



“One good man in a corrupt ancient society”: The Steward in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*

Florence Toh Haw Ching
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Arbaayah Ali Termizi
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Received: 10-07- 2012

Accepted: 25-07- 2012

Published: 31-07- 2012

doi:10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.1>

Abstract

Within the master-servant relationships of the hierarchical Renaissance era, loyalty is often assumed as a common and expected attribute. However, the present study reveals this assumption as a misconception. From the evidence gathered, the paper highlights the declining virtue of loyalty particularly among the servant class of the Elizabethan era. Despite that, the Steward in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (1605) portrayed commendable examples and extent of loyalty towards his master, Timon. This represents a stark contrast to the selfish and disloyal community of Shakespeare’s seventeenth-century England. Through discussions of the scenes in which the servant character displayed acts of loyalty towards the protagonist, the paper emphasizes the significant contribution of the selected character in preserving the well-being of his master. It is hoped that through an understanding of the loyalty shown by the Steward towards his master, Timon, the study will heighten understanding of Shakespeare’s servant characters leading to further appreciation of the dramatist’s work, *Timon of Athens*.

Keywords: Elizabethan society, loyalty, master-servant relationship, Renaissance play

Introduction

It has been widely assumed that loyalty in master-servant relationships was a common and expected act of service during the Renaissance. However, Anderson refuted this assumption by claiming that viewing Shakespearean servants as reflections of the servants during the Elizabethan era is “largely incorrect, unless we accept that reflections can be distorted” (10). This is due to the many instances of corruption which plagued Elizabethan society. Despite the escalating corruption within his seventeenth-century society¹, Shakespeare still concerned himself with “the problems of community” (Slights, par. 5) and “sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, degrees, depression, and elevations” (Hazlitt 322). Furthermore, he endeavored to portray his characters with commendable values, particularly the “loyal servants [who] embody charity, humanity, humbleness, independence, love of justice, moral courage, self-denial, and wisdom” (Weinstock, par. 4). Building on from these claims, this paper looks at the portrayal of loyalty displayed by the Steward in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (1605) and how his attitude differed from the declining virtue of loyalty occurring within the Renaissance master-servant relationships.

Discussion

The steward in *Timon of Athens*

In *Timon of Athens*, the Steward accounted for 8.6% of the play’s total lines, making him the third most prominent character after Timon and Apemantus (Sollner, qtd. in Hunt, par. 1). According to the list of *dramatis personae* forwarded by the Oxford editors, the Steward is placed in the sixth² position. This arrangement nevertheless puts him in the first position as a servant character compared to other servant characters within the play. The list of *dramatis personae* was first introduced by eighteenth-century poet-cum-editor Nicholas Rowe at the same time that he began the practice of dividing Shakespearean dramas into act and scene breaks in his 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s plays to “cater to a sophisticated taste in private reading” (Arbaayah 40). This list was arranged according to the importance of the characters; a tradition which continues until this very day.



From the study, it has been observed that the extent of loyalty shown by the servant character towards his master presented a stark contrast to the social backdrop of the Elizabethan era from which Shakespeare drew inspiration for his characters. Although the representations of servants have been apparent in numerous literary works, it is surprising to discover the obvious lack of discussions concerning this particular social hierarchy. Due to the general neglect towards Shakespeare's servant characters, Anderson believed that "it may be worth taking a close look at them and some of the attributes of service they embody" (23). In order to better comprehend the position held by the Steward and his acts of loyalty, it is thus necessary to first understand the social hierarchy occupied by the Elizabethan servants within which the servant character dwelled.

The servant class

Seventeenth-century Elizabethan society was largely influenced by social status and wealth which divided its people into four major hierarchical levels. Occupying the highest position was the ruling class, which included nobles, knights, and squires, recognized as "those whom their race and blood or at least their virtues do make them noble and known" (Kinney 3). The burgesses were next down the line, enjoying the freedom of trade according to their expertise. The third category consisted of the yeomen who were either freeholders of land or farmers who worked their gentlemen's land. At the lowest position of the social hierarchy were those who worked as day laborers, poor husbandmen, artificers and servants. These were known as the commoners.

During the Early Modern England period, "service played a vital part in the economy and constituted one of the main sources of employment" (Burnett 1). Hopkins and Steggle observed that "the whole of Renaissance society [was] implicated in 'service' of some sort" (46). For William Gouge, "any individual bound by a contract was a 'servant'" (qtd. in Burnett 2). On the other hand, Burnett believed that stewards³ who served the upper gentle and aristocratic households were not bound by any contracts. Rather, "rewards may have been granted in the form of land or political privileges" (Burnett 3). While it is not explicitly known whether the Steward in *Timon of Athens* was bound by any contract or rewards, these descriptions offer a general view of the character's position and responsibilities within Timon's household. According to Badawi, the steward was "the head of the household [...] who was responsible for all financial matters, for the provisioning, the necessary repairs and the discipline of the staff" (35). In *Timon of Athens*, The Steward was clearly serving and living in Timon's household as he took care of the financial provisions and followed Timon's orders to prepare feasts for the visitors.

From Edgar and Sedgwick's observation, "[i]n practice, from the twelfth century onwards, significant numbers of serfs were able to buy their freedom, and move to the growing towns" (126). As the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth century gave rise to the coming of capitalism, the feudal system began to lose its authority, particularly over the lives of the Elizabethan servants. Consequently, reverence towards the virtue of loyalty which the servant class had so long observed was altered. Burnett commented that "the values of domestic service [fell] under threat and that the institution itself [went into] flux" (84). Dillon also asserted that the previously static society dominated by social hierarchies became a "changing society in which individuals could make their way out of the social class into which they are born through ability, capitalist enterprise or sharp practice" (100). For Barker and Hinds,

the largely rural medieval social formation [which] had for centuries held relatively few opportunities for social advancement [was] by the late sixteenth century [...] giving way to a more diverse and rather more fluid system of social hierarchy, where a man's degree depended on a combination of his wealth, power and status (3).

Due to this social mobility, Henry Crossed alleged that "domestic service [became] characterized not only by disloyalty but by vices which have alarming social repercussions" (qtd. in Burnett 87). In a like manner, Bradbrook acknowledged that during this changing period, "a clever servant could rule over his master" (7). As movement up and down the social ladder escalated, "fortunes [...] notoriously rose and fell, either through changes in a man's wealth or through the crown's ability to raise inferiors to higher places" (Elton 1: 14). Subsequently, the lowest social hierarchy occupied by the servants was plagued with a decline of loyalty towards their masters.

As a direct influence from this incident, the plays written during the Renaissance began to exhibit a "determined preoccupation with matters of social rank [as] evidence both of the evolution of the social structure, and of the way that this produced a tension between the emerging classes and the old aristocracy" (Barker and Hinds 4).



With more studies on the socio-political and cultural circumstances of the Elizabethan era emerging, Burnett acknowledged that there is a growing “recognition of the socially embedded nature of literary texts and of their relationship to other discursive practices” (5). Characters involving “dishonest, unscrupulous and ambitious stewards, for instance, [became] staple ingredients of romances, religious treatises and the theatrical repertoire from the medieval period onwards” (Burnett 155) which portrayed them as upholding “high principles in public but is incapable of maintaining them in private” (Burnett 161). In addition, Burnett revealed records “of stewards who actively sought their employers’ economic downfall” (164). The decay of virtue within the Renaissance community involving the servant class seemed tragically irreversible. Despite that, the Steward in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* remained loyal to his master, Timon. The following paragraphs provide details of his acts of loyalty derived from selected scenes within the play.

The Steward’s loyalty

Timon of Athens opens with visitors flooding the house of the protagonist, Lord Timon, in hopes of achieving his favour and gaining monetary advantage. Walker observed that the influx of guests to Timon’s house “reinforce[ed] the impression that he is a great man of affairs” (par. 5). Being an overly altruistic character, Timon easily succumbed to praises and good words. Flatterers who pleased him would be rewarded with a “magnanimous action or gift” (Griffiths and Josecelyne 497). The protagonist’s ignorant lavishness soon caused a financial decline in the household. Although the Steward tried many times to warn his master about their exhausting wealth, Timon would brush him off:

STEWARD: I beseech your honour, vouchsafe me a word; it does concern you near.

TIMON: Near? Why then, another time I’ll hear thee. I prithee, let’s be provide to show them entertainment.

STEWARD: I scarce know how. (2. 176-80)

Harrison believed that Timon repeatedly refused to listen to the Steward because the protagonist was “not used to unpleasant truths and, when the Steward rates him severely for his extravagances, he grows impatient” (259). Despite the multiple rejections, the Steward relentlessly tried to tell Timon about their financial status:

STEWARD: What shall be done? He will not hear till feel.

I must round with him, now he comes from hunting. (4. 7-8)

Alas, when Timon finally took time to hear his Steward out, it was already too late. The protagonist became upset because the situation was not made known to him earlier and thus hindered him from taking necessary measures:

TIMON: You make me marvel wherefore ere this time

Had you not fully laid my state before me,

That I might so have rated my expense

As I had leave of means.

STEWARD: You would not hear me.

At many leisures I proposed. (4.119-24)



In his defense, the Steward replied that he had tried many times to warn Timon by showing the sum in his account but his master would not listen to him. The protagonist then went on to accuse his Steward of giving excuses to hide his efficiency. In return, the Steward rebuked his master and reasserted his position:

STEWARD: O my good lord,
At many times I brought in my accounts,
Laid them before you; you would throw them off,
And say you summed them in mine honesty.
When for some trifling present you have bid me
Return so much, I have shook my head and wept,
Yea, 'gainst th' authority of manners prayed you
To hold your hand more close. I did endure
Not seldom nor no slight checks when I have
Prompted you in the ebb of your estate
And your great flow of debts. My loved lord -
Though you hear now too late, yet now's a time.
To present of your having lacks a half
To pay your present debts. (4.128-39)

In this instance, even though Timon expressed his anger at the Steward, the servant-character remained firm in his defense. From the lines above, the Steward stated that he brought in the accounts for Timon to see, prompted his master about the current state of his estate and his flow of debts but Timon would often ignore him. Instead the protagonist would give out presents in large amounts over trifling matters.

When Timon's financial resources ran out, he sent his servants to seek help from his friends. However, not only were they unwilling to help him, these friends who were previously Timon's visitors and also the protagonist's creditors, sent their servants to collect debts from him. Timon was provoked to anger "at finding his door, which have always been open to all comers in a standing gesture of hospitality, now locked to keep creditors out" (Dillon 99-100). In scene 9 of the play, Timon called for a final banquet and ordered his servants to invite his friends again. Here, the Steward showed obvious concern at his master's decision, reflecting that what they had at present was not even enough to feed the household:

STEWARD: O my lord,
You only speak from your distracted soul.
There's not so much left to furnish out
A moderate table. (9. 9-12)

According to Anderson, the Steward resisted "what he takes to be his master's folly" (211). This reminds us of the fifteenth-century theologian Martin Luther, who asked "[a]re those, then the only ones who lead and teach us rightly, who reprove all our actions and call us miserable? Indeed, such is the case" (qtd. in Frye 156). Likewise, Weinstock asserted that "true servants [...] make every effort to contradict their masters when necessary, to them the truth to their faces, or to dissuade them from mischievous action" (par. 7). According to Jowett, the word 'Steward' is associated with "a spelling variant of 'Stuart' [a figure who represents] qualities of financial prudence" (80) in the play. He further regarded the servant character as a figure of integrity whose presence was essential in signifying the "qualities of financial prudence conspicuously lacking in King James" (80). From this scene, the Steward is recognized as "the only character who spends constructively" (Burnett 163).



In scene 12 of the play, Timon reacted bitterly towards the ungrateful treatments received from his friends and creditors. The protagonist abandoned his house, left the city and went into the woods, vowing that “his hate may grow / To the whole race of mankind, high and low” (12. 39-40). Ironically, it was in the woods that Timon, while digging for roots, found gold which could restore the protagonist to his former wealth and glory. In spite of that, he refused to return to Athens. Instead, he gave a portion of the gold to encourage Alcibiades⁴ and his army to attack the city. Timon’s transformation from a philanthropist into a misanthrope marked a significant shift in the play’s atmosphere and scene, dividing the play into two distinct phases.

When the Steward appeared again in scene 13, his master had already abandoned the city and sought solace in the woods. As the person in-charge of the household affairs, the Steward took upon himself the responsibility of providing for the other servants by dividing his savings among them before sending them off. With the remaining money that he had, the Steward went in search for his master:

STEWARD: I’ll follow and enquire him out.
I’ll ever serve his mind with my best will.
Whilst I have gold I’ll be his steward still. (13. 49-51)

For Jowett, the poor Steward “had already acted altruistically [...] where he distributes his last money to the servants under his authority, reserving only what he intends to give to Timon” (81). Even though the servant character could search for a new master and household to serve in, he chose to seek after Timon. When the Steward finally located Timon in the woods in scene 14, he was deeply saddened by Timon’s fallen state. Nevertheless, he continued to address Timon as “[m]y dearest master” (14. 471). Timon however, responded to the Steward’s greeting with a fierce hostility: “Away! What art thou?” (14. 472). This scene corresponds to Anderson’s belief that “loyalty in service is no guarantee to servants that their employers will reward, appreciate, or even remember them” (127). This is further exemplified by Timon’s speech, “I have forgot all men; / Then if thou grant’st thou’rt a man, I have forgot thee” (14. 472-3). Irrespective of that, the Steward continued to plead with his master:

STEWARD: The gods are witness,
Ne’er did poor steward wear a truer grief
For his undone lord than mine eyes for you
He weeps (14. 478-80)

With the little money that was left after he had distributed it to the other servants, the Steward offered his remaining wealth to Timon:

STEWARD: I beg of you to know me, good my lord,
T’accept my grief,
He offers his money
And whilst this poor wealth lasts
To entertain me as your steward still. (14. 485-8)

The Steward’s persistence has so moved Timon that the misanthrope called him the “one honest man” (14. 495) among the insincere community of Athens. Echoing his statement was Hunt, who called the Steward “the one good man in a corrupt ancient society” (507). Moreover, Weinstock observed that “voluntary service frequently exceeds a master’s normal expectations. Free will no doubt spurs on a person at the cost of greater privations than duties according to rank or habit ever could” (par. 35). Although it seemed like Timon was initially moved by the Steward’s loyal gesture, he was still doubtful of the servant’s sincerity:



TIMON: ...But tell me true—
For I must eve doubt, though ne'er so sure—
Is not thy kindness subtle, covetous,
If not a usuring kindness, and, as rich mean deal gifts,
Expecting in return twenty for one? (14. 505-9).

In his response, the Steward reaffirmed his loyalty by stating that his only wish was to see Timon being restored to his previous wealth and dignity:

STEWARD: My most honoured lord,
For any benefit that points to me,
Either in hope or present, I'd exchange
For this one wish: that you had power and wealth
To require me by making rich yourself. (14. 517-21)

Jowett interpreted these lines as “Timon’s renewed riches would be the source of reward [and] the Steward would regard Timon’s enrichment as reward in itself” (Jowett 301, n. 521).

Following that, Timon offered the Steward gold and bid him to “[g]o, live rich and happy” (14. 251). However, the Steward refused and insisted to stay and serve his master: “O, let me stay and comfort you, my master” (14. 533). In this instance, the Steward could have taken the gold given and abandon Timon. Amidst the fluidity of the seventeenth-century social hierarchy as discussed earlier, the Steward could have used the gold to buy into nobility and elevate his social standing. Nonetheless, the loyal servant chose to forgo his personal comfort in order to remain by Timon’s side. Jowett described this scene as “the residual possibility of real friendship at the point where money no longer matter[ed]” (qtd. in Dillon 162). Compared to Timon’s insincere friends and visitors, the Steward was the only person unaffected by the social tableau of the Elizabethan servitude with its “ostentatious liberality which scatter[ed] bounty but confer[red] no benefits, and [bought] flattery but not friendship” (Johnson, qtd. in Wimsatt 128).

By the end of the drama, despite the redemptive pleas of the Steward, Timon remained stubbornly misanthropic and refused to return to the city. Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* closes with the protagonist ending his life “entombed upon the very hem o’th’ sea” (17. 67). Although the Steward’s loyalty was not able to save his master, Anderson praised the servant character who remained “faithful to Timon in adversity” (12). For Dillon, the Steward is regarded as “the play’s clearest instance of unqualified nobility” (102). In a like manner, Levitsky believed that the servant character is “the only person in the play who exhibit[ed] magnificence in the sense of both resisting temptation and enduring adversity admirably” (par. 30). For that, he is recognized as the only loyal servant who stood by his master throughout the whole play, making him the one character in *Timon of Athens* who is truly worthy of our acknowledgement and admiration.

Conclusion

By understanding the social hierarchy occupied by the Elizabethan servants and corresponding acts of service, readers are able to better comprehend the position held by the Steward and, subsequently, grow to appreciate the service and displays of loyalty extended by the selected servant character towards his master, Timon. The study also shows how servant characters continue to play prominent supporting roles in Shakespearean dramas, elevating the dramatic merits of his plays, particularly *Timon of Athens*. Despite the influences of greed and selfishness surrounding the Athenian society, the Steward remained devotedly loyal to Timon. The servant character’s thoughts and actions reflected a sincere concern towards the well-being of his master, often at the expense of his own comfort and desires. As Brown asserted, the study of Shakespearean characters influences readers to “learn to apprehend the action and some of the personages of each [selected drama] with a somewhat greater truth and intensity” (23). It is thus hoped that the appreciation of the selected servant characters will further enhance the understanding and acceptance of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* in the literary community. In Hunt’s words, the Steward is indeed “the one good man in a corrupt ancient society” (507).



Notes

- ¹ Examples of these corruptions will be further discussed in the following sections of the paper.
- ² The first five characters in the play arranged chronologically are Timon, Alcibiades, Apemantus, Lords and Senators of Athens, and Ventidius.
- ³ In this paper, discussions pertaining to the position of a 'steward' as the servant of the household is distinguished from the selected servant character of the study, 'the Steward' in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, through the use of the small letter 's' for the former and the capital 'S' for the latter.
- ⁴ Alcibiades was an Athenian army captain who revolted against the city's authorities due to an injustice befalling his fellow soldier.

References

- Anderson, Linda. *A Place in the Story: Servants and Service in Shakespeare's Plays*. Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2005.
- Arbaayah Ali Termizi. *Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra in the Eighteenth Century*. Diss. U of Manchester, 2005.
- Badawi, M. M. *Background to Shakespeare*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1981.
- Barker, Simon and Hilary Hinds, eds. *The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Bradbrook, M. C. *Shakespeare: The Poet in His World*. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Brown, John Russell, ed. *Studying Shakespeare: A Casebook*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990.
- Burnett, Mark Thornton. *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience*. Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997.
- Dillon, Janette. *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare Tragedies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Edgar, Andrew and Peter Sedgwich, eds. *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008.
- Elton, G. R. "The State: Government and Politics under Elizabeth and James." *William Shakespeare: His World, His Works, His Influence*. Ed. John F. Andrews. 3 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985.
- Frye, Roland Mushat. *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Griffiths, Trevor R., and Trevor A. Josecelyne. *Longman Guide to Shakespeare Quotations*. Harlow: Longman, 1985.
- Harrison, G. B. *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. 1951. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1956.
- Hazlitt, William. "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays." *The History of British Theatre: Responses to Shakespeare*. Ed. John Adler. Vol. 5. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Hopkins, Lisa and Matthew Steggle. *Renaissance Literature and Culture*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Hunt, Maurice. 'Qualifying the Good Steward of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*.' *English Studies* 82.6 (2001): 507-20. Academic Search Premier_ 4 October 2007 <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.
- Kinney, Arthur F., ed. *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- Levitsky, Ruth. "Timon: Shakespeare's Magnyfyce and an Embryonic *Lear*." *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978): 107. Academic Source Premier. 20 May 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.
- Shakespeare, William. *Timon of Athens*. Ed. John Jowett. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Slights, William W. E. "Genera mixta and *Timon of Athens*." *Studies in Philology*. 74.1 (1977): 39. Academic Search Premier_ 10 October 2006 <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.
- Walker, Lewis. "Timon of Athens and the Morality Tradition." *Shakespeare Studies* 12 (1979): 159. Academic Search Premier. 10 October 2006 <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.



Weinstock, Horst. "Loyal Service in Shakespeare's Mature Plays". *Studia Neophilologica*. 43 (1971): 446-73.

Wimsatt, W.K, ed. *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*. 1960. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969.

Florence Toh Haw Ching

Florence is a tutor with the English Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, UPM. She is also pursuing her MA focusing in English Literature. Her current research interest lies in character studies related to Shakespeare's playtexts.

Arbaayah Ali Termizi

Arbaayah is currently a senior lecturer with the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She has been teaching in the department since 1996. Her research interests include the teaching of Shakespeare's plays, visual representation in literary texts, and the art of performance.