

Adherence and Deviation: *Pericles's* Slow Progress Toward Social Change

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“Opinion’s but a fool that makes us scan / The outward habit for the inward man,” Simonides says upon seeing *Pericles's* habit as he rides into the tourney at Pentapolis.¹ Yet *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* has often been judged by its strange outward style, almost un-Shakespearean in manner. Shakespeare’s more famous masterpieces, including *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, enjoy liberal use of source material but evince no special care in adhering too closely to it. *Pericles*, however—though written in Shakespeare’s maturity, after such great specimens of adaptation—makes a spectacle of borrowing, constantly directing audience attention to the external sources that predate and inspire it. The stylistic differences between acts of the play have led many scholars to regard this surprising faithfulness as a flaw influenced by the questionable collaboration of George Wilkins; however, the performative nature of adaptation becomes one of the text’s greatest strengths, making evaluation of tradition and innovation one of its central themes. Thus, even as the text calls attention to the mythical world from which it is derived, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* challenges audiences to reevaluate assumptions about their own world, especially regarding the distribution of prestige and power.

Pericles's close adherence to its sources demonstrates the problems inherent in blind application of any system. The

recasting of a narrative—taken from Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the later *Pattern of Painful Adventures*—as a work of drama without substantial transformation violates the expected form of the new genre. The inherited episodic nature of the narrative constantly disrupts the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. The first act alone transports audiences from Antioch to Tyre to Tharsus, and the entire play consists of snapshots spanning years, only loosely tied together by a narrator conjured from beyond the grave, whose style contrasts sharply with that of the other elements of the play. Thus, apparent unwillingness to change the inherited tradition leads to a jarring instantiation of the new medium in which it is presented. Such eccentricities in the play's form and style emphasize an anti-authoritarian strain running through it by demonstrating that one set of rules does not fit all circumstances, and a flawed code should be resisted rather than universally applied.

The play's unusually faithful adherence to source material also makes its rare departures from its parent texts more noticeable, particularly in the case of the titular character's name change from Appolinus to Pericles. Isaac Asimov attributes the new name to the influence of Sir Phillip Sidney's Pyrocles, insisting that "the Pericles of Shakespeare's play has nothing whatever to do with Pericles of Golden Age Athens."² However, such a contestation is difficult to prove, especially since the Athenian Pericles's inclusion in Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, which influences a large proportion of Shakespeare's plays, indicates that the Bard couldn't have been ignorant of the new name's possible implications. The connotation would have been as obvious to the classically aware among Jacobean audiences as to modern scholars. The primary consequence of invoking an Attic connection initially seems to be the evocation of a democratic atmosphere, but familiarity with Plutarch's account reveals that the historical Pericles's concessions to the lower classes were often motivated more by political exigence than by democratic conviction.³ This complex background foregrounds issues of class and the tension between appearance and reality, themes which color almost every conflict in Shakespeare's *Pericles*.

The tension between tradition and adaptation emphasizes the bewildering pursuit of sifting fact from falsehood that drives

the forward momentum of the plot. *Pericles* is filled with facades and disguises, from Antiochus's riddle to Dionyza's "mourning" of Marina. Simonides asserts the folly of taking anything at face value, and this caution applies to the crafting of the play itself. The surface is a whimsical plot lifted from antiquity, but the substance can be read as a critique of Jacobean England, subtly suggested by seemingly insignificant details. Ambiguities throughout the play implicitly challenge the validity of generally accepted social conventions and institutions, echoing Plutarch's complaint that "So difficult a matter is it to trace and find out the truth of anything by history when, on the one hand, those who afterwards write it find long periods of time interrupting their view, and, on the other hand, the contemporary records of any actions and lives, partly through envy and ill-will, partly through favor and flattery, pervert and distort truth."⁴ While written as part of his attempt to defend the historical Pericles's character from what he considered vicious slanders, this observation clearly casts doubt on Plutarch's own interpretation of events, interrupted and shaded by intervening years and his own biases. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* invites audiences to embrace this sense of indeterminacy by treating official narratives with the skepticism due to any tale.

Much of the tension between tradition and adaptation is centered in Shakespeare's use of Gower as a chorus. *Pericles* has been categorized as "a collective instance of Recovered-Memory Therapy, but with a skeptical edge," due to Gower's clear remoteness even as he peddles the memory of medieval English identity as a panacea to contemporary problems.⁵ Gower's strict iambic tetrameter casts him as alien and stilted in a world of flowing pentameter and a genre emphasizing action over narration. Scholars have noted the medieval obsession with *auctoritas*, which has been characterized as almost precluding the ability to do anything without regurgitating an extensive tradition of anecdotal or literary precedent in justification.⁶ The poet that Shakespeare chose to resurrect is an extreme example of this tendency. Gower, here utilizing distinctly archaic meter and diction, "was himself famous for revitalizing old tales," reminding audiences that the play's borrowed narrative is older than even the version found in *Confessio Amantis*.⁷ It is therefore all the more surprising when this ancient specter changes his tune, beginning to take on more modern color throughout the

play until he delivers his final epilogue in the loose pentameter common to Shakespeare's other characters and without any jarring, obsolete diction (5.4). "*Et bonum quo antiquius eo melius,*" the older the better, he says in Act One (1.0.10). But, by his epilogue, even he has conformed to contemporary form, signaling to audiences that the restorative properties he initially promised are found not in the past but in an innovative future.

Even without Gower's direct intervention, the play's archaisms are clear, but beneath them lies a throbbing heart of innovation. Its overused plot led to Ben Jonson's critical description of *Pericles* as "a mouldy tale."⁸ However, the loosely connected nature of that plot, spanning leaps of years and leagues, allows for extreme experimentation in form, stretching the accepted limits of theatrical representation. Harold Bloom contests that Shakespeare may have chosen this source specifically for its revolutionary potential because he "had exhausted" the modes of "history, tragedy, and comedy."⁹ In this sense, the play's use of tradition in its subject enables its violation of tradition in its form, emphasizing the theme of improvement and achievement though subverting past standards. It is in a similar vein that Pericles invokes the image of the Trojan Horse upon his first arrival at Tharsus only to juxtapose its violent cargo "with corn to make your needy bread," emphasizing the salvation he offers the famished city by contrasting it with the historical destruction of Troy (1.4.94). Here the protagonist, like his play, invokes precedent only to glorify its subversion.

Much of the innovation Pericles seems to advocate is entwined with a shift in power dynamics, one example being Marina's struggle for power after being snatched away and sold in Mytilene. The threat of prostitution is not only a personal test for Marina, playing on her spiritual and emotional fears, but a significant part of a wider critique. The brothel represents commercial exchange in general and, particularly, the commodification of human flesh.¹⁰ Thus, when Marina is threatened with loss of maidenhead and the more senior prostitutes are treated as "baggage," their objectification is more economic than sexual (4.2.20). It is ironic, then, that Marina generates more income as a governess than she would have as a prostitute, partially because she does not need frequent replacements due to illness (5.0.10-1). This unprecedented success radically challenges the oldest business in the world, suggesting

again that the oldest practices may not be the best. In this way, Marina not only keeps herself unstained and worthy of a comic ending, according to conventional sensibilities of the time, but strikes a blow for the entire base of production attempting to resist systemic objectification.

The lower classes continue to speak out against official narratives through the fishermen, who expose the working-class reality beneath the egalitarian ideology espoused in Pentapolis. Instead of a king providing for his people, we see the commonest of men preserving Pericles's life and providing him with the armor he needs to improve it by employing a skill that would probably have been considered vulgar and unnecessary for a royal. Meanwhile, they complain about the rich in tones that "may echo the language of the 1607 Midlands Uprising against landlord enclosures of the common lands."¹¹ When Pericles engages in the tourney, Simonides suggests a progressive view of class judgment, indicating that, despite his poor attire, it is not unreasonable for Pericles to hope that "by [Thaisa] his fortunes yet may flourish" (2.2.45); however, he fails to acknowledge that neither this nor any avenue to greater social standing or economic stability appears open to men who, like the fishermen, have neither the training to fight in a formal tournament (though that lack of expertise almost certainly wouldn't have exempted them from conscription) nor the means to purchase armor. The king's nominal ideology promotes merit-based judgment, while social conditions prevent the majority of laborers from developing the established forms of merit. The fishermen provide the means for Pericles's rise without any hope for similar improvement in their own lives, demonstrating this usually shrouded injustice. Despite Pericles's promise to reward them, they are prominently absent from the rest of the play and apparently far from the prospering hero's thoughts.¹² Thus, the fishermen represent a wide segment of society that exists only as a means of production whereby members of a higher class can excel. Pentapolis's unreachable ideals and Pericles's broken promise echo the position of many audience members, then and now, calling for a critical reexamination of hegemonic ideologies and recognition of the exploitation they perpetuate.

While Pericles prospers by the help of commoners in Pentapolis, his own citizens seem to do quite well during his

absence from Tyre. While the lords there seem to uphold the authoritarian narrative that “kingdoms without a head . . . Soon fall to ruin,” the idea of a divinely appointed ruler is subverted by the ultimate equanimity with which Tyre endures the loss of its prince (2.4.36-7). Even the concerned nobles immediately invoke the protocol of “free election,” implying that the state is dependent not on Pericles for its prosperity but on the accepted mechanisms by which the people order their own governance (2.4.34). When Pericles does finally return, he is “Welcomed and settled to his own desire,” and that is all the play has to say about it before Gower rushes on to spend nearly fifty lines recounting Marina’s upbringing in Tharsus (4.0.1-2). There is no chaos for the returning ruler to resolve, and his welcome is no matter of great moment or fanfare. At least, it includes nothing significant enough to stage or even note in passing. Tyre’s considerable independence from its ruler, like Pericles’s notable dependence on the fishermen in Pentapolis, challenges narratives of divine right by demonstrating that, rather than a king facilitating prosperity for his people, royalty and nobility are supported only by the effort of the lower levels of society. Combined with the Athenian allusions—especially the noted reference to “free election”—this suggests that society should reshape itself in recognition of the fact that true power lies in the base of production.

The most violent shift of power in the play is perhaps also its most notable deviation from earlier source material. In *Confessio Amantis*, Gower is careful to include the council of war that Appolinus holds after his daughter’s marriage. After this preparation, the Prince of Tyre sails personally to Tarsus, “And strong pouer with him he [takes].”¹³ There, he oversees the “execucion” of his revenge on Dionise and those involved in her plots.¹⁴ Shakespeare’s version of the scene, however, includes no mention of Pericles. After his reconciliation with his wife, Pericles never again mentions Cleon or Dionyza and, instead of amassing an army and sailing to Tharsus, he lives out the remainder of his days quietly in Pentapolis. Meanwhile, “For wicked Cleon and his wife, when fame / Had spread his curséd deed to the honored name / Of Pericles, to rage the city turn, / That him and his they in his palace burn” (5.4.11-4). The last speech in the play leaves audiences with an image of justice being exacted not by royal prerogative but by

a mob of commoners, who the play clearly supports in destroying their leaders. The incident is indemnified against censorship or accusations of sedition not only by its descent from an old, respected narrative but by the assertion that the people's actions are both in a ruler's "honored name" and sanctioned by the even higher authority of the gods (5.4.15-6). However, the scene still stands as a clear vindication of the violent uprising of lower classes against corrupt leadership.

Of course, Pericles's personal representation of stagnation and progress demonstrates that violence is not the only—or even, necessarily, the most effective—way to advance. The catatonia into which Pericles has sunk by the opening of Act Five serves as a vivid analog for tradition. Just as Pericles refuses to answer anyone for three months, traditional aristocrats ignore the murmurings of "vulgar" crowds demanding redress for unfair labor, taxation, and conscription policies, among other grievances. Just as Pericles has not "taken sustenance / But to prorogue his grief," such societies accept no ideological sustenance except that which reinforces the old stratifications (5.1.21-2). And, just as Pericles violently pushes Marina away when he first perceives her trying to speak to him, privileged classes strike out with force when common voices rise enough to threaten the ideologies which perpetuate power imbalances (5.1.74). Significantly, the role of rousing Pericles from his stagnant slumber falls not to a lord but to Marina. Casting a woman as the catalyst for recovery and progression suggests empowerment for the traditionally voiceless. Additionally, Pericles's response to Marina's words makes discourse the instrument of awakening. This not only encourages the voiceless in society to seize the right to speak but also subtly recalls the art of playwriting as a form of political speech. The play can offer revolutionary ideas because the theatre is a place where those silenced by convention are heard.

Despite his membership in the privileged classes that audiences are encouraged to question, Pericles himself participates in the sort of interrogation his play advocates. When he begins to recognize Marina as his daughter, he checks his credulity multiple times, often interrupting the girl's narrative to ask for further proof. Early in their conversation, he promises, "I will believe you by the syllable / Of what you shall deliver," yet immediately tests her

by asking more questions (5.1.158-9). Once she has answered these questions, resolving all doubts, Pericles loudly announces his joy, sharing with Helicanus his certainty that he has found his daughter, before suddenly pausing to present one final test. "What was thy mother's name?" he asks Marina, "For truth can never be confirmed enough, / Though doubts did ever sleep" (5.1.190-2). No matter how well the girl's previous responses have satisfied him of her identity, Pericles sees nothing but advantage in continually seeking greater confirmation of reality. In this scene, his pattern of accepting new information demonstrates a healthy skepticism. He does not blindly cling to his belief that Marina is dead, discounting the evidence before his eyes. Nor does he quickly accept a stranger's claims without substantial proof. Similarly, societies fester in corruption when ideologies are blindly accepted and never challenged. However, if proposed advancements are accepted for the sake of change without careful consideration, they may (in grand Orwellian fashion) prove just as detrimental as the systems they replace. Thus, the only way to improve a society is to constantly reevaluate the narratives that codify it.

Pericles, Prince of Tyre, despite some superficial flaws, shows an astonishing awareness of craft. A carefully woven adaptation of earlier narratives, it emphasizes the similar care taken in crafting official reports and ideologies. Additionally, it provides an unambiguous critique of societies' selective silencing of voices. The English class system was based almost entirely on ancient traditions, and outdated ideologies of honor and chivalry perpetuated the aristocratic primogeniture that kept power in the hands of a few familiar names. Moreover, James I, King of England when Shakespeare wrote *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, was an intense advocate of divine right, arguing that some narratives—those originating from and supporting him—were unquestionable. The play explicitly presents Pericles as a paragon of monarchical virtue, but subtleties of choice and circumstance implicitly demonstrate that no one is above doubt. Even the "Moral Gower," perhaps the most traditional figure Shakespeare could have invoked, serves to highlight the necessity to reexamine assumptions, let go of the past, and adopt new conventions to meet the future.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2016), 2.2.254-55.
2. Isaac Asimov, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, in *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 186.
3. Plutarch, "Pericles," in *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, ed. Edmund Fuller (Garden City: International Collectors Library, 1959), 127.
4. Plutarch, *Lives*, 138.
5. Jonathan Baldo, "Recovering Medieval Memory in Shakespeare's *Pericles*," *South Atlantic Review* 82.2 (2016): 171.
6. Baldo, "Recovering," 177.
7. Baldo, "Recovering," 171.
8. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 603.
9. Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 604.
10. Rui Carvalho Homem, "Offshore Desires: Mobility, Liquidity and History in Shakespeare's Mediterranean," *Critical Survey* 30.3 (2018): 48-50.
11. Walter Cohen, "Pericles," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2016), 2869.
12. Cohen, "Pericles," 2870.
13. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis or Tales of the Seven Deadly Sins* (2008), 1920-1927, Project Gutenberg eBook. References are to line.
14. Gower, *Confessio*, 1952.