

The Religious Echoes in *Pericles*

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I. Introduction

The last plays have been isolated from the rest of the canon chronologically, but their independence is also explained in terms of their abundance of religious echoes and the significant appearances of the gods for the first time in Shakespeare's plays. The setting of these religiously rich last plays is a pagan world overseen by the gods and goddesses of classical antiquity. The pagan settings were a means by which the playwright could treat religious themes without risking prosecution by the 1606 Abuses Act, which forbade any blasphemous Christian references in the theatre¹⁾. The last plays, like their predecessors, deal first and foremost with the human secular world and the sufferings and achievement of Man. Indeed Peter Milward suggests Shakespeare's kinship with Chaucer is in his deep concern with the affairs of humanity (Milward 1967, 9). The plays dramatize the temporal world and the language and actions of religious significance occur as an

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1) "The obvious reason is the passing in 1606 of an Act to Restrain Abuses of Players, which prohibited stage-players from using the names of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, or the Trinity, profanely or in jest ... Apart from *Macbeth* ... all the plays after the date (1606) have a pagan setting. A deeper reason, however, is perhaps to be found in the religious development of the dramatist - not that he was moving from Christian to pagan, but that he found it more convenient in the circumstances of his age to express his Christian vision indirectly in terms of classical mythology" (Milward 1973, 213-14).

integral part of the human drama. According to R. M. Frye, "within this secular sphere he at times introduced such theological material as might contribute to his presentation of particular characters and situations" (44). Religion of one form or another has played an important part in the drama of the world of Man, but equally important have been secular concerns such as politics and human relationships. Shakespeare deals with all aspects of this "little world of man" (*King Lear* III. i. 10) in his plays. Religion is an important aspect of this little world, and its influence is apparent to varying degrees in the last plays.

There has been much speculation as to the nature of Shakespeare's personal belief, and critics have used the theological elements of the plays as evidence in efforts to establish the playwright's religious sympathies. Milward, for example, describes a 'deep Christian inspiration' behind Shakespeare's treatment of pagan themes, and offers the view that his religious sympathies 'are clearly on the side of the old Catholic tradition'(Milward 1967, 9). The last plays, rich in religious language, and actions of religious significance, not least the theophanies, have been subjected to much speculation. They have been described in emotional terms as the work of an aging playwright growing more concerned with religious matters towards the end of his life. G. Wilson Knight describes these plays as "the inevitable development of the questioning, the pain, the profundity and grandeur of the plays they succeed" (9). It is easy to understand the efforts of biographers and critics to gain an understanding of the man behind the playwright, as Frances Yates describes that "we are led to look in the last plays for meanings which might reveal to us the nature of Shakespeare's religion in his last years"(9).

Any attempt to extract clues as to the playwright's personal philosophy and religious sympathies can, however, only be speculative. While it is true that they are particularly rich in language and actions of possible religious significance and might offer us clues as to

'through what historical channels he looked to see his religious hopes fulfilled' (Yates 9), they deal primarily with human leadership, power, love, faith, and strength in suffering. It is the presence of the gods and the language and actions of possible religious significance occurring within these secular worlds that we should like to explore in the plays, and we will attempt to illustrate something of the combination of pagan and Christian echoes that characterize these plays. Emphasis will be on the *Pericles* among them.

II. *Pericles*

"The first reference to the printing of a text of *Pericles* is an entry in the Stationers' Register for 1608" (Hoeriger xxiii), and despite the scholarly conclusion that Shakespeare was not responsible for Acts I and II, the play is counted as the first of a series of late works that are categorized separately from the previous tragedies, comedies and histories, as late romances, late plays or tragi-comedies. F. D. Hoeriger notes how

Pericles anticipates *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and also, though less obviously, *The Tempest* in a number of characteristics which justify one in speaking of these plays as a group different from the earlier comedies, tragedies, and histories (lxxi).

Like the later plays in the group *Pericles* is set in a pagan world, and it deals with the secular adventures, sufferings and joys of mortal character. Despite the pagan settings and the conclusions of critics such as A. C. Bradley who, as R. M. Frye describes, holds that 'Christian theology is essentially irrelevant to Shakespeare's writing' (4), pagan and Christian elements are mixed in these late plays. Within the secular arena there is a profusion of religious language, echoes of Biblical

teachings, and references to and appearances of the gods and goddesses of classical mythology. In the Renaissance the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were sometimes used as representatives of the various aspects of the one God of Christianity, for as Edgar Wind describes, 'Poetic pluralism is the necessary corollary to the radical mysticism of the One' (176). We can only speculate as to whether Shakespeare intended these late plays as essentially Christian celebrations, however, and we must acknowledge that the use of the classical gods and goddesses serves to remind us of their pagan settings.

The inhabitants of the world of *Pericles* are greatly influenced by their awareness of the presence of higher powers, and we find many references to the pagan "gods of Greece"(I.iv.97), "the most high gods"(II. iv. 3), "Lucia"(III. i. 10), "Apollo"(III. ii. 68), "Diana"(III. ii. 106), "Juno"(II. iii. 30), "Aesculapius"(III. ii. 114), "Priapus"(IV.vi.4) and "Neptune"(V. Chorus. 17). Pericles suffers a number of sea tempests, attributed to the angry Neptune, and the reunions of the last act of the play occur when the god's anger is stilled on "God Neptune's annual feast"(V.chorus.17). Peter Milward, who argues the significance of Christian and in particular Catholic influences on Shakespeare, asserts that the reunion of Pericles with Thaisa and Marina is 'the outcome not of mere natural power, but of divine grace working both in an above nature' (233). Pericles does indeed put his fate in the hands of heaven, acknowledging the worthlessness of struggling against divine providence, in a Calvinistic acceptance of the relevance of the will of God, or the gods (Elton 18).

We cannot but obey
The powers above us. Could I rage and roar
As doth the sea she lies in, yet the end
Must be as 'tis.

(III. iii. 9-12)

Pericles is an openhearted, generous-spirited, lovely and courageous figure and at times he demonstrates a 'wholehearted submission to inevitable fate' and the 'stoic resignation' of the faithful (Hoeniger lxxxiii). Hoeniger compares him to 'many mediaeval Christian saints and figures in the Old Testament' in his 'passive endurance' (lxxxv), and Pericles does endure his suffering in the first half of the play with patience. This notion is a break from the two accepted sources for the play; neither Gower nor Twine presents this theme of the acceptance of physical and spiritual suffering (lxxxvi) that, Milward suggests, may be intended to reflect the suffering of Christ (Milward 1967, 85). The suggestion that the suffering of Pericles is intended to call to mind the suffering of Christ on the cross is a conjecture for which there is no textual evidence, but the *Pericles* of the first half of the play does endure much and accepts the twists and turns of mortal fortunes under divine manipulation. He is a largely passive man who accepts that "both the waters and the wind"(II. i. 59) have made him "the ball/ for them to play upon" (II. i. 60-1). But Pericles' endurance is not infinite, his ability to suffer is far from Christ-like, and at times during the second half of the play he is frustrated at the incomprehensible workings of the gods;

O you gods!

Why do you make us love your goodly gifts,
And snatch them straight away?

(III. i. 22-24)

Helicanus, Lychorida and Marina all have to encourage Pericles to be patient. Helicanus urges his master "to bear with patience/ Such griefs as you do lay upon yourself" (I. ii. 65-6). Pericles begrudgingly heeds such encouragement, but we witness his self pity when he thinks Marina is sent as a punishment to torture him further in his despair:

O, I am mock'd
And thou by some incensed god sent hither
To make the world to laugh at me.

(V. i. 142-4)

Although Pericles is not a 'pattern of patience' (*King Lear*, III. ii. 37), he is an essentially good man. Tempted by the beauty and seeming virtuousness of Antiochus' daughter, Pericles rejects her when he understands her father's riddle, and his actions throughout the play are generous and free from sin. Francis Bacon writes of goodness as being the greatest of all virtues, 'being the character of the Deity' (37), and in this sense Pericles is a godlike prince. He is also "music's master" (II. v. 30), accomplished in the art of Apollo, as Simonides indicates:

I am beholding to you
For your sweet music this last night. I do
Protest my ears were never better fed
With such delightful pleasing harmony

(II. v. 25-8)

Considering Pericles' essentially virtuous nature in comparison to the jealous Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, his suffering may seem unjust, but the chorus figure of Gower reassures the audience of the charitable intentions of the gods.

I'll show you those in troubles reign,
Losing a mite, a mountain gain.

(II. Chorus. 7-8)

Pericles' patience breaks and he succumbs to un-Christian despair when he receives the final blow of the death of Marina. Marina is the only hope of reviving the prince's weary faith and his fading

enthusiasm for life, and she, foreshadowing Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, Imogen in *Cymbeline* and Miranda in *The Tempest* is her father's saving grace. As Hoeniger comments,

Marina, aided by the grace of Diana, the play's presiding goddess, becomes the main instrument in the freeing of Pericles, her father, from his condition of inward darkness after extreme tribulation (lxxxv).

Marina's strength is illustrated in the brothel scenes which, according to Milward, provide 'a sordid contrast to the bright chastity of the heroines' (228). Marina's survival of all attempts to seduce her, even in the corrupt atmosphere of the brothel, heightens the sense of her piety. Marina possesses the Christian virtues of chastity and patience, but she offers her prayers to the pagan goddess "Diana" (IV. ii. 147) and to "the gods" (IV. vi. 98). Her prayers are answered, and her virtue proves itself strong enough to save her from seduction and leads Lysimachus to remove her from the brothel. Marina's musical accomplishments reflect those of her father, and enhance her angelic quality, as Gower reports:

She sings like one immortal, and she dances
As goddess-like to her admired lays.

(V. Chorus. 3-4)

It is Marina who rescues Pericles from his despair. She brings him back to life in a kind of resurrection which anticipates Paluina's resurrection of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Pericles' suffering has turned the instruments of resurrection to a better and eternal life.

Marina's resurrection of Pericles is an echo of the resurrection of the supposed dead Thaisa by Cerimon in Act III scene ii. Cerimon calls upon the gods to aid him in his healing for he, like Prospero in *The*

Tempest, recognizes the limitations of his powers. He requests the guidance of Aesculapius, the classical god of healing, and, as Hoeniger illustrates, "his invocation is especially apt, because before his apotheosis he raised a dead man, Hippolytus, to life" (93, note).

Cerimon calls upon Apollo, as the god of learning, to aid him in understanding Pericles' scroll; "Apollo, perfect me in the characters!" (III. ii. 68-9). That Cerimon is understood to be a tool of the gods to illustrate the extent of their powers is indicated in Thaisa's description of "this man,/ Through whom the gods have shown their power"(V. iii. 58-9). In raising Thaisa, whom Lychorida describes as "dead" (III. i. 18) but whom Cerimon recognizes as still possessing "the fire of life" (III. ii. 85), Cerimon calls for music, as Paulina is later to do in bringing the statue of Hermione to life:

The still and woeful music that we have.
Cause it to sound, beseech you. [Music]
(III. ii. 90-1)

The Elizabethans had inherited the Platonic concept of the music of the spheres, a notion perhaps alien to a twentieth century audience accustomed to music as a largely secular art. Music was considered a gift from the gods and attributed with regenerative qualities and it was performed as an act of faith, a celebration of the Creation. The concept of the heavenly origin of music is illustrated in a passage by Dr Christopher Tye (the tutor of Samuel Rowley) related by J M Nosworthy:

Musicke is heavenly, for in Heaven is Musicke. For there the Seraphins doe sing continually, And when the best was borne, that euer was man, A quire of Angels sang for joy of it (61).

Pericles' vision of the goddess Diana is anticipated by "the music of the spheres" (V. i. 228) that only Pericles hears, "Rarest sounds!" (V. i. 230) which lull him to sleep:

Most heavenly music!

It nips me unto list'ning, and thick slumber
Hangs upon mine eyes; let me rest.

(V. i. 231-3)

Pericles' vision of Diana is an addition to the possible sources, as Muir points out 'neither Gower nor Twine refers to Diana, except in connection with the temple where Thaisa serves the goddess'(34). In bringing the presiding deity to life, the masque-like theophany, as well as providing a theatrical spectacle, puts the religious echoes of the play to the fore. Both Marina and Thaisa pray to Diana throughout the play, and here the goddess directly intervenes in the plot, instructing Pericles to visit her temple at Ephesus where Thaisa is High Priestess. Unlike Posthumus' blurred memory of his dream and the ambiguity of Jupiter's message in *Cymbeline*, Pericles remembers his vision and determines that "Celestial Dian, goddess argentine,/ I will obey thee" (V. i. 248-9). *Pericles* is alone, in the last plays, including a theophany that directs the progress of mortal events.

Thaisa is not a character we see very much of, but her piety is evident from the praise she receives. Pericles speaks of her as "A most virtuous princess" (II. v. 34) and to Cerimon she is a "Rare" (III. ii. 106) and "fair creature" (III. ii. 105). Marina kneels to Thaisa in a gesture of devotion that anticipates Perdita's kneeling before Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Marina is kneeling before her mother, but also before a High Priestess at the temple of her patron goddess Diana, and if we accept Milward's assertion that this gesture reflects the Catholic tradition of Marian devotion (Milward 1973, 26), we find Christian and

pagan religious echoes combined.

Throughout the play *Pericles* has suffered loss and been a witness to cruelty and corruption. And his patience, albeit tainted by moments of despair, is rewarded, just as Gower promised, in his reunion with Marina and Thaisa. *Pericles'* faith has been challenged but remains strong in the end when he, like *Cymbeline*, is overwhelmed with religious gratitude:

You gods, your present kindness
Makes my past miseries sports.
(V. iii. 40-1)

Pericles is a play where the good triumph after adversity, and a play of hope, endurance and faith. We can describe the play enthusiastically as an uplifting, positive and life affirming play. *Pericles* presents a very moral fairy-tale world in which the good and the faithful are eventually rewarded and the wicked and irreligious punished, reflecting Hardin Craig's assertion that

Shakespeare ... held very firmly to this belief in the ultimate punishment of the wicked, in other words, in eternal justice. (Elton 5)

The virtuous and pious characters all experience the reward of a joyful reunion and the evil characters, Antiochus, his daughter, Cleon and Dionyza, all die for their sins. This doling out of just rewards is attributed to the gods, as Gower reports in the Epilogue, who ensure that the wicked suffer the fatal consequences of their action:

In Antiochus and his daughter you have heard
Of monstrous lust the due and just reward.

.....

The gods for murder seemed so content
To punish; although not done, but meant.
(Epilogue. 1-2 / 15-6)

III. Conclusion

Pericles presents us with very moralistic worlds in which the good are eventually rewarded and the sinners punished. It has been suggested that this moralism indicates the Christian allegory intended in the use of the classical gods and goddesses, and though this may be the case, it is important to remember that such moralism belongs as much to the pagan world as to the Christian. It seems that in this play Shakespeare is merely mirroring attitudes which classicist and theologian alike credited to the pagan world. The intention of this study has been to illustrate something of the profusion of religious echoes in *Pericles* and to indicate the union of Christian and pagan concepts that occurs in the theophanies and in the language and actions of the mortal and spirit characters.

In *Pericles* we find characters who endure suffering and hardship, seemingly arbitrarily, as with Pericles and Thaisa. In *Pericles* suffering eventually receives reward, largely as a result of the human practice of the godly virtues of patience, mercy and forgiveness. Supernatural figures are prominent in *Pericles*, be they ghosts or gods. As we witness Apollo voicing his judgement through the Oracle in *The Winter's Tale*, Prospero communicating with the elemental spirits in *The Tempest*, and Jupiter descending to speak with the spirits of Posthumus' family in *Cymbeline*, so we witness Diana making an appearance in *Pericles*. *Pericles* ends on a peaceful note of harmony after confessions, reconciliations and reunions in which the characters pay tribute to the gods. It is the result of gods's graces to human being that the separated Pericles, Thaisa and Marina are reunited in

forgiveness. In other words, the happy ending like this could be attributed to the mixed mysterious functioning of the religious echoes and divine power displayed in this play.

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