plays is enough to endanger the spectator, but Rainolds fears especially for actors, since their passions might so easily be imprint[ed] in others :

How much more in them selves? Whose minds in what danger they are of infection, by meditating and studying sundrie days, or weekes, how to expresse the manners of wantons or drunkards, or country-woopers lively, the seeing whereof played but an hower, or two, might taint the spectators. (Q1v)

His point about the danger of the theatrical contagion is further illustrated when he cites, in similar fashion to Gosson, the example of a classical audience, who after watching a performance of Euripides' *Andromeda*, found themselves afflicted with a peculiarly theatrical syndrome since, as Rainolds recounts, they

did fall into a strange distemper and passion of a light phrensie. The which exciting them to say & cry aloude such things as were sticking freshly in their memorie, and had affected moste their minde, they grewe all to Tragedie-playing, and full lustily they sounded out Iambicall speeches So that the whole citie was full of pale and thinne folke, pronouncing like stage-players, and braying with a loude voice (Q1v)

In Rainolds' formulation actors pollute their bodies through imitation, and then threaten theatrical pandemic through contagion. The insinuation throughout his work is clear: players who impersonate the manners and inhabit the minds of others embodying, in Artaudian terms, feelings that do not relate to their real condition put their bodies at risk of lapsing into disease. Those who spend too much time at playing others or even viewing this aberration put their mind and body at risk of being transformed, of catching the strange distemper or light phrensie of theatrical infection. In antitheatrical discourse, players and playgoers alike were figured as vectors of a disease considered equally as deadly and destructive as any plague. The sickness of acting, the illicit, self-conscious personation of non-being, was not just an internal crisis but also a contagious infection.

12. This concern over the impact of the passions on the body was entirely consistent with the understanding of the relationship between the body and the emotions circulating in medical tracts of the period. As has been established in the important work of Joseph R. Roach and Gail Kern Paster, moderation is the repetitive warning in early modern writing about the passions, and actors put themselves at daily risk of overcooking the delicate humoural balance vital for maintaining health of body and mind. Published in 1601, just a few years before *Timon of Athens* is presumed to have been written, Thomas Wright's oft-cited *The Passions of the Mind in Generall* includes various warnings about the potentially transformative dangers of excessive feeling:

for there is no passion very vehement, but that it altereth extreamly some of the four humours of the body; & all Physitians commonly agree, that among divers other extrinsecall causes of diseases, one, and not the least, is, the excess of some inordinate passion [and illustrates] how an operation that lodgeth in the soule can then alter the body. (4)

Wright recommends a prudent monitoring of one's emotional well-being, the first rule of which is to persuade our selves when we are mooved with a vehement passion, that our soules are then as it were infected with a pestilent ague (133). An excess of passion is itself a plaguy disorder and the potential source of bodily diseases.

13. Though Roach does not address antitheatrical discourse directly in *The Player's Passion*, his summary of commonplace ideas inhabiting the early modern mindset provides a possible explanation for why fear of theatre as a contagious disease becomes the touchstone of antitheatrical polemic. The image of early modern acting in this text constructed by way of Wright, Quintillian's study of the art of oratory, and Thomas Heywood's *Apologie for Actors* reveals a powerful capacity for transformation: entirely inhabiting the spirit, internal and external, of a character; able to make sudden, protean transitions between passions in the delivery of a single speech or between roles; and yet so overtaken by their performance that they may have difficulty resuming their prior self and emotional state, perhaps even

resorting to alcohol or strong medicine to assist in the post-show comedown.¹⁶ The player's medium was one of potent efficacy: through altering his spirit he possessed the power to alter his body, the physical space around him and act on the bodies of the spectators who shared that space with him (Roach 27). Crucially, the protean impassioned state of the actor was transferable, able to move from player to spectator:

Underlying the powers characteristic of the Protean actor there existed a theoretical substructure of considerable interest: a parapsychological explanation of communication founded on the ancient concept of *pneuma*. It was widely believed that the spirits, agitated by the passions of the imaginer, generate a wave of physical force, rolling through the aether, powerful enough to influence the spirits of others at a distance. (Roach 45)

The notion that acting was a transferable psychic frenzy, a communicable passion endorsed by Artaud and feared by the antitheatricalists, is here given pseudo-scientific validation. Wright also sees emotional states as communicable; the humoral infection ravaging the bodies of the intemperate and passionately overheated individual is contagious by mere proximity. He exhorts his readers to flee occasions which may incense the passions he that willingly [and] without necessity dealth with infected persons, may blame himself if he falleth into their diseases (122).¹⁷ Read in the context of these correlations between the art of acting, the passions and contagion in early modern culture, as the following section will show, *Timon of Athens* presents its protagonist's extreme shift in demeanour as an infection of passionate acting, and seems to betray an explicit awareness of the plague of playing imagined by Rainolds and his fellow critics.

A Nature but Infected

14. About halfway through a performance of *Timon of Athens* the spectators witness the entrance of Timon, as the stage directions suggest, *in a rage* (3.5.78 sd). The character described in the play's opening lines as a man, breathed, as it were, to an untirable and continue goodness (1.1.11) is now considerably altered. The extremity and apparent suddenness of Timon's transformation that becomes the pivotal juncture for the play's irreconcilable halves has often relegated the play to the critical waste-basket of the incomplete work. It is, as Thomas Cartelli perceives it, the unaccommodating text, that is, a text that is inconsistent with the prevailing critical consensus defining what a Shakespearean tragedy is or should be, does or should do (182). The play's status has been subject to endless speculation, and a significant proportion of critical responses examine questions over its structural flaws, its presumably unfinished state and evidence of probable co-authorship (the recently released Oxford collected works of Thomas Middleton includes *Timon* as a Shakespeare-Middleton collaboration). It has been excluded from much critical consideration precisely because it apparently contradicts the levels of constancy and coherence to which works attributed to a single author are expected to adhere, and which are often used to determine authenticity and canonical worthiness.
15. Despite its maligned and often-neglected status, however, *Timon of Athens* has attracted a persistent counter-tradition offering a more germane account of its thematic preoccupations. Among such treatments are psychoanalytic approaches, which predominantly focus on the play's rampant misogyny and telling lack of

female characters.¹⁸ Examinations of the play's economic concerns and Timon's obsession with gold, stemming from Karl Marx's brief but influential analysis of the play's figuring of money as simultaneously 'visible divinity' and 'common whore' (324), have offered thorough readings of Shakespeare's apparent critique of early capitalism.¹⁹ Rarely though have scholars considered the meaning and significance of *Timon of Athens* in Renaissance terms.²⁰ Some have presented extended analyses of the prevalence of venereal disease in the play.²¹ Given the play's particular preoccupation with plague language and imagery, and the recent resurgence in scholarly work on conceptions of disease in early modern culture, it is surprising that the resonance of plague in *Timon of Athens* has remained largely unexamined.²² One of the few exceptions, addressing precisely this oversight in readings of *Timon*, brings together the play's fixations on finance and disease to focus specifically on the connection between plague and gold. Rebecca Totaro unequivocally sees *Timon of Athens* as 'a plague play, largely driven by the themes and language of pestilence' (107), but laments the idea that 'plague is most often interpreted as syphilis and used to support the claim that Timon suffers from sexual nausea' (96).²³ This paper shares Totaro's conviction that the bubonic plague itself, rather than venereal disease or the broader conception of plague as a catchall term for epidemics in general, is the indelible pathology of this tragedy.

16. In much of the negative tradition of critical work on the play, the problem is regularly centred on Timon himself. As Coppélia Kahn has summarised, *Timon's* two disjunct halves 'are generally viewed as lacking psychological coherence' (35). Harry Levin criticizes Shakespeare in his writing of *Timon* for the 'lightning change from one state of mind to the opposite' that characterises the protagonist (92). Una Ellis-Fermor's classic essay on *Timon* as an unfinished work suggests that the real flaw in the play lies outside of the passages thought to have been 'lost', beyond even the usual arguments about the inexplicable subplot: 'the problem is emphatically the character of Timon'. For our complaint concerning Timon is not that we do not see enough of him, but that, in spite of the length of time during which he occupies the stage, he fails to leave a deep, coherent impression of his personality' (280). The one-dimensional depiction of Timon in the first half of the play 'is not fit to support either so mighty a theme as is foreshadowed at the beginning [Timon's fall], or a conversion such as the mood of the fourth and fifth acts suppose' (Ellis-Fermor 280-81). The apparent need for continuity of character in critical responses to this play is then transferred to the audience members who, it is assumed, would be unable to accept such a swift, drastic, and seemingly untenable change. If the first half of the play is one-dimensional, the Acts after Timon's transformation are viewed as flat and single-minded. In one of the more poisonous critiques of the play, Ninian Mellamphy claimed that *Timon* was rotten to its core, arguing that its lack of success in performance is due to the 'monotony' of Timon's ranting soliloquies in the play's second half, which he says leads to 'the boredom of the theatregoer exposed to too much' 'exceptless rashness' (173). It is beyond the scope of the present paper, however, to resolve questions over the authorship or completeness of *Timon of Athens*. Rather, the assumed inconsistencies and incoherence in Timon's character provide the cue for a closer examination of Timon's transformation. Its apparent failure on the modern stage, despite the relative successes of Greg Doran's 1999/2000 production for the RSC and Tracey Bailey's moderately praised production at London's replica Globe in 2008, is irrelevant to a consideration of how the play might have been experienced by an early seventeenth-century audience.²⁴ It

will instead be suggested that, if considered in the context of the performance space and culture for which it was written, *Timon of Athens* can be understood as a highly self-conscious play concerned with the processes and impact of representation, and reveals itself to be an intense study of the infectious nature of passionate feeling, one that is bound up with the dialogic intersection between theatricality and antitheatricality in early modern culture.

17. The first half of the play revolves around Timon's construction of a gift economy: that is, he borrows money from various Lords and then showers them with gifts and lavish banquets to assure their loyalty.²⁵ When the money runs out and he turns to them for more, they withhold credit, leaving him financially, and eventually spiritually, destitute. This betrayal precipitates his absolute and irrevocable transformation. Prior to his change, Timon is constructed as the very model of hospitality and generosity; he presides over a world of courtly luxury, rich banquets and theatrical spectacles. This is deliberately juxtaposed against Apemantus, the puritanical churlish philosopher and self-confessed misanthrope who is constructed as the resident antitheatricalist. Entering *after all discontentedly like himself* (1.2. sd), as the stage directions suggest, he sits presumably downstage, separated from the stage action, and in a series of asides piles scorn on the duplicitous theatricality of Timon's banquet and his guests' false friendship, he shuns the rich food of Timon's banquets, all of which culminates in his attack on the masque of Amazons that Timon presents. We are also given insight into Apemantus's humoural disposition, as shown in Timon's rejoinder to Apemantus's cynical observations on the banquet: *Fie, thou art a churl, you have got a humour there / Does not become a man / They say, my lords, Ira furor brevis est, [anger is brief insanity] / But yond man is ever angry* (1.2.25-28). The exchange deliberately foreshadows Timon's passionate fury, when he later becomes Apemantus.
18. Before the audience even sets eyes on Timon, he is constructed as king of his own court, to which everyone, whatever their social position, comes to bow before him. As the Poet relates:

You see how all conditions, how all minds,
As well of glib and slippery creatures as
Of grave and austere quality, tender down
Their service to Lord Timon. His large fortune,
Upon his good and gracious nature hanging,
Subdues and properties to his love and tendence
All sorts of hearts; yea, from the glass-faced flatterer
To Apemantus, that few things loves better
Than to abhor himself; even he drops down
The knee before him. (1.1.53-62)

This clearly establishes the antithetical relationship between Timon, with his self-absorbed altruism tolerating even the glass-faced flatterer, and Apemantus as the self-hating misanthrope. Timon's selflessness seems ultimately self-serving since it forces his beneficiaries, even those of equal or higher social status, to be subservient and attentive to his every whim:

All those which were his fellows of late,
Some better than his value, on the moment
Follow his strides, his lobbies fill with tendance,
Rain sacrificial whisperings in his ear,
Make sacred even his stirrup, and through him
Drink the free air. (1.1.79-84)

It is precisely this vain, narcissistic fantasy of Timon and his world that Apemantus picks on in his critiques: He that loves to be flattered is worthy o th flatterer (1.1.227). His status as a figure harbouring an antitheatrical mind-set is established early after his entrance in dialogue with the Poet who has fashioned a work in Timon s honour:

APEMANTUS. Art not a poet?

POET. Yes

APEMANTUS. Then thou liest. Look in thy last work, where thou
Hast feigned him [Timon] a worthy fellow. (1.1.221-24)

It is feigning the gap between real identity, true intention, and what is merely acted that most disturbs Apemantus about courtly ceremonies, and he relates his observations on this theatricality to the audience in a series of asides.[26](#)

19. In the banquet scene, Apemantus presumably sits somewhere near the front edge of the stage, facilitating his function as a filter between onstage action and the audience s perception of it, as he informs Timon: I come to observe, I give thee warning on t (1.2.33). Not only is Apemantus constructed as opposite to humanity (1.1.272), his philosophy consists of a puritanical denial of pleasure, eschewing vain ceremony, theatrical seeming and gastronomic indulgence. Refusing the breads and meats in Timon s feast, he consumes the comparatively meagre fare of roots and water: Rich men sin, and I eat root (1.2.70). He despises the false inclinations of Timon s guests and their host s ignorance of this fact (O you gods, what a number of men eats Timon, and he sees em not! [1.2.38-39]), and highlights for the spectators the counterfeit nature of the Lords responses at the banquet. This can be seen when he exposes the deceitful tears they cry in affected sympathy with Timon s emotional speech:

TIMON. O, joy s

e en made away ere t can be born: mine eyes cannot hold out
water, methinks. To forget their faults, I drink to you.

APEMANTUS. Thou weep st to make them drink, Timon

SECOND LORD. Joy had the like conception in our eyes,
And at that instant like a babe sprang up.

APEMANTUS. Ho, ho, I laugh to think that babe a bastard.

THIRD LORD. I promise you, my lord, you moved me much.

APEMANTUS. Much! (1.2.98-106)

Apemantus abhors the Lords theatrical pretence and (like the antitheatrical polemicists he evokes) the falsity and the lying evident in artifice. The invective he levels at the masque of Amazons who arrive at the banquet to feast the eyes of the guests (1.2.120), is even more reminiscent of antitheatrical rhetoric:

Hey-day, what a sweep of vanity comes this way!
They dance? They are madwomen.
Like madness is the glory of this life
As this pomp shows to a little oil and root.
We make ourselves fools to disport ourselves (1.2.124-27)

He derides the vain spectacle which Timon himself hints was of his own making:

You have entertained me with mine own device (1.2.142). Then, anticipating the disease-ridden tirades featuring later in the play, Apemantus implies the infected state of the performers since the worst is filthy and would not hold the taking (1.2.145-46), presumably because of venereal disease. Apemantus clearly embodies antitheatrical discourse, but this replication is framed within a self-conscious theatricality. As outlined above, he relays most of his attack on the theatricality of Timon's world in a series of direct asides to the audience; his comments draw attention to the thinly veiled artifice of the banquet. Spectators at a performance of the play would be invited to see the feigned status of the whole scene, including the fact that Apemantus's character is itself a role being enacted and that his antitheatricality is something merely staged. This self-consciousness is continually emphasised throughout *Timon of Athens*.

20. Timon's transformation is rendered as a theatrical act, and the audience is given fair warning of its arrival. As the debts pile up and the gift economy is inevitably exposed as coming from an empty coffer (1.2.188), hints of the impending change begin to surface. The spectators hear of common rumours, suggesting that Lord Timon's happy hours are done and past, and his estate shrinks from him (3.2.5-6). They witness several failed attempts to borrow more money from the same Lords who benefited from his generosity. After one such scene, a servant of Timon's household is left alone onstage, and tells the audience in direct address that:

This was my lord's best hope. Now all are fled
Save only the gods. Now his friends are dead.
Doors that were never acquainted with their wards
Many a bounteous year must be employed
Now to guard sure their master;
And this is all a generous course allows:
Who cannot keep his wealth must keep his house. (3.3.34-40)

He is absent from the stage for some 250 lines, from the end of the second Act until the end of Act 3 Scene 4. In the staging of this scene, a clear delineation of onstage and offstage fictional place, inside and outside space, is created. If throughout the opening scenes one of the stage doors is established as the entrance to Timon's private chambers, and the other door (or doors) are used for the comings and goings of visitors to the household except for when they go in to see Timon (as the mercer and the senators do in the opening scene), the audience would presumably remember the relationship between onstage and offstage fictional spaces. The servant's direct reference to doors that have not been locked for such a long time (due to the constant influx of visitors), which must now be used to protect their master, becomes a theatrically conscious statement. The door he refers to, in the following scene, is the stage door behind which the actor playing Timon is now situated. The servants of Timon's creditors enter through the other door(s) to, as the stage direction stipulates,

wait for his coming out (3.4. sd). They refer to Timon's conspicuous absence ('Is not my lord seen yet?' [3.4.10]), and throughout the waiting period his servants, who have been attending to him, enter from the door to his private quarters bearing news of his condition. Flaminius enters informing the creditors that Timon is not yet ready to come forth, and then re-exits through the same door. The steward Flavius enters from Timon's door and despite being hindered by the creditors passes over the stage exiting through another door. Finally, Servilius enters from the door to Timon's chamber and offers the clearest indication of Timon's altered state yet:

for take t of my soul,
my lord leans wondrously to discontent. His comfortable temper has forsook him. He's much out of health, and keeps his chamber. (3.4.69-72)

The shift in his temper hints at the turmoil in Timon's humoral state. By this time, the audience's attention would most likely be focused on the door from which Timon is about to emerge, and they would understand that he is going to be different upon entering. This is further emphasised by the fact that all the onstage figures' attentions would be focused on the door as they physically crowd around it. Above all, the use of fictional space and the numerous pre-warnings, allows the playgoers time to adjust before Timon's actual entrance *in a rage*. Timon's first words upon entering 'are my doors opposed against my passage?' (3.4.79) indicate that the actors onstage are indeed crowded around the entrance to Timon's chamber. Timon's transformation is thus not a sudden or lightning change, but a carefully and quite self-consciously rendered theatrical transition that would cause a Jacobean audience no more trouble than the commonplace performance conventions of disguise and the doubling of roles.

21. Timon's metamorphosis is also explicitly rendered as changes happening inside his body, particularly in his heart. The word 'heart' recurs throughout the play, uttered on 32 occasions; the majority of the references concern the state and substance of Timon's ticker. Prior to his change, Timon is described as 'free-hearted' (3.1.9), he 'outgoes the very heart of kindness' (1.1.273-74), and his friends' hearts are 'ever at [his] service and chiefly belong to his heart' (1.2.73-87). But when Timon's friends turn against him, his precipitous transformation is also centred on his heart. Flaminius describes one of them as 'a disease of friend, with a faint and milky heart' (3.2.47-48), turned to 'poison, and sensing what his master is going through, proclaims: 'O you Gods, I feel my master's passion' (3.2.49-50). A fountain of blood has gathered in Timon's breast while he has been locked away, so much that when he finally bursts through the door to confront his creditors, his debt can only be paid with passion: 'cut my heart in sums' he implores, 'tell out my blood, one debt of five thousand crowns will be paid with five thousand drops of his blood' (3.5.93). Having earlier asked that his encroaching creditors 'give him breath' (2.2.32), he is now so overcome with passion that he struggles for air: 'They have e'en put my breath from me' (3.5.1). As Paster has shown, the Renaissance understanding of the heart's function, sourced from Galen, was 'as the capacious receptacle of blood and feelings and the seat of the passions' (69), with 'breathlessness as one of the telling symptoms of emotional transformation.'²⁷ Timon clearly has an early modern heart. Wright saw the heart and blood as central to determining a healthy body or whether someone will fall into dis-ease: 'The humours

flock to the heart in passions a little melancholy blood [about the heart] may quickly charge the temperature and render it more apt for a melancholy passion (65-66). An excessive collection of blood and abundant humours around the body causes distemper: Too much hot blood in the body [the subject] shall easily, and often, be moved to anger (Wright 111). Timon's psychological change is sourced from alterations in his body; he is infected, with an over-abundance of humours. He is later described as but a mad lord, and nought but humours sways him (3.7.101-2). As Paster has shown, early modern bodies contained a constantly shifting sea of emotional turmoil, seemingly always vulnerable of veering to extremes: the humoral body should be characterized by its emotional instability and volatility, by an internal microclimate knowable, like climates in the outer world, more for changeability than for stasis (19). An early seventeenth-century audience would therefore not see anything incongruous, inconsistent or lightning fast in Timon's emotional change.

22. This humoral distemper brings about other changes in Timon's behaviour. Like Artaud's and Rainolds' infected stage players, the symptoms of Timon's illness are manifested in a frenzied delirium. As Rainolds painted the plagued spectators of Euripides' *Andromeda*, Timon has grown all to Tragedie-playing, full lustily [sounding] out Iambicall speeches, and braying with a loude voice (Q1v). Unwittingly, he also starts to behave like his former adversary Apemantus. As he rails against Athens and his fair-weather friends, he casts off the speech, mannerisms and, literally, the clothing of his former identity, crying nothing I'll bear from thee but nakedness (4.1.32-33). Timon shows a propensity for duplicity, role-playing and imitation, not seen in his earlier incarnation. This is first revealed when Timon restages the banquet scene from the first act where he shows that he has become aware of the theatrical deceit of his treacherous followers. Like Apemantus in the first scene, Timon exposes their vapid façade to the audience and begins to take on some of the cynical philosopher's qualities and theatrical function, having his first aside to the audience. While Timon has changed, he makes a pretence of presenting himself under the guise of his former, altruistic identity this is the old man still (3.7.57) his guests proclaim. The lords and senators are, of course, unaware of the ruse. Instead of the royal cheer (3.7.46) they expect from the covered dishes, Timon serves them the austere and decidedly Apemantian fare of *steaming water and stones* (3.7.77 s.d.). This little scene of theatre has been scripted by Timon as a phisic (3.7.93) for their reeking (3.7.84) theatricality which Timon divulges in a series of chaotic inversions: Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites, / Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears (3.7.86-87); he calls for every disease of man and beast the infinite malady [to] / Crust [them] quite o'er (3.7.90-91).
23. In the fearsome tirades that characterise the aftermath of his transition, Timon's vitriolic rhetoric mimics the repetitious style of antitheatrical polemic. The speech he delivers as he leaves Athens for the isolation of the nearby woods harnesses fear of undifferentiation and fear of plague. Contagion is figured as the catalyst for social dissolution in which all degrees, customs, observances and hierarchies are to be overturned and chaos will reign. In asking that everyone and everything should decline to [their] confounding contraries, / And let confusion live (4.1.20), Timon prescribes nothing short of an antitheatricalist's worst nightmare. Even while Timon becomes, in his adoption of Apemantus's persona, totally opposed to theatricality, his tirades turn out to be more like a dark satire of antitheatrical discourse. Like the

enemies of the stage, he projects plague as the inevitable result of, and a deserving punishment for, the false theatricality of his deceitful friends and his former identity. He asks that potent and infectious fevers heap / On Athens, ripe for stroke! (4.1.22-23) and that the air become infected so that the contagion can be communicated more effectively: Breath infect breath, / That their society as their friendship, may / Be merely poison! (4.1.30-32). Appropriating antitheatrical rhetoric, Timon also calls for Lust and liberty to [c]reep, as if by stealth, into the minds and marrows of our youth (4.1.25-26). And echoing the connections between plague and divine providence he summons a planetary plague when Jove / Over some high-iced city hang his poison / In the sick air (4.3.108-10). Athens is the city full of vice and ripe for stroke, just as London was for antitheatricalists who believed, as Gosson suggests, that with its rampant theatricality the metropolis, as a high-iced city, would soon be a target for divine retribution: God is iust, his bow is bent & his arrow drawn, to send you a plague, if you stay too long (G8v).

24. By Act 4 Timon is fully transformed, living in a cave, feverishly scrounging in the dirt for roots and digging a hole that will eventually become his grave, and entirely taking on the ceremony-hating identity of Apemantus. All s obliquely he states (4.3.19), encapsulating the devious histrionics he now despises; and then quotes Apemantus's misanthropic, self-hating comments from earlier in the play:

There's nothing level in our cursed natures
But direct villainy. Therefore be abhorred
All feasts, societies, and throngs of men.
His semblable, yea himself, Timon disdains. (4.3.20-23)

In direct address to the audience, Timon's hatred of throngs of men becomes a conscious attack on theatre crowds and the guilty creatures sitting at a performance of the play. When visited by Alcibiades, who has turned revolutionary and intends to attack Athens, Timon asks that the captain's army become like a plague and destroy the city. In particular, he advises Alcibiades to destroy those whose external identity is merely theatrical: Strike me the counterfeit matron / It is her habit only that is honest, / Herself's a bawd (4.3.112-14). The statement recalls the connections between the plague and inversions of sexual behaviour in which the chaste become promiscuous. In this case, Timon exposes the duplicity that overtakes even honest citizens in the epidemic of theatricality he describes taking place in Athens.

25. Like the stage's enemies, Timon expresses a desire for people to manifest outwardly that which they are inwardly, and again invokes the plague: Promise me friendship, but perform none. If thou wilt promise, the gods plague thee, for thou art a man. If thou dost not perform, confound thee for thou art a man (4.3.73-75). His perception that all humankind is possessed with an epidemic of rank and duplicitous theatricality, and his argument that the only solution to this is destructive contagion, are conjoined upon the entrance of Apemantus: More man? Plague, plague (4.3.197). The conflict that ensues between the two figures brings to the fore notions of legitimacy and authority in roleplaying, calling its processes into question. Upon his entrance Apemantus clearly suggests that Timon's new identity is merely an impersonation of him: I was directed hither. Men report / Thou dost affect my manners, and dost use them (4.3.198-99). He then employs a metaphor that seems to be aware of the

antitheatrical identification of theatre as plague, particularly the accusation that role-playing contaminated the player like a disease: This is in thee a nature but infected, / A poor unmanly melancholy, sprung / From change of fortune (4.3.202-4).

26. Timon's apparently affected role is thus also a kind of infection, a contagious entity he caught from his overtly theatrical lifestyle, or from Apemantus himself. Rather than making a genuine, internal change, Apemantus argues, Timon has simply supplanted a new theatrical role for his old one; shifted from one livery to another:

Why this spade, this place,
This slave-like habit, and these looks of care?
Thy flatterers yet wear silk, drink wine, lie soft,
Hug their diseased perfumes, and have forgot
That ever Timon was. Shame not these woods
By putting on the cunning of a carper.

Do not assume my likeness. (4.3.204-18)

The legitimacy of Timon's identity is thereby challenged as fraudulent and feigned: a mere putting on the way that players did on a daily basis his hatred of pretence is itself merely an act of pretence. Timon's imitation, Apemantus suggests, lacks authenticity:

If thou didst put this sour cold habit on
To castigate thy pride, 'twere well; but thou
Dost it enforcedly. Thou dost courtier be again
Wert thou not a beggar. Willing misery
Outlives incertain pomp (4.3.239-42)

Apemantus's antitheatricality and misanthropy are privileged as the true article, while Timon's is tainted with the falsity and ceremony that marked his previous identity and position. It is as if Apemantus speaks of an antitheatricalist who was once a playwright as many authors of the real tracts were and having now reformed pretends to renounce his former lifestyle.²⁸ Timon rejects the accusation. He is so infected with his role-playing that he, as the pamphleteers suggested, is unaware of his disease; its mode of transmission occurring, of course, by covert and secret means. This leads him to imply that he is without an identity in an angst-ridden but fundamentally self-conscious statement that affirms his impending death: I am sick of this false world, and will love nought / But even the mere necessities upon t. / Then, Timon, presently prepare thy grave (4.3.368-70). The scene seems to deliberately re-inscribe antitheatrical argument by staging antitheatricality in a self-reflexive way. It appears to satirize the argument in anti-stage criticism that theatricality was a contagion a plague of passionate frenzy.

27. The slippage of identity performed by the actor portraying Timon foregrounds a playing within the role a personation within a personation is enacted, whereby the character of Timon takes on and imitates the fictional and theatrical identities of Apemantus. Apemantus challenges Timon's imitation of him as fraudulent and feigned, thereby drawing into question notions of legitimacy and authority in the art of role-playing itself and, by extension, the legitimacy and authority of social

identity. *Timon of Athens* offers a unique example of metatheatrical reflexivity, since the audience sees that Timon takes on an identity that they would recognize as belonging to another character in the play. When that character, Apemantus, comes to reclaim his identity, the discussion that ensues is clearly self-reflexively concerned with modes of theatrical representation. Momentarily, the discontinuities between performer and role are highlighted; so too is the fluidity and temporality of identity on the stage. Actors shifted roles on a daily basis, regularly playing more than one role in a given play. While Timon the character is clearly infected with the role of Apemantus, this passage in its self-reflexivity cannot help but remind the audience of the actors, the personas under the personation, who are presumably in no danger of infection.

28. Moreover, with deliberately ironic inference, Timon is not only infected with theatricality but with antitheatricality. In *Timon of Athens*, the venomous invective of antitheatrical discourse is just as dangerously infectious as the process of roleplaying. Antitheatricality is shown as revealing an innate theatricality, relying on precisely the kinds of excessive emotion and disturbed passion that writers like Thomas Wright warn will result in a diseased mind and body. If *Timon of Athens* deliberately responds to the Oxford debates about the danger of acting, Shakespeare suggests that antitheatrical rhetoric and its obsession with plague is effectively Timon-like in its repetitious ravings. A contagion of rhetoric – the feverish tone of antitheatrical sentiment that invades this play – perhaps explains the development of anti-stage criticism from its commencement with Gosson's *The School of Abuse* in 1579 to its culmination in 1633 with the mammoth thousand-page *Histrionomastix* that reads as if Prynne had set out to collect and repeat the entire history of the antitheatrical project in a single volume. The infection of rhetoric escalates as each subsequent writer plagiarizes the last. Timon's embodiment of antitheatricality, an infection he caught from a fellow cynic, is thus not only an examination of the apparent dangers of excessive passion, of over-acting, but a cutting satire of the antitheatricalists themselves, so enraptured by their passion that they remain unconscious of their lack of moderation, catching antitheatricality from each other. Unlike the early modern actor, however, the antitheatricalists lack that self-conscious doubleness, the awareness of the seam between actor and character, revealed so often in the metatheatrical style of Shakespearean theatre, and as is seen in the confrontation between Timon and Apemantus. The reference to Timon's impersonation of Apemantus being a nature but infected thus reinscribes the antitheatrical identification of acting as a plague, responding to antitheatrical sentiment with parodic effect.

Notes

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[1](#) For further examinations of the importance of plague to Artaud's vision for theatre see Goodall and Garner.

[2](#) History's long hate-affair with attacking the stage is comprehensively traced in Barish. Artaud cites Augustine's *The City of God* in which he points to the similarity of the plague that kills without destroying any organs and theatre which without killing, induces the most mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in a whole nation (17).

[3](#) The debate was conducted between Rainolds, Alberico Gentili, and the playwright and professor William Gager over the effects of personation on Oxford students who had appeared in a trio of Latin plays staged by Gager in 1592. For a thorough reading of the debate, and Rainolds's work in particular, see Sanders. Though an important contribution to study of the antitheatrical discourse and its significance for understanding the practice of acting in early modern England, Sanders neglects to consider the construction of acting as an infection in *The Overthrow of Stage-Playes*, which may have had implications for the analysis of *Coriolanus* given the prevalence of disease language in that play.

[4](#) On the miasma theory of plague contamination, see Barroll 93-96. Barroll offers an important consideration of the potential impact of playhouse closure during plague outbreaks on the professional career of Shakespeare and his company. For a discussion of the plague during Shakespeare's lifetime, see Wilson. For a thorough articulation of the paradigmatic shift during the period in the conception of disease from an endogenous to an exogenous phenomenon, and thus to an understanding of pathogens (venomous seeds) as ontological entities external to the body and able to infiltrate through vulnerable pores and orifices, see Harris, *Foreign Bodies* 20-30.

[5](#) Stephen Bradwell's 1636 treatise argued similarly that plague was caused by a venomous airborne vapour: 'I define *Infection* or *Contagion* to be *That which infecteth another with his owne qualitie by touching it, whether the medium of the touch be Corporeall or Spirituall, or an Airie Breath* the Plague infects by all these ways, and such sicke bodies infect the outward Aire, and that Aire again infects other Bodies. For there is a *Seminarie Tincture* full of a *venomous quality*, that being very thin and *spirituous* mixeth it selfe with the Aire, and piercing the pores of the *Body*, entreth with the same *Aire*, and mixeth itself with the *Humors* and *Spirits* of the same Body Also (B3v-B4r).

[6](#) Bradwell lists similarly malignant symptoms: Vomiting, and Loathing in the stomacke, Head Ache, and pricking paines there Sharp paines in the Eares Inflammation in the Eyes Bleeding at the Nose The tongue and mouth enflamed and furred Spitting of Bloud Swelling of the Belly with externall paine Wormes Swelling of the Testicles very painefully Extreame heate, and paine in the Backe Swelling of the Feet and Legges with intollerable paine (G1v-G2r).

[7](#) Once the disease has finally claimed its victim, Bradwell observes, the poison still tyrannizing over the dead carcas, the cadaver bares certain marks that distinguish it from other kinds of corpses (G4r). The body in death looks bruised, discoloured; the nose, ears and nails turn blackish blew and the corpse is so softened by its devastation that it resists *rigor mortis*: 'That whereas other dead Bodies must be layed out straight while they are warme, or else when they are cold they will be too stiffe to be straightned : In those of the *Plague* the flesh is soft, and the joynts limber and flexible, after the Body is cold (H1r).

[8](#) Girard has noted that the correlation between mimetic contagion and a plague of undifferentiation can be witnessed in Ulysses' famous speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida* (Politics of Desire 1985). For a more detailed extension of Girard's correlation of plague and undifferentiation in both *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* see Mallin; and for a further consideration of *Troilus and Cressida* in Girardian terms and as a direct response to the theatrical contagion identified by antitheatricalists, see my forthcoming book chapter (Chalk).

[9](#) The passage picks up on both medical and moral conceptions of plague. Stroke, for example, plays on the original Latin word for plague meaning 'to strike': the plague is envisioned as a punishment Athens deserves, being 'ripe' for it.

[10](#) In the chapter on the 'Cosmetic Theatre' (81-100), the corruptive and potentially contagious effects of face painting and cosmetics are explored in relation to Barnaby Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* (1606), but here, as elsewhere, the notion of infection is not specifically related to contemporary conceptions of disease or the plague.

[11](#) The connection between theatre and plague in early modern England has previously been suggested by Mullaney (49-52). The recurrent figuring of theatre as a plague in antitheatrical discourse has been noted and briefly discussed by Elam (In what chapter 152-59). It is the intention of the present paper to take this connection somewhat further. For an examination of the conjunction between language, plague and the notion of the performative, see Elam, 'I'll Plague Thee' 19-27.

[12](#) The full title of Rankin's pamphlet clearly sees playing as a plague-inducing phenomenon: 'A MIRROVR / of Monsters: / Wherein is plainly described the / manifold vices, &c spotted enormities, that are cau- / sed by the infectious sight of Playes, with the / description of the subtile slights of Sa- / than, making them his instruments' (title page).

[13](#) Gosson suggests that it is through the eyes and ears in particular that the spiritual wellbeing of the spectators is put most at risk, and their protection must be rigorous:

... if we be carefull that no pollution of idoles enter by the mouth into our bodies, how diligent, how circumspect ought we be, that no corruption of idoles, enter by the passage of eyes and eares into the soule? We know that whatsoever goeth into the mouth defileth not but passeth away by course of nature; but that which entreth into vs by the eyes and eares, muste be digested by the spirite (B8v). This scopic and auditory contagion penetrates its victim's very soul, which like the poison of the plague is very difficult to expel.

[14](#) For further examinations of cross-dressing and antitheatricity, see especially Levine, Howard 92-128, and Orgel.

[15](#) This finale is consistent with the view repeated throughout antitheatrical discourse that theatrical contagion is even more dangerous than the plague itself because it destroys not only the body but the mind and soul. Prynne, for example, reiterates this when he states that plays bring 'Greater plagues and infections to your soules, then the contagious pestilence to your bodies' (364).

[16](#) See especially Roach 23-49.

[17](#) Wright later adds that any negative quality can be transferred to those who chose bad company, imagining a contagion of vice: Commonly by conversation you may discover mens affections, for he that frequenteth good companie for most parts is honest, and he that useth ill company can hardly be virtuous: who euer saw a man very conuersant with drunkards to be sober? Who knew an individuall companion of harlots chaste? I am not ignorant that a physitian may conuerse with sick men without infection, and cure them: but manie physitions will scarce aduenture to deale with plague patients, lest in curing others, they kill themselues. Vices are plagues, and vitious persons infected; therefore it were good to deale with them a farre off, and not in such places where their vices are strongest, as with gullers in bankets, drunkardes in tauernes, riotous persons in suspected houses, lest thou discredit thy selfe, and be infected with the others vices (224).

[18](#) See especially Kahn, Wheeler, Greene, and Prendergast.

[19](#) See for instance Cohen, Chorost, and Greene,.

[20](#) One of the few exceptions is Smith & Bevington, who draw upon the work of Kahn and Goldberg to situate the play in the context of the politics of the Jacobean court.

[21](#) See especially Bentley.

[22](#) See Harris, *Foreign Bodies* and *Sick Economies*; Healy; Moss & Peterson (eds); and Gilman. Healy's and Harris's important studies have been particularly influential on the present paper, though neither offers consideration of the antitheatrical identification of the pathology of theatre. Curiously, apart from several brief references in Harris (*Sick Economies*), none of these recent works examine *Timon of Athens*.

[23](#) See also Elam (*I'll Plague Thee*) for a reading of the power of plague language in *Timon*.

[24](#) The quest for the play's authenticity and the problem of its completeness, combined with the fact that we have no record of it ever being performed in Shakespeare's lifetime, has led most critics to assume that it was never intended for performance and thus did not receive an audience at The Globe, Blackfriars, or at court. This is in spite of the fact that we also have no direct evidence for contemporary performances of *As You Like It*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*, and very slim evidence regarding *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *King John*, and *Coriolanus*. The lack of evidence indicating contemporary performances of these plays is not evidence enough for most critics to suggest that they were never performed. The singling out of *Timon* amongst these plays as incomplete and unperformable has been primarily based on evidence provided by apparent inconsistencies in the text, its monotonous style and *Timon*'s seemingly unacceptable change.

[25](#) For a more detailed examination of Timon's gift economy, see Chorost 350-58. Chorost also divides the play into two irrevocable halves centred around Timon's drastic change: Timon's sudden shift dramatises two separate people embodying two antithetical ideological perspectives, from Timon Philanthrope and a gift economy to Timon Misanthrope and a money economy (365).

[26](#) As Weimann has argued, Apemantus is a character inhabiting what he calls the *platea*: the flexible, non-illusionistic portion of the platform stage, from which audience-oriented characters can comment on the action occurring in the *locus*, the fictional location, that remains distanced from the audience (225-27).

[27](#) See particularly the reading of Othello's emotional transformation (Paster 60-76).

[28](#) Both Gosson and Rankins were former playwrights, while Rainolds had first-hand experience of cross-dressing on stage having once played the role of Hippolyta in Richard Edwardes's *Palamon and Arcyte* at Christ Church in 1566 (Sanders 396 n28).

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