Pericles: A Romantic Hero Sailing on a Stormy Mediterranean Sea

By Heather Helinsky, Dramaturg

When one thinks of Shakespearean storms, the first thing that might come to mind is the opening of The Tempest or King Lear shouting at the heavens to “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!” Or Viola in Twelfth Night worried that her twin brother has drowned. Even in Act Two of Othello, the governor of Cyprus has just witnessed a storm on the Mediterranean destroy a Turkish fleet of ships, and everyone is uncertain if Othello’s ship has survived the storm. In Western literature, the Mediterranean is not for pleasant cruising around the ancient world. Literary critic Northrup Frye once quipped that when “the setting is Mediterranean, the normal means of transportation is by shipwreck.”

While The Tempest by its title sounds like a stormier play, the main setting is Prospero’s magical island. Pericles, which is also one of Shakespeare’s later plays, written in 1608, is a journey around the Mediterranean set mostly on a ship or along the coast. Pericles follows the traditions of ancient Greek romances. Northrup Frye defines the form: “in the Greek romances we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future continuations of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage to the heroine.”

Shakespeare’s Pericles has all this and more: Pericles begins as a young man in love trying to solve a riddle (another ancient literary device) to marry the daughter of a King—and ends as an old King so filled with grief from the loss of his beloved wife and daughter, he cannot speak. Yet, in this play that was extremely popular in Shakespeare’s day, we have not just one happy reunion, but two. Before the audience gets to experience the happy restoration of a lost wife and daughter, the hero must go through several trials and storms.

In ancient Western poetry and literature, the sea is a remnant from the chaos that existed before creation of the world. The sea’s mysterious immensity is also a metaphor for unfathomable truth and wisdom, or sometimes the soul. The sea is also a symbol of collective unconsciousness, housing ‘monsters of the deep’ which sometimes represent the emotion of human sexual desires as well as the general longing for spiritual adventures. The sea also buries immense sunken treasures, as well as loved ones lost at sea, never to return.

The Mediterranean Sea is the source of some of Western literature’s great passages of poetry and prose. A passage from Homer’s Odyssey certainly could describe the soul of Shakespeare’s hero Pericles: “Tell me about the man, Muse, the man of many ways, made to go far journeys...many the men whose towns he saw, whose minds he knew, And many were the sorrows that he suffered on the sea, trying to save his soul...” (Book I). The Greek dramatist Aeschylus, calls the sea one of man’s “deepest enemies...For us, and for our ship, some god, no man, by guile/Or by entreaty’s force prevailing, laid his hand/Upon the helm and brought us through with hull unscarred...Life giving fortune chose to take our ship in charge...But may/It all come out well in the end” (Agamemnon).

Yet for these same reasons, Pericles had a tumultuous journey through history, and many have asserted that the first two acts of the plays are not even written by Shakespeare, but by another dramatist George Wilkins, who also wrote the 1608 novella The Pattern of Painfull Adventures of Pericles to cash in on the success of the play. What led to this speculation of contesting authorship was that Pericles appeared in 1609 in Quarto form under a different publisher than usual with the title The LATE, and much admired Play, called Pericles, Prince of Tyre, With the true Relation of the whole Historio, adventures, and fortunes of the said Prince: As also, The no lesse strange, and worthy accidents, in the Birth and Life, of his Daughter MARIANA, As it has been diuer[s]e and sundry times acted by his Maiesties Servants, at the Globe on the Banck-side. By William Shakespeare. Yet, when the First Folio was published in 1623, Pericles was left out, leading many over the years to assert that it was not part of the canon, and most certainly a collaboration with George Wilkins.

A primary reason why Pericles may have been popular in its day but then rarely produced until the 1600s and 1700s, is that the sexuality of the play offended the sensibilities of the Victorians. The opening scene where Pericles tries to win the daughter of the powerful King of Antioch contained a shocking revelation concerning the king and his daughter. Prior to 1900, productions cut the opening narrative, much to the confusion of the rest of the story as to why Prince Pericles is sailing around the Mediterranean to avoid the King of Antioch’s assassin. When in the later acts Pericles’ daughter is captured by pirates and forced into prostitution, Victorian audiences could not laugh at the comic bawds who threatened the purity of the heroine.

The play begins with a world where Pericles’ eyes are opened that the mighty and powerful are hiding great sins:

“Who has a book of all that monarchs do, He’s more secure to keep it shut than shown. For vice repeated is like the wandering wind Blows dust in others’ eyes to spread itself”

In spite of his youthful desire to marry a princess, Pericles is wise enough to run away from the corrupt court, as he states, “One sin, I know, another doth provoke: Murder’s as near to lust as flame to smoke.”

While we may not think twice about watching Macbeth and his wife murder to ascend the throne, perhaps this line provides some insight. This is the work of an older Shakespeare writing with a grown daughter and a Stratford doctor, with Shakespeare’s first
(and only) granddaughter born on February 21st, 1608. It shouldn’t surprise us that in twenty-two of Shakespeare’s plays, there are thirty-one dramatizations of the father/daughter relationship. Instead of a play with a shocking series of murders, Shakespeare has his hero on the run from a king whose abuse of his daughter is a smoking gun. There are ancient monsters lurking in the Mediterranean, some in the sea, some on land.

As Pericles travels around the Mediterranean ‘by shipwreck,’ he calls out to the ancient gods to spare his loved ones from the perils of nature. One cannot help but feel for Pericles as he cries out, “O you gods! Why do you make us love your goodly gifts/ And snatch them straight away? We here below/Recall not what we give, and therein may/Vie honour with you.” In this, we cannot help but hear the voice of a more mature, fatherly Shakespeare, who had once lost his only son Hamnet and is most likely concerned about the risks of his daughter Susanna’s pregnancy. Yet, after the hero has learned the tragedies of the stormy sea, his family is restored to him by the same ocean. Pericles exclaims:

“Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me
O’erbear the shores of my mortality,
And drown me with their sweetness.”

Usually literary imagery of drowning has to do with loss, but Shakespeare turns the verse around as his daughter born at sea has been found.

Fathers, in these later plays of The Tempest and Pericles, are offered second chances. Consider the early tragedies: Lord Capulet’s anger leads to Juliet poisoning herself. In Hamlet, Polonius’s daughter Ophelia drowns herself after she’s used by her father as a political prop. Pericles gets off relatively easily. True, for a majority of the play, Pericles is a man who has lost everything. Yet, he’s given what many other Shakespearean fathers rarely receive: the opportunity to have his daughter walk back into his open arms.

Shakespeare never fails to show us something incredible. Never do we doubt in A Midsummer Night’s Dream that Titania, Queen of the Fairies, is able to fall in love with the weaver Bottom, whose head has been transformed into a donkey. Never do we doubt that the ghost of King Hamlet appears on the barracks and tells his son the details of the King’s murder. Nor do we ever doubt that the two sets of twins in The Comedy of Errors or the fraternal twins in Twelfth Night could bring so much confusion through the course of the play. So with Pericles, Prince of Tyre, Shakespeare asks the audience to continue to suspend our disbelief and go on this incredible journey around the Mediterranean Sea. And in the world of Pericles, anything can happen.

**Pericles**
By William Shakespeare
Schubert Theatre
July 22 to August 2

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_Around the Ancient World with Pericles_

**Antioch**: located on the Orontes River near the Amanus Mountains in Syria, central in the spice trade. It was a leading city in the rise of Christianity because of an ancient school for biblical studies. Located on a major fault line, this heavily contested ancient city also fell to fires and earthquakes.

**Ephesus**: Modern-day Turkey, the temple of Artemis is here, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, also a major trade hub.

**Mytilene**: Part of Greece in the North Aegean Sea, the capital and port city for the island of Lesbos. The poets Sappho and Alcaeus were of Mytilene and Aristotle lived here when he was the tutor to Alexander the Great.

**Pentapolis**: Actually in the northeastern coast of Libya, Shakespeare takes dramatic liberty and moves it to Greece. It was a Greek colony founded in 7th century BCE and the city is actually named Cyrene, but the area became so prosperous it led to the foundation of four other cities in the region, so including Cyrene the Romans referred to it as Libya Pentapolis (five cities). A famous disciple of Socrates was born here and founded a 3rd century BCE school of philosophy called Cyreniacs. In the New Testament, Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross for Jesus.

**Tarsus**: In modern-day Turkey. Anthony and Cleopatra famously met for the first time here. According to Luke in the New Testament, this is the birthplace of St. Paul. In the ancient world, also famous for its schools and library said to compete with those in Athens and Alexandria.

**Tyre**: In modern-day Lebanon; an ancient Phoenician port city, the name means ‘rock’ and the main trade center is on an island complex, constantly under attack for its prosperity. King Nebuchanezzar II of Babylon, Alexander the Great, and Egypt all had their ambitions set on Tyre. When Tyre fell to the siege of Alexander the Great, the survivors who escaped founded the city of Carthage in North Africa. Tyre was also known for creating a purple dye from shellfish used in making royal robes. In biblical references, King David had trade alliances with Tyre to help him build the Temple, and in the New Testament, both St. Paul and Jesus visited the city.

Image courtesy of Isabel Smith-Bernstein, dramaturg, Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

**Pericles**

**“Zany and colorful...”** — The Morning Call

**“Rapunzel is sweet, gentle and kind-hearted.”**

Tuesdays thru Saturdays 10am
2pm matinees: July 24, 28, 29 & 30
Sign-intepreted performance Saturday, July 25

Photo by Lee A. Butz.