Pericles’ "rough and woeful music"

Alan Lopez
April 21, 2014

PDF

For Julia

Abstract: In this essay, I argue for the benefits of Suzanne Gossett’s reading of Pericles over the Oxford’s 1986 reconstructed Pericles, looking specifically at Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2. Gossett argues that Cerimon’s “rough and woeful music” is not a scribal error in the quarto, a doubling of Cerimon’s “rough” in 3.2.78-79, but perhaps intentional on Shakespeare’s part. If we side with Oxford’s emendations of these scenes, Cerimon’s call for “rough and woeful music” becomes a call for “still and woeful music”; his admonishment, that Pericles was “too rough” when he “threw her in the sea” becomes the insistence that he was “too rash” when he “threw her in the sea.” In accepting Oxford’s emendation, we lose the repetition in Cerimon’s earlier admonishment. More importantly, we miss the fact that Thaisa’s recovery by Cerimon turns as much on Pericles’ rough handling as the rough notes he places on her coffined body.

§

When Cerimon revives Thaisa with “rough and woeful music” (3.2.87) in William Shakespeare’s Pericles (c. 1609), he invites us to look back to a similar use of roughness in Act 3, Scene 1: the “roughness” on behalf of those “[t]hat threw her into the sea” (3.2.79). Suzanne Gossett notes this entwined use of “roughness” in a footnote of her 2004 Arden edition of Pericles, observing, “[t]here may be a relation between the rough expulsion of Thaisa and the rough . . . music . . . by which Cerimon will revive her” (3.2.78 n, emphasis in original). Gossett draws attention to a semantic difference in “rough,” noting the Oxford editors’ preference, following George Wilkins’ Painful Adventures of Pericles, for “rash” over “rough.” In a further gesture of indebtedness to Wilkins, the Oxford editors prefer “still and woeful music” over the quarto’s “rough and woeful music.” I wish to argue for the benefits of Gossett’s reading of these scenes. Gossett contends, at odds with Arden 2’s edition of Pericles, that Cerimon’s “rough and woeful music” is not a scribal error in the quarto, a doubling of Cerimon’s “rough” in “They were too rough / That threw her in the sea” (3.2.78-79), but perhaps intentional on Shakespeare’s part: “Thaisa requires to be awakened, and ‘music, such as charmeth sleep’ (MND 4.1.81) would be inappropriate” (3.2.87 n). If we side with Oxford, Cerimon’s call for “rough and woeful music” becomes a call for “still and woeful music”; his earlier admonishment, that Pericles was “too rough” when he “threw her in the sea,” becomes the insistence that he was “too rash” when he “threw her in the sea.” In accepting Oxford’s emendation, we lose the repetition in Cerimon’s earlier admonishment. More importantly, we miss the fact that Thaisa’s recovery by Cerimon turns as much on Pericles’ rough handling as the rough notes he places on her coffined body.

Let us rehearse the events of the previous night. Pericles is told by a sailorman that his wife, Thaisa, believed dead after delivering their daughter Marina, must be thrown overboard — and this owing, Pericles is additionally told, to a long-standing custom at sea. Although reluctant, because robbed of the time for a proper funeral for his wife, Pericles complies. In lieu of a funeral, Pericles calls for “ink and paper” (3.1.65), the latter comprising the “priestly farewell” (3.1.69) he places on Thaisa before sending her overboard and, eventually, onto the shores of Ephesus where Cerimon and his servants discover her. On this point, there is no substantive difference between the various editions of Pericles, namely Arden, Cambridge, and Oxford. There remains considerable editorial discussion, however, over how Cerimon revives Thaisa. In asking for “[t]he viol once more” (3.2.90), as Cerimon does in
his efforts to bring Thaisa back to life, he may ask “for an instrument to play . . . or a small container of medicine” (3.1.89 n), this ambiguity owing to various Renaissance spellings of “viol.” The ambiguity allows us to read “music” as “physic” (3.2.85), the latter also often meaning, on the Renaissance stage, “health” or “wellness,” both at stake in Pericles. In addition to refusing a forced choice between “instrument” or “medicine,” reading “music” as “physic” brings us closest to Gossett’s identification of this chiasmatic structure of Scenes 1 and 2 in Act 3 of Pericles, where Pericles’ “rough” handling of Thaisa becomes the necessary time by which Cerimon, with his “rough” physic, can recover Thaisa. My use of “handling” is not incidental, although I refer less to Cerimon’s capacity to carry a tune than to the quickness by which Pericles, in the words of Sonnet 34, can “give physic to [that] grief” (Son 34.9).

Although I draw from Shakespeare’s sonnets throughout this essay for this language of grief and adds, Pericles is itself a work concerned with grief, including vengeance for injury upon anothers. I am thinking of the burning of Antiochus and his daughter in their chariot [due to this heinous capital offence of incest (2.4.5). For the most part, however, Shakespeare contrasts this punitive aspect of justice with the restorative aspects found in Thaisa’s death and resurrection. This latter sense of justice is concerned with remedy rather than vengeance, as in the overturning of violence and “wreck[age]” (3.2.51) to persons and things. One recalls the servant’s explanation for Thaisa’s appearance on the seashore. No one has yet seen the coffin’s contents, which are bejeweled with spices and diamonds. Yet the servant attributes Thaisa’s arrival on shore to the “sea’s stomach being o’ercharged with gold” (3.2.63), as if the sea would do wrong not to cast up and belch out that “delicate” (3.2.60) fortune it would keep as its own. Pericles appeals to this ameliorative justice when he places his priestly farewell upon Thaisa, a plea that this farewell, though “black” (1.2.87), may “comfort” (1.2.97) “wrong” (1.2.89) and “relieve” (1.2.97) “offence” (1.2.90). In the eyes of a Renaissance audience, throwing Thaisa overboard could be an offense. It all but confirmed not only that Thaisa’s “glorious beauty” (1.2.70) may be propagated no further, as Marina may also die aboard, but that Thaisa may be “[f]orgot[ten] . . . utterly” (3.1.58).

How do we acquit what Sonnet 34 would call Pericles’ “strong offence” (Son 34.12)? We do not know whether Shakespeare drew upon his sonnets in the composition of Pericles. We know, nonetheless, that his sonnets and Pericles were published about the same time in 1609. And Pericles recalls Sonnets 65 and 85. I refer to them collectively rather than individually. In reading them together, we find enacted the above-mentioned tension in Pericles between, on the one hand, a “polished” and “well-refined pen” (85.8), “golden quill” (85.3) referring to marigolds or, continuing our conceit, Pericles’ royalty, and, on the other hand, the speaker’s “dumb thoughts” (85.14), as in “lowliest” (Shakespeare 550n) rough thoughts. The sonnets acquit Pericles in how they return us to Pericles. In the sonnets’ enactment of this tension between polish and roughness, ultimately a battle of class, we find Pericles’ own plea to the gods, what in E.C.’s Emaricdulfe is the sonneteer’s plea, “Smile on these rough-hewed lines, these ragged words” (qtd. in Shakespeare 392). And which the gods seemingly do. Now, if we look only at the sonnets’ considerations of orthography, Sonnet 85’s juxtaposition of “manners” (85.1) with “polished” and “well-refined pen” would seem at odds with Sonnet 65’s “wrackful siege of batt’ring days” (65.6), itself echoing Sonnet 6’s “winter’s ragged hand” (6.1). Yet this comparison only seems off if we focus on the orthographic alacrity with which, presumably, Sonnet 65’s and Pericles’ words are composed. If we focus on the epistolary act of writing itself, we find a way to recuperate the sense of “manners” and “polish”: despite the tempest in which he finds himself, despite the insistence that his queen “must overboard straight” (3.1.53), Pericles calls for “ink and paper” (3.1.65), appealing to the “manners” and “polish” befitting his status as prince and husband — the manners, Lychorida’s requested “manli[ness]” (3.1.22), which oblige that Pericles, before all else, observe his duties as husband before Thaisa. (Hence “take comfort” [3.1.22].) These manners, consequently, find in the rapid unloosening of Pericles’ hand that other “manner” by which he can “hold her still” (85.1).

Sonnet 65 refers to a “hand” that would be “strong” (65.11) and attempt to “hold [Time’s] swift foot back” (65.11). But it also refers to a hand that would write. Like Pericles, Sonnet 65 offers a riddle:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o’ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O how shall summer’s honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of batt’ring days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?
O fearful meditation; where, alack,
Shall Time’s best jewel from Time’s chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Beginning with the speaker’s lament that “Nothing and no one escapes from a subjection to which the earth and sea are themselves bound” (Greenblatt 113), and continuing with the speaker’s delineation of these instances of sundered brass, stone, earth, and sea before the foot of an indifferent, sad mortality, we come upon what may, in the speaker’s mind, forbid these “ravages of time” (113), what the speaker calls a miracle of might: “That if[ in black ink, my love may still shine bright” (65.14). If we trust the speaker’s closing words in the couplet, then the sonnet ends on a curious note. What
allows this miracle’s might is the speaker’s repudiation of the might of miracles at all. For what shall forbid these decays, answers the speaker, is only his flower. Against the “wrackful siege of batt’ring days,” the breath of a “honey’d” quill shall hold beauty and his “plea.”

Although Thaisa is thrown overboard with a “strong hand” (65.11), she is held onto with an even stronger one, although this hand is “no stronger than a flower” (65.4). Because only as strong as a flower, this hand asks not that Thaisa is “hid” from “Time” (65.10), but merely “give[n] . . . burial” (3.1.69), may not “spoil” (65.12), but “shine bright” (65.14). Yet there would be no brightness had Pericles not relented when a sailor told him to throw Thaisa overboard. Pericles does relent, giving Thaisa the only burial he can. Owing to his husbandry, Pericles is himself given his “due and just” reward (epilogue li. 2) by the goddess Diane at Ephesus. Indeed, Pericles is given what is denied the speaker of Sonnet 65’s aspirations to immortality, which is this chance to “[find]” his beloved at “sea again” (5.1.187).

Pericles’ farewell is rough and hurried. It is also why Thaisa lives again. We lose this mechanism of Thaisa’s recovery if we adopt Oxford’s “still” over Arden’s “rough.” By retaining Arden’s “rough,” we discover a continuity between Act 3, Scenes 1 and 2. What we see, between Pericles’ loss of Thaisa and her recovery by Cerimon, is how rough husbandry becomes “rich” (3.2.101) and “rare” (3.2.105). It is not with aspirations to the divine, a request that “this dead queen re-lives” (5.3.64), but with a plea for that “small[est]” gift, another’s “good will” (3.4.17). Cerimon’s recovery of Thaisa is rare because of how Cerimon returns Thaisa to the world, which is through that same passport, if not quite the same notes, by which Thaisa was earlier received by the “most praised water[s]” (3.2.100) of a husband’s inked farewell.

Notes

I would like to thank Will Stockton for his encouragement and helpful suggestions during my revisions of this essay. I am grateful to Jennifer R. Rust for helpful questions and comments on an earlier version of this essay. I am also grateful to Upstart’s two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

1 All citations from Pericles refer to Gossett’s edition.

2 For an excellent reading of music in Pericles, especially as relates to the pagan and Christian history structuring Cerimon’s “rough and woeful music,” see Hart.

3 All citations from the sonnets refer to Burrow’s edition.

4 One could argue, of course, that Cerimon performs violence on Thaisa by attempting to revive her after his failing the first time.

5 Although “if” is absent from the sonnet, I have inserted the word to draw out what I take to be the speaker’s subtle appeal to the conditional in the closing quatrain’s “That,” which I read as the argument’s hypothetical.

6 Stephen Greenblatt draws from Theodor Adorno’s philosophy of aesthetic autonomy in his gloss of the speaker’s use of “miracle,” where miraculous is belief itself, as in belief in the “exemption,” at least for a time, “of an aesthetic object from the laws that govern all other material objects” (113). Compare also with John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

7 See Kennedy for a very informative discussion of violets and botany in Renaissance works, with attention especially to the “violet’s olfactive and affective properties,” its “sweet and sad aroma.”

8 Richard C. McCoy argues that “the miracles in these late plays are not gifts from the gods but result instead from families reuniting and comforting one another” (115). McCoy’s observations chime with Sean Benson’s reading of Pericles’ “restoration” as primarily “the restoration of family” (137): “family reunions” and “reconciliation” take part, Benson similarly argues, owing not to an insistence upon “resurrection” (137), but simply “belief in its possibility” (137).

9 Had Pericles not relented before the sailors’ custom, for instance, mutiny could have erupted, with everyone dying on board or sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Additionally, the intrigue of Pericles’ farewell extends beyond Pericles’ placement of it on Thaisa. Suzanne Gossett, in a note on this scene, tells us that “a special service for those who died at sea was not added to the Book of Common Prayer until the revision of 1662” (287 n.69) — fifty-years after the first publication of Pericles.
Works Cited


Alan Lopez works in Renaissance literature and drama, with a specialization in Shakespeare and early modern political philosophy. He is presently at work on a manuscript on hospitality in Shakespeare. He has previously written on Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*.

© Clemson University 2013