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Review of

by Lukas Erne

*Timon of Athens* is an unlikely candidate to become everyone’s favourite Shakespeare play. Characterization is crude: Timon’s misanthropy late in the play is as one-dimensional as his generosity in the early acts. The plot is unusually allegorical and rigid. And the play contains no memorable female characters – indeed no female characters at all except for two prostitutes who speak no more than a few lines. Yet the recent production at Shakespeare’s Globe, directed by Lucy Bailey, has reminded us of the extraordinary power the play’s simple design can exert. What’s more, few plays seem of such immediate relevance at a time when greed is thought to be good and the crashing real estate market has left many dispossessed and bitter. Signs are multiplying that *Timon* is in many ways the Shakespeare play of the moment.

Editors are contributing their share to current interest in the play. Following Karl Klein’s *Timon* in the New Cambridge Shakespeare (2001) and John Jowett’s in the Oxford Shakespeare series (2004), the Arden *Timon*, edited by Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton, is the third major edition this decade. What makes of *Timon* a particularly exciting play to study today is that it is increasingly recognized to be a collaboration between Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton. It is true that Middleton’s hand has also been found in *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, but whereas Middleton is argued to have revised these two plays after Shakespeare’s death, he probably co-authored *Timon* with Shakespeare around 1607, as Dawson and Minton demonstrate. For earlier editors, the possibility of Middleton’s involvement in *Timon* was an embarrassment, either used to explain what was perceived to be
unsatisfactory about the play or strenuously denied. Until not long ago, Middleton was considered one of Shakespeare’s ‘lesser contemporaries’, the author of some little-studied and often collaborative Jacobean plays. Yet in recent years, Middleton’s reputation has seen a meteoric rise. The long-awaited publication, in 2007, of the massive OUP *Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* and its companion volume *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture*, edited by a team of approximately seventy scholars, led by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, allows for the first full appraisal of the scope and nature of his achievement. Not few are those who are starting to see Middleton as a genuine rival to Shakespeare – as ‘our other Shakespeare’, to quote Taylor. Excitingly, *Timon of Athens* thus allows us to witness the joint work of what an increasing number of scholars consider the two greatest English Renaissance dramatists.

Dawson and Minton devote the first ten pages of the Introduction to ‘the question of collaboration’, arguing that the ‘collaborative process’ repeatedly led to productive ‘cross-fertilization’, with Middleton’s ‘sardonic tone’ and ‘vivid attention to the grittiness of city life’ enhancing the contributions by Shakespeare (3-5). An appendix devoted to ‘authorship’ examines each scene individually, providing reasons for assigning it to Shakespeare, to Middleton, or to both. There are others things to praise about this edition of *Timon*, including the clean text, detailed annotation, and full introduction for which the Arden series is appreciated. But Dawson and Minton’s have special merit for their sustained attention to the matter of co-authorship, right down to the appealing imaginative reconstruction of how Shakespeare and Middleton may have ‘sat down together on occasion and worked through scenes that needed tinkering’ (8).