Together at last: *Timon*, Shakespeare and Lewis meet: A New Edition

Paul Edwards


One volume, bound by hand with sailcloth spine and printed paper-covered boards: 9 3/4 inches h x 13 inches w x 3 1/2 inches d, in a sailcloth clamshell, with printed paper title, approx. 14 inches h x 10 1/2 inches w x 1 1/2 inches d. Illustrations mostly in b/w, some in color, and color plates created from photopolymer plates or digital printing. Della Robbia was selected for the type, which was printed on Biblos and Mohawk Superfine papers. (Unpaginated, but publisher estimates 106 pp., including front and end matter.) Edition limited to 100 numbered copies. $500.00. Available from the press, at Stephen F. Austin State University Dept of Art, Nacogdoches, TX 75962.

Until the discovery of the ‘maquette’ of Lewis’s original proposed edition (see my essay elsewhere in the *Annual*), there were two main alternatives for producing an edition of *Timon of Athens* using Lewis’s designs. First, a version that tried to deduce and reconstruct Lewis’s plan as closely as possible, using scholarship to help decide on the placement of the plates. Such an edition is a pedant’s dream, and as such it would ideally contain an appendix that would make it, as well, a complete critical guide to the project and its significance in Lewis’s work as a whole. The other approach is to take a copy of the portfolio and treat it as a visual resource from which a new edition of the play can be constructed, attempting to create for a modern readership an equivalent of the visual excitement Lewis hoped for from the book he wanted to produce with the publishers ‘Max Goschen’ – or ‘The Cube Press’. The LaNana Creek Press of Nacogdoches, Texas, have chosen the second of these approaches, and have succeeded in producing a beautiful book indeed.

It is in the pages with pure line-block black designs on the white paper that Lewis’s work looks best in this volume. The printer has not used an offset process for them (or for the text), and the photopolymer plates are definitely impressed into the paper, giving a crispness of image not found in the three full colour pages (discussed below). These printing plates, which give what the designer and printer Charles Jones calls a ‘traditional “bite”’, are made by placing negatives of the designs on to light-sensitive plates and exposing them to ultraviolet light. The unexposed areas dissolve afterwards in water, leaving a relief of the original design on the surface of the plate; this is inked and pressed directly onto the sheet. All Lewis’s full-page plates are given pages to themselves, with no printing on the other side of the paper to show through or interfere with the effects of the impression of the plate in the paper. They have all the visual impact Lewis must have hoped for them. In the portfolio there are also several sheets of vignettes or small decorations (M103–8), and all of these have been used to open and close the scenes. In addition, the designer has extracted details from the larger images and used these as further vignettes. Sacrilege! But it works well, especially when they are taken from line-block plates; one or two of the details converted to line from full-tone are less successful. Excising the small details as self-sufficient designs in their own right must have been one of the most enjoyable parts of the design process. Still more vignettes have been taken from Blast 2, and fit well. The pages are not cluttered with fussy and obtrusive decorations, however. On many the text stands on its own, in a clean unfussy typeface with generous margins. The line block images are not all printed in black: M102, the mecanomorphie figure of Timon (see Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer, p. 117) is
printed in a fairly faithful blue (though without the original’s tone), and, most successfully of all, in the image Michel calls ‘Two Soldiers’ (M103; actually they look more like dancing figures) the figures have been infilled with a rich dark red and are given a whole page to themselves. It’s not the colour of the original (intentionally — see below), but it is equally Lewsian.

At 12 by 9 inches, the page size is somewhat smaller than the original portfolio (15 by 10). The publisher’s brief afterword explains that ‘to avoid possible confusion with the original plates, the size of images has been slightly reduced or modified in color to distinguish them, and they have been printed on carefully selected paper’. I’m not sure that this colour-modification was intended for the full-colour images images (M93, 98 and 100), but their colour does seem to have become denser and more sombre, and in the process some of the fine detail of the original plates, which reproduce the texture and full tonal range of Lewis’s watercolours washes and fine, incisive ink lines, has been lost. This is partly because of the paper chosen (it is not coated), but modern technology even on this paper might have produced something more accurate. The printer tells me that he chose to produce them by ‘archival inkjet’, partly to retain consistency of paper type, and partly to endow these reproductions with something of the texture of watercolours. To someone familiar with the original prints, or even good colour reproductions of them (such as those on pp. 90–1 of my book), these three ‘full colour’ pages will be slightly disconcerting at first sight. But there is no perfect solution to this printing dilemma, and it is surprising how quickly the eye becomes accustomed to this particular realisation of Lewis’s coloured drawings. That M99 (called ‘Composition’ by Michel) is reproduced without tone in dark grey ink will also surprise at first; though to my eye it is more impressive like this than it would be as a full-colour approximation to the original. It looks like a print rather than a slightly inaccurate reproduction.

Now for some pedantry. In the 1914 portfolio there are two plates (one of them a full-colour one) for the title pages of Act I, there is one each for Acts III, IV and V, but none for Act II. Any designer has to make decisions about how to deal with the redundancy and the gap. This edition uses the full colour ‘Act I’ (M93), on a recto following a blank verso, to introduce Act I. Act II uses the redundant ‘Act I’ (M94), also on a recto facing a blank verso. This is a clever decision, because Lewis’s lettering on this page looks so much like ‘Act II’ that most readers are unlikely to notice the subterfuge. In the review copy lent to me the title page for Act III (M95) appears (again facing a blank verso) in the final scene of Act II, two pages before its appropriate place. The publisher tells me this is an ‘imposition error’ discovered at the last moment on assembling the sheets, and that it will be corrected in copies sold to the public. Act IV and Act V both have the proper title pages. Each Act title page is preceded by a full page illustration. So, for example, at the close of Act I, the text finishes on a verso, the illustration (M102) is on the facing recto; the following verso is blank and faces the Act title page, the verso of which is also blank, the text of Act II commencing on the recto opposite it — all much easier to demonstrate than to describe. This seems a reasonable solution to the problem of distributing the full-page plates.

My only real cavil with this book is a visual one: the slight loss of detail and colour range in the three full-colour plates. The question naturally arises, whether the book is worth $500.00. In terms of the work that’s gone into it (and will still have to go into reprinting and assembling new pages to correct the misplacement of the Act III title page) I’m sure this must be a good price. It is as a collector’s edition, rather than for the man-hours it has consumed, that most buyers will want this book, however. It is limited to 100 numbered copies, beautifully printed and bound, with the portfolio’s cover image boldly printed on the grey front cover and a smaller vignette fixed on the sailcloth-covered ‘clamshell’ hinged box. I assume that it will eventually appreciate in value, but I’m not qualified to make investment recommendations. The Press’s website may be helpful in this respect:
Using alternative and traditional printing and binding methods, LCP produces limited edition books in the fine press tradition. Each year, the Press publishes one or two major books and produces a number of less ambitious publications. LCP provides SFA faculty and students rare opportunities to work together on collaborative projects. LCP has quickly established a reputation for innovation and quality. Its books may be found in such important rare book collections as the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University. The first major LCP book, *Shakespeare's Pound: Illuminated Cantos*, is being distributed by Ashgate Publishing, London.

Apart from the profit motive (or a desire to support this educational and craft venture), the reason to buy this edition of *Timon* would be to have Lewis's visual meditation on the play presented not only beautifully, but also in something like the form he intended it, thoroughly embedded in the experience of reading the play itself. If you do not own a copy of the original portfolio (and you would be lucky to get one for under £2,000), this is not quite a substitute, but it is the next best thing, and is a pleasing work of art in its own right. It demonstrates, too, that the best place for the black and white designs is actually in a book, where they really do come into their own. Investment or not, I wouldn't expect many Lewis enthusiasts would like to part with this book once they had it.