

From *Pericles*, New Beginnings

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Reflecting on *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* in a 2016 article featured in *The New Yorker*, poet Cynthia Zarin writes: "[It] is perhaps the strangest play in Shakespeare's canon." Critics have long been confounded by the genre-defying text, which was likely written between 1607 and 1608 C.E. and takes as its source the tale of Apollonius of Tyre, a story of ancient Greek origins and unknown authorship that was wildly popular in Europe during the Middle Ages. So singular and, indeed, curious is *Pericles's* dramaturgy that some scholars, including Suzanne Gossett, editor of the Arden Shakespeare edition of the play, have concluded that its writing should not solely be credited to the Bard of Avon. Whether or not Shakespeare received an assist from the likes of George Wilkins, a minor English dramatist and petty criminal, or others, the play's indebtedness to John Gower's 14th century poem, *Confessio Amantis (The Lover's Confession)*, is unmistakable. That Gower is given new narrative life as a choric character in *Pericles* bespeaks the significant influence he had on Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries.

Perhaps most striking about the ongoing debates regarding *Pericles*--its authorship, its patchy plot--are the ways in which they often rehearse the play's preoccupations with matters of loss, recovery, and reconciliation. Forced to flee Tyre after discovering King Antiochus's incestuous relationship with his daughter, Pericles soon finds himself stripped of many of the things he loves the most--his home, his wife, Thaisa, and his daughter, Marina. He spends much of the play negotiating immense heartbreak and attempting to recuperate what he can of his losses. While he does eventually reunite with the wife and daughter he fears he will never see again, what his decades-long stormy voyage makes abundantly clear is that there are some things that can never be fully recovered. All that will ever remain are the fragments, remnants, and traces that they leave in their wake--the material out of which we create memories and stories.

Dramaturgical unwieldiness aside, *Pericles* has continued to garner the interest of scholars, theater-makers, and audiences alike precisely because of the ways in which it surfaces the power of memory and storytelling to raise the dead, to re-present those things that we fear have been eternally consigned to the gaps. The mood of the drama shuttles between the subjunctive and the indicative--from what we, following performance theorist Richard Schechner, might call the "as if" and the "is"--across its five acts, and, in so doing, bids its audiences to call forth their own visions of restoration and reconciliation.

We know that *Pericles*, despite a nearly two hundred-year caesura in its production history, was a favorite amongst spectators prior to the rise and reign of puritanism in the 17th century. Its earliest audiences likely found much to appreciate in the play's evocative explorations of the human condition. They also likely resonated with its message of hope. Maintaining a sense of optimism and possibility is no doubt a daunting enterprise, especially given how unpredictable and inexplicable life often is--unfair too. *Pericles's* peripatetic journey casts a spotlight on the crucial role that hope plays in our survival. To be sure, in the absence of hope, we, much like *Pericles*, are liable to become mired in despair.

"New hope waits on you," South, revising Gower's exclamation at the end of *Pericles* about "new joy," declares in the final beat of *In this Hope*, a project that generously interpolates the earlier work. It is a provocation for us all to desire more, to desire better, to desire differently. It is also an invitation to find and explore the new beginnings in endings.