

A Study of Disease Metaphors in *Timon of Athens*: The Pathological Mapping of the Commodity Economy

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Abstract: Conceptual metaphor theory posits that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which humans construct abstract thought, systematically mapping concrete experiential domains onto abstract ones to build and structure their understanding of the world. In Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, disease metaphors establish a dual critical dimension through cross-domain projection: the ulcerous symptoms of syphilis, as a source domain, are mapped onto the ethical domain, while the chaotic outbreak of fever corresponds to the subversive disintegration of traditional social hierarchies. Within the play, the materializing power of gold and the contagiousness of plague are cognitively linked through metaphor, through which the notion of a “metallic plague” reveals how the expansion of the commodity economy becomes a pathogenic force of social disorder.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Timon of Athens*; disease metaphor; commodity economy anxiety

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, with the development of cognitive linguistics, human cognition has become a new perspective in language studies. Metaphor, rooted in fundamental human experience, constitutes an essential means through which people think about and understand the objective world, shaping both their modes of thought and patterns of behavior. As a creative cognitive capacity that develops alongside human cognition, metaphor is indispensable for understanding the objective world, particularly abstract phenomena. In their 1980 work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson proposed the concept of a “conceptual metaphor system,” arguing that metaphor, as a mode of thought and action, enables individuals to comprehend abstract and unfamiliar concepts in terms of more concrete and familiar ones. Conceptual metaphor theory has been widely applied in

textual studies, including poetry, fiction, philosophy, journalism, and political discourse. It helps reveal the underlying cognitive patterns and value systems embedded in texts, as well as the connections between texts and their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Timon of Athens, written between 1605 and 1608, is set in the Greek city-state of Athens and narrates the rise and fall of the nobleman Timon from great wealth to complete destitution. In the play, Timon's generosity forms a sharp contrast with the ingratitude of his fellow citizens, ultimately driving him into the wilderness, where he becomes a "misanthrope." The first three acts depict Timon, a wealthy Athenian nobleman, hosting lavish banquets and warmly entertaining his guests. He is exceedingly generous, readily using money and gifts to satisfy everyone's requests. After his fortune is depleted and his estates are entirely sold, Timon still naively believes that he can obtain financial support from his former friends. However, contrary to his expectations, these companions of convenience respond with scorn, and none are willing to offer assistance. In the end, Timon resolves to humiliate all his insincere friends with a mock banquet, after which he leaves the city-state and retreats into the wilderness. The final two acts recount his life in exile, dwelling in a cave and subsisting on roots. During this period, he curses the city of Athens and those who visit him with disease and plague, and ultimately dies in the wild.

Greg Bentley examines the dramatic function of syphilis in Shakespeare's plays, seeking to demonstrate that syphilitic imagery serves as a form of satire. Bentley argues that "syphilis during the Elizabethan age was literally or metaphorically associated with sexual license, slander, and usury, the topics on which Shakespeare focuses in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Timon of Athens* respectively" (3). Critic Hristomir A. Stanev argues that the plague metaphor in *Timon of Athens* extends beyond the "infectiousness" of language to encompass a unique olfactory dimension, portraying the material and moral collapse of Athenian society as a suffocating experience of volatile odors. Alcibiades' return in the play embodies the paradoxical dual role of plague as both "disaster and purgation," serving as both a cursed source of contagion and a purgative that cleanses urban corruption, thereby revealing how Jacobean London's deep anxieties about plague and urban sanitation were projected into the play's social critique through humoral theory and the body politic metaphor (Stanev 154). The aforementioned studies failed to examine the disease discourse in drama through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and thus did not adequately reveal that the target domain of dramatic disease metaphors is, in fact, commodity economy anxiety.

In this paper, "commodity economy anxiety" refers to the cultural and ethical unease produced by the increasing penetration of monetary exchange into traditional social relations in early modern England. Such anxiety arises not from commerce in a narrow sense, but from the fear that money, once elevated into a seemingly omnipotent mediator, may dissolve inherited ethical bonds, unsettle hierarchical distinctions, and reduce social relations to relations of exchange. The aristocratic economy of gift, obligation, and reciprocal loyalty represented by Timon is therefore placed under pressure by a more impersonal economy of debt, credit, interest, and calculation. This tension is concentrated in the play's representation of gold, whose power to make "black white, foul fair, wrong right" reveals a world in which moral and social values have become radically unstable. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx quotes *Timon of Athens* to illustrate money's power to turn human wishes into reality while distorting human nature and transforming personal qualities into their opposites (120 – 123). From this perspective, Shakespeare's gold imagery already reveals an early anxiety over the

commodity form: once money becomes the universal measure of worth, moral virtue, friendship, rank, and loyalty are all exposed to conversion, purchase, and corruption. Commodity economy anxiety, then, designates the fear that the expansion of monetary exchange will bring about the disintegration of traditional ethics, the uncontrolled mobility of social positions, and the collapse of reliable distinctions between value and corruption.

Through close reading, it becomes evident that the representation of illness in the play is concentrated in the final two acts, where Timon's soliloquies and dialogues are replete with illness-related expressions. Accordingly, this paper takes Acts IV and V as its object of study, employing close reading to identify the representations of illness within them, including direct references to disease names, symptoms, and related expressions. Focusing on these instances of illness metaphor, this paper identifies their shared metaphorical patterns and explores the socio-historical realities they reflect. By integrating conceptual metaphor theory with the socio-historical context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, this paper analyzes these illness metaphors and reveals that beneath Timon's tragedy lies a set of social ethical anxieties characteristic of early modern England during a period of political and economic transition.

2. Metaphor Theory and Illness Metaphors

Early theories of metaphor generally understood it as a rhetorical device based on substitution or comparison, while Richards' interaction theory marked an important shift toward viewing metaphor as a dynamic process of meaning production. In classical rhetoric, Aristotle's substitution theory regarded metaphor as the transfer of a name from one object to another, a linguistic ornament that enhances vividness without changing literal meaning. Quintilian later developed this view into the comparison theory, defining metaphor as a "condensed simile" based on an implicit resemblance between two things. From this perspective, metaphor was largely treated as a deviation from ordinary language rather than as a central mechanism of thought. In the 1930s, however, I. A. Richards challenged this ornamental understanding in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* by proposing the interaction theory of metaphor. He introduced the terms "Tenor" and "Vehicle" to explain the mechanism of metaphor: the "Tenor" refers to the principal subject or underlying idea that the metaphor expresses, while the "Vehicle" refers to the image or expression through which that idea is conveyed (95–96). For Richards, metaphorical meaning does not arise from simple substitution or comparison, but from the interaction between these two elements. In this interaction, the vehicle projects certain associations onto the tenor, while the tenor simultaneously selects, modifies, and reinforces particular features of the vehicle. Thus, metaphor produces a new meaning generated by the convergence of two distinct conceptual elements, preparing the ground for later theories that regard metaphor not merely as a figure of speech but as a mode of cognition (Richards 100–101).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson formally proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory in their 1980 work *Metaphors We Live By*, fundamentally transforming our understanding of the relationship between language and thought. This theory breaks with the traditional view of metaphor as merely a linguistic rhetorical device, profoundly asserting that metaphor is essentially a fundamental mode of human cognition and thought. According to this theory, our daily communication, thinking, and even behavior are largely governed by a conceptual system, which itself "is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 3). The core mechanism of conceptual metaphor involves understanding and structuring a relatively abstract, complex domain, namely the

target domain, through a more familiar, concrete, or tangible domain, namely the source domain. For example, in the structural metaphor “argument is war,” elements of war are mapped cross domain onto argument, leading us to use expressions such as “attacking” an opponent’s weaknesses, “defending” one’s own position, or “winning” or “losing” a debate. This mapping not only shapes the vocabulary we use to discuss argument, but fundamentally determines how we experience and behave in argumentation (Lakoff and Johnson 4–5).

In her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag profoundly examines how society transforms physical illness into a moral or psychological symbol through cultural imagination and rhetorical devices. By comparing tuberculosis in the nineteenth century with cancer in the twentieth, Sontag reveals how different eras have employed metaphors to define the fear of the “incurable”. In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was often romanticized, regarded as an “elegant” demise that sublimated the soul and was even associated with artistic temperament (Sontag 26); cancer, by contrast, was metaphorically constructed as a foul, despicable, and aggressive foreign invader. These metaphors frequently carry strong moral judgments, imposing on patients not only physical suffering but also a heavy burden of shame and stigmatization. Another key critical point in the book concerns the pervasive use of military metaphor in medical discourse. Sontag observes that we habitually describe treatment as a “war,” bacteria as “invaders,” and radiotherapy as “bombing” (Sontag 65–66). Such language reduces complex biological processes to a simplistic conflict between good and evil, distorting the physician patient relationship and leaving patients feeling more isolated in their confrontation with illness.

Integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory with Susan Sontag’s ethical critique in *Illness as Metaphor* provides the theoretical and methodological basis for this paper’s analysis of disease metaphors in *Timon of Athens*. Conceptual Metaphor Theory explains how concrete bodily experiences of illness can be mapped onto abstract domains such as morality, social order, and economic relations, thereby making invisible crises tangible and perceptible; Sontag’s critique further reminds us that such mappings are never ideologically neutral, for representing social disorder, moral corruption, or economic desire as disease also implies contamination, blame, and pathological judgment. On this basis, this paper identifies disease metaphors by first locating disease names, descriptions of symptoms, processes of contagion, and words related to bodily corruption in the play, such as “plague,” “fever,” “pox,” and “sick.” It then examines whether these expressions move beyond their literal medical meanings and are used to describe abstract social, moral, or economic phenomena. When features of disease experience, including infectiousness, corrosiveness, uncontrollability, and visible symptoms, form stable correspondences with these abstract phenomena, a cross-domain mapping from the source domain of disease to the target domains of society, morality, or economy can be identified. In this sense, the disease imagery in the play is not merely rhetorical decoration, but a conceptual mechanism through which Shakespeare transforms the anxieties produced by the commodity economy into a pathological vision of Athenian society.

3. The Representation of Illness Metaphor in Drama and the Anxiety over Commodity Economy

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 yet confusion live! Plagues incident to men,
 Your potent and infectious fevers heap
 On Athens, ripe for stroke! (4. 1. 15–23)^[1]

In Act 4, Scene 1, Timon exits Athens and, looking back upon the city, delivers the above soliloquy. This scene consists entirely of Timon's interior monologue and is saturated with curse-laden language related to illness, through which he expresses his intense aversion to a city whose ethical order has collapsed. What Timon envisions is not merely the punishment of individual Athenians, but a sweeping and total upheaval of Athens as a social body; in his imagination, plague becomes the agent capable of bringing this upheaval into being. This metaphorical association between plague and social disorder is illuminated by Girard's account of plague as a force of undifferentiation. As René Girard observes, in the face of plague, "Social hierarchies are first transgressed, then abolished. Political and religious authorities collapse. The plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid" (833). In other words, plague does not simply destroy life; it also destroys the distinctions, classifications, and institutional boundaries upon which social order depends. Girard further argues that "The plague is presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specifics" (833). His formulation helps explain why Timon's curse takes the form of disease imagery: plague provides a concrete pathological model for imagining the collapse of hierarchy, law, religion, custom, and moral judgment. This erasure of social distinctions is itself violent: in the face of plague, the boundaries between rich and poor, class and status, cease to exist, leaving individuals passively at the mercy of fate.

The impact of plague on early modern English society was particularly profound. The discourse of illness surrounding plague permeated all levels of society, exerting a significant influence on people's psychology and behavior. In the play, this collapse of order is most vividly embodied in Timon: he descends from a wealthy aristocrat in Athens to a misanthrope wandering the wilderness, and the stark contrast between his former generosity toward friends and their cold, unfeeling response to him is laid bare. Through his portrayal of the disorder within the Athenian city state, Shakespeare in fact articulates a deep seated anxiety over the turbulence of social order in early modern England.

As the above analysis demonstrates, the core conceptual metaphor embedded in the representation of illness in Act 4, Scene 1 is that "social upheaval is disease." The turmoil and collapse of social order are inherently macro level and complex, their abstractness and uncertainty rendering them difficult for an audience to grasp directly. Shakespeare here skillfully employs the mechanism of conceptual metaphor, using "disease" as the source domain and "social upheaval" as the target domain, rendering this abstract and grand theme concrete through the discourse of illness familiar to his audience.

[1] All quotations from *Timon of Athens* are taken from John Jowett's Oxford Shakespeare edition. References retain the conventional act-and-scene divisions for ease of identification, while line numbers follow Jowett's edition.

Be whores still,
And he whose pious breath seeks to convert you,
Be strong in whore, allure him, burn him up.
Let your close fire predominate his smoke;
And be no turncoats. Yet may your pains-sick months
Be quite contrary, and thatch your poor thin roofs
With burdens of the dead-some that were hanged,
No matter. wear them, betray with them; whore still;
Paint till a horse may mire upon your face.
A pox of wrinkles! (4. 3. 140–149)

When the Athenian general Alcibiades leads his army toward Athens, he encounters Timon, who has withdrawn to the wilderness. Timon offers gold to Alcibiades, hoping he will completely destroy the “corrupt” city; at the same time, he gives some of the gold to Alcibiades’ two mistresses, urging them to continue their prostitution so as to facilitate the spread of syphilis in Athens. Margaret Healy terms syphilis “the new Renaissance plague” (14), a disease that aroused widespread attention in the literary and cultural spheres of the period. Unlike plague, which is swiftly fatal, syphilis typically follows a chronic, staged progression, yet its symptoms are highly visible and striking: in the secondary stage, patients often exhibit disfiguring signs such as hair loss, pox, rashes, skin ulcerations, and pustules. Moreover, its mode of transmission is not shrouded in mystery but occurs primarily through sexual contact and the exchange of bodily fluids. For this reason, syphilis has from the outset carried a heavy burden of moral implication.

Susan Sontag points out, “in its role as scourge, syphilis implied a moral judgment (about off-limits sex, about prostitution)” (39). English society after the Reformation was in a state of intense upheaval, urgently in need of a practicable and normative Christian ethical system to guide social practice. In this context, syphilis gradually became constructed as a symbol of lasciviousness and immoral conduct, regarded as divine punishment meted out to the impious. In early modern England, groups that rapidly accumulated wealth through commerce and overseas trade gradually broke free from the constraints of feudal ethics, instead exhibiting an unbridled pursuit of profit, propelling society toward a structure characterized by a form of commodity fetishism. As represented in the play, the Athenian society in which Timon lives is rife with usury, despite interest and money-lending having been strictly condemned in medieval Christian contexts.

It can be seen, then, that the core metaphor embedded in the representation of syphilis here is that “moral corruption is disease.” By linking the highly tangible physical experience of venereal disease with the decay of social ethics, the play renders the abstract moral crisis into a visible, palpable “pathological process.” Through such imagery of illness, Shakespeare profoundly articulates a deep seated anxiety over moral anomie and the crisis of faith during a period of socioeconomic transformation.

What is here?
Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold?
No, gods, I am no idle votarist:



Roots, you clear heavens. Thus much of this will make
Black white, foul fair, wrong right,
Base noble, old young, coward valiant. (4. 3. 25–30)

What a god's gold,
That he is worshipped in a baser temple
Than where swine feed!
'Tis thou that rigg'st the barque and plough'st the foam,
Settlest admirèd reverence in a slave.
To thee be worship, and thy saints for aye
Be crowned with plagues, that thee alone obey. (5. 1. 582–588)

Timon discovers gold hidden in the cave. Having experienced betrayal and abandonment by all, he exhibits an extreme aversion and hatred toward money. All who come to him seeking gold are met with his fierce invective. In Timon's view, gold possesses the power to overturn right and wrong, leading its worshippers to disregard existing moral norms and value systems, thereby producing a plague-like effect of social subversion. This fear of and repulsion toward money collectively reflect the deep-seated anxiety pervasive in early modern England during its period of economic transformation.

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England was in a critical phase of transition from the feudal system to a capitalist commercial economy. With the development of commercial economy, the previously relatively stable feudal lord system came under intense strain, as traditional elements such as rank, status, power, land, and wealth gradually disintegrated in the face of irreversible historical change. The determining factor of social power relations shifted from hierarchical status to economic strength, the traditional moral values centered on chivalry gradually gave way to the pursuit of economic profit, and the focus of social ethics shifted from moral obligation to contractual duty. As Zheng Jie observes, "the giving of gifts was originally a virtue expected of the ideal feudal lord, and this virtue also provided legitimacy for his privileges and wealth," and "Timon's giving was motivated not by economic or political considerations but by the inherent demands of his ethical identity, for an important basis for maintaining power lay in fulfilling feudal responsibilities and obligations in exchange for the submission of others" (92, 93).

During the Renaissance, however, this social relationship centered on gift giving became increasingly difficult to sustain. Morrill's observation helps situate Timon's personal bankruptcy within a broader economic transformation: "The richest men in the kingdom derived the bulk of their income from rents and services, and these were notoriously difficult to keep in line with inflation"; in contrast, "Those in the middle of society, whether yeomen farmers or tradesmen, prospered" (Morrill 296). This contrast reveals the weakening material basis of aristocratic generosity and the rising power of commercial wealth. The aristocracy, in order to maintain the lavish consumption required by their hierarchical status, gradually fell into financial insolvency and became burdened with heavy usurious debts. In the play, the relationship between Timon and his "friends" is not founded on equality but is instead bound by gift giving: the recipients repay his generosity with deference. When a servant informs Timon that he is deeply in debt and his lands are fully mortgaged, his aristocratic status is

thereby shaken. He condemns the society of his time for abandoning moral obligations and indulging in the relentless pursuit of money; unable to comprehend the logic of a contract-based commercial economy, he therefore invokes plague upon the city, pushing this process of upheaval to its extreme.

Thus, in the context of the play, money and illness share a homologous symbolic significance: both possess the capacity to dismantle and reshape the existing social order. The core metaphor embedded in this passage can therefore be summarized as “money worship is disease.” When society universally pursues material gain as its sole objective, the class structure undergoes dramatic transformation: once revered aristocrats may swiftly fall to the bottom, while those who have amassed wealth through speculation and commercial enterprise gradually acquire greater political influence by virtue of their economic power. Through this metaphorical expression of “pathologization,” the play powerfully articulates the structural anxieties and value crises of early modern England in the throes of social transformation. Juxtaposing “money worship is disease” with the aforementioned “social upheaval is disease” and “moral corruption is disease (syphilis)” allows us to discern Shakespeare’s deeper critical intent: money worship, this “metallic plague,” is in fact the root cause of all the other “diseases” afflicting society in the play.

4. Conclusion

Susan Sontag contends that “Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (3). Thus illness constitutes a concrete and readily comprehensible concept for people. The conceptual metaphor perspective holds that metaphor is a mode of cognition, by which people tend to understand abstract and unfamiliar concepts through concrete and explicit ones. Metaphor, therefore, functioning both as a rhetorical device and a mode of thinking, becomes a valuable tool for literary creators to express broader and more profound ideas. Framed within cognitive linguistics, this paper selects and exemplifies instances of illness representation in *Timon of Athens*, proceeding to analyze them through the lens of conceptual metaphor. It thereby reveals that the representation of illness in the play metaphorically conveys the phenomena of social upheaval and moral corruption in early modern English society, the root cause of which lies in the impact of commercial economy upon traditional social order and values. Metaphor serves as a bridge between social history and the text, enabling us to better comprehend and critique the literary work.

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