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# Notes on Pericles, Prince of Tyre

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## Introduction

*Pericles, Prince of Tyre* holds a unique, and often contested, position within the works attributed to William Shakespeare. Not only does it challenge notions of single authorship and consistent style, but it also stands as a remarkable specimen of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic experimentation. Frequently categorized as one of the so-called "late romances" or tragicomedies, the play resists easy classification, blending elements of adventure, tragedy, and miraculous restoration in a manner distinct from much of Shakespeare's earlier output. Its absence from the First Folio and the stylistic disparities across its five acts have generated vigorous scholarly debate, but these very qualities make *Pericles* a fertile ground for literary exploration and analysis.

For English Literature students, *Pericles* offers both a challenge and a reward. The narrative is sprawling and episodic, set against a backdrop of shipwrecks, royal courts, famine, and miraculous survivals. These melodramatic turns are not mere spectacle; they stem from sources firmly rooted in classical and medieval storytelling—a heritage that Shakespeare acknowledges by making the medieval poet John Gower both the inspiration for the plot and a dramatic character who serves as the Chorus. The tale of Apollonius of Tyre, with its long legacy of retelling in various European cultures, finds new life in Shakespeare's hands, who, together with a probable collaborator, transforms the old story into a play resonant with Elizabethan anxieties about fortune, virtue, and providence.

The major characters—Pericles, Thaisa, Marina, and the narrating Gower—serve as both representatives of their narrative traditions and as distinctive personalities shaped by the concerns of Shakespeare's time. Marina, in particular, has fascinated critics for centuries with her steadfast chastity and moral resolve, themes that tie into the play's broader preoccupation with the power of virtue to transcend suffering and corruption. The perils that assail the family—storms, assassins, betrayal, and the threat of sexual exploitation—are counterbalanced by moments of startling grace and forgiveness, culminating in one of the most moving recognitions in all of Shakespeare.

As one delves into the structure and dramaturgy of *Pericles*, the reasons for its patchwork reputation become apparent. The play's first two acts differ markedly in style from those that follow, and the various quantities of prose, blank verse, and deliberately archaic rhymed speech create a shifting linguistic landscape. Yet, it is precisely this variety—its mixture of genre, mode, and tone—that marks *Pericles* as an adventurous work. Themes of hospitality and treachery, appearance versus reality, loss and reunion, all find fresh expression in the exceptionally mobile settings and the episodic plotting.

This book is designed as a comprehensive companion for students. It offers detailed notes on each act and scene, explores the difficult questions of authorship and textual integrity, and traces the play's sources and influences. Each chapter provides commentary on the important motifs, language, and dramatic devices, helping students to develop a nuanced understanding of the play's place in Shakespearean drama and in the broader history of English literature.

Above all, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* is a play about adversity and hope, about journeys that test the body and the spirit, and about the remarkable human capacity for endurance and forgiveness. Though it may pose unique challenges for readers and performers, its enduring appeal lies in its very complexity—in the unpredictable nature of fate, the power of reunion, and the ultimate triumph of virtue. These notes aim to illuminate the play's rich tapestry, offering guidance and insight as students embark on their own journey through Shakespeare's extraordinary romance.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Shakespearean Canon and the Place of Pericles

To speak of the "Shakespearean canon" is to invoke a body of work that has, over centuries, become arguably the most celebrated and studied in the English language. These are the plays and poems widely accepted as having been written by William Shakespeare, the man from Stratford-upon-Avon whose genius reshaped dramatic literature. For most of Shakespeare's plays – *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear*, and so on – their inclusion is relatively straightforward and undisputed. They appeared in authoritative early collections, were known to be performed by Shakespeare's company, and generally exhibit a consistency of style and quality that aligns with our understanding of his development as a playwright.

Then there is *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. This play occupies a far more ambiguous and debated territory within that hallowed list. Its presence feels less like a cornerstone and more like an intriguing, slightly eccentric addition, a play that prompts questions about authorship, textual reliability, and even the very definition of what constitutes "Shakespearean." Its journey into the standard collected works is a story in itself, reflecting shifts in scholarly attitudes, theatrical fashion, and the enduring allure of a compelling narrative, however imperfectly presented.

The bedrock of the Shakespearean canon, as we largely understand it today, is the First Folio of 1623. Published seven years after Shakespeare's death by his friends and fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell, this volume gathered thirty-six plays, presenting them for the first time as a collected body of work. It was a monumental undertaking, preserving many plays that might otherwise have been lost and providing what are often considered the most authoritative texts available. The First Folio was, in essence, the first major curatorial act for Shakespeare's dramatic output.

Yet, conspicuously absent from the First Folio was *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. This omission immediately set the play apart. Why was it left out? The exact reasons remain a subject of speculation, but several possibilities have been proposed over time. It might have been an oversight, though given its apparent popularity in performance, this seems unlikely. More plausibly, the editors may have had doubts about its sole authorship by Shakespeare or questions about the quality or completeness of the available text. The play had been published in quarto form in 1609, but this edition was, and still is, considered notably corrupt.

The 1609 quarto, titled *The Late, And much admired Play, Called Pericles, Prince of Tyre. With the true Relation of the whole History, action, and fortunes of the said*

Prince, As also, The no lesse strange, and worthy accidents, in the Birth and Death, of his daughter Marina, did explicitly attribute the play to William Shakespeare on its title page. However, the quality of the text within suggested to many that it was a "bad quarto," possibly put together from the faulty memory of actors or perhaps taken down piecemeal during performances. Such texts were notorious for their inaccuracies, garbled lines, and missing passages, making them less desirable for inclusion in a prestigious collected edition like the First Folio.

Following the First Folio, other collected editions of Shakespeare's plays appeared throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. *Pericles* began to appear in some of these later editions, albeit sometimes appended as a doubtful play or placed separately. For instance, it was included in the Third Folio of 1664. This marked a turning point, bringing *Pericles* back into proximity with the rest of the accepted plays, though still with a lingering question mark attached to its name. Its inclusion suggests that, despite the initial doubts or omissions, the play retained a connection to Shakespeare in the minds of publishers and readers, perhaps based on performance traditions or the 1609 quarto attribution.

The debate simmered for centuries. Critics and scholars, particularly from the 18th century onwards, often pointed to the stark stylistic differences between the first two acts of *Pericles* and the latter three. The early acts feature relatively simple plotting, irregular versification, and what some perceived as a less sophisticated dramatic technique compared to Shakespeare's known work of the same period. The later acts, however, exhibit much more characteristic Shakespearean blank verse, richer characterisation (especially in Marina and Pericles's recognition scene), and a thematic depth more in line with his mature work.

This perceived disparity fueled theories of non-Shakespearean authorship for the first two acts, with Shakespeare being credited with completing or revising the play from Act III onwards. While such collaborative practices were not uncommon in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, identifying Shakespeare as a collaborator on *Pericles* further complicated its canonical status. Was it Shakespeare's play if he only wrote part of it? If so, how much of it did he have to write to earn that label? These questions tangled the play's identity and its right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with plays widely accepted as entirely his own.

Despite these challenges, *Pericles* gradually solidified its place in the canon. Scholarly consensus, particularly in the 20th century, largely accepted the theory of dual authorship, often attributing the first two acts to another playwright, likely George Wilkins, and the latter three to Shakespeare. With the significant portion attributed to Shakespeare including the play's most dramatically powerful and thematically resonant scenes, editors and critics increasingly felt justified in including *Pericles* in collected works, acknowledging its complex genesis but affirming Shakespeare's vital contribution.

Its categorization as one of Shakespeare's "late romances" or tragicomedies also helped to define its place. Grouped with *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, *Pericles* shares characteristics with these plays: a journey from apparent tragedy and loss towards reconciliation and reunion, often featuring long separations, exotic settings, and elements of the miraculous or improbable. While *Pericles* predates the other romances and is structurally more episodic, its thematic concerns and dramatic trajectory align it with this group, providing context for its unique style and narrative approach within the broader arc of Shakespeare's career.

The episodic structure of *Pericles*, guided by the narrative presence of Gower as Chorus, is another feature that sets it apart from many of Shakespeare's more tightly plotted plays like *Othello* or *Twelfth Night*. This structure, borrowed from its source material, gives the play the feel of a dramatic adaptation of a narrative poem or novel, unfolding across vast geographical distances and long periods of time. While some critics have seen this as a weakness, others appreciate it as a deliberate stylistic choice, perhaps reflecting a different mode of storytelling that Shakespeare was exploring in this period.

Ultimately, the inclusion of *Pericles* in the Shakespearean canon speaks to the evolving nature of literary study and the concept of authorship itself. It forces us to consider what criteria we use to define a writer's body of work. Is it solely based on singular, undisputed authorship? Or can it include works that are collaborative, textually problematic, or stylistically divergent, provided they bear the significant imprint of the author in question? For *Pericles*, the power of Shakespeare's hand in the latter acts, the enduring appeal of the story, and historical performance tradition eventually outweighed the initial doubts raised by its textual history and stylistic inconsistencies.

Studying *Pericles* within the canon thus offers a unique lens through which to view Shakespeare's work. It highlights the potential for collaboration, the challenges of textual transmission, and the ways in which a playwright might experiment with form and genre. It reminds us that the canon is not a static, perfectly formed entity but a collection shaped by historical circumstance, critical interpretation, and the survival of texts. *Pericles*, with its debated origins and distinctive structure, serves as a fascinating case study in these dynamics.

Its place in the canon is, therefore, secure today, though forever marked by its unusual journey. It is no longer an appendage or a doubtful work, but an accepted part of the collected plays, albeit one that comes with a compelling backstory. This history informs how we read and interpret it, prompting us to be mindful of its potential dual authorship and the textual issues that plague the 1609 quarto, the primary source for most modern editions. The challenges it presents to editors and scholars are part of what makes it such a rich subject for study.

Furthermore, *Pericles* serves as an important bridge to understanding Shakespeare's later work. Its exploration of themes like loss, patience, and miraculous recovery foreshadows the concerns of *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Studying *Pericles* provides essential context for appreciating the full scope of Shakespeare's artistic development, showing him venturing into new narrative territories and dramatic possibilities in the final phase of his career. It is a play that expands our definition of what a "Shakespearean" play can be.

The play's survival and eventual acceptance also speak to its inherent theatrical qualities. Despite the textual difficulties and structural peculiarities, the story of Pericles, Thaisa, and Marina is deeply moving and dramatically compelling. The recognition scenes, in particular, possess a raw emotional power that transcends any textual imperfections. This enduring appeal in performance likely played a significant role in keeping the play alive and eventually securing its place within the broader collection of Shakespeare's works, proving that theatrical vitality can sometimes override scholarly reservations.

In considering *Pericles* within the Shakespearean canon, students are invited to look beyond the familiar masterpieces and explore a play that tests the boundaries of attribution and form. It encourages a deeper appreciation for the historical context of playwriting and publication in the early 17th century and highlights the complex process by which a body of work comes to be defined and preserved. *Pericles* is a reminder that even the most established canons have their fascinating anomalies and contested entries.

The journey of *Pericles* into the accepted canon is a testament to the collaborative nature of scholarship, the persistence of theatrical tradition, and the enduring power of a compelling story. It is a play that challenges easy answers and rewards careful study, offering insights not only into the play itself but also into the very nature of the literary canon it now inhabits. Its presence enriches the collection, adding a unique flavour to the diverse landscape of Shakespeare's dramatic world.

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