



## Synopsis: *Pericles*

*We get incest, famine, jousting knights, two shipwrecks, a woman resurrected, murder plots, pirates, kidnapping, prostitution, a randy governor, music of the spheres, heavenly visions, improbable reunions, and a poet who comes from the grave to tell all.*

By William Shakespeare and George Wilkins, written around 1608 and first printed in a 1609 Quarto; though printed in six quarto editions through 1635, this play was not included in the First Folio.

### Chorus

Gower, a 14th century English poet who wrote an English translation of the story of Apollonius of Tyre, appears from the grave to narrate his story (the main character's name changed to Pericles). He's standing before the palace of Antioch, which is decorated with severed heads.

King Antiochus is in an incestuous relationship with his hot-looking daughter, but he nevertheless must make appearances of intent to marry her off, so he devises a riddle that all suitors must solve. If they don't, they lose their heads.

### Act I, Scene 1

Pericles comes to Antioch to try his hand at winning the princess. He reads the riddle which reveals the incest. This solution is so obvious you have



Gower (Armando Durán) sings his tale in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2015 production of *Pericles* at the Folger Theatre. Photos by Teresa Wood, Folger Shakespeare Library

to wonder why no previous suitor got it. Were they that dumb, or did they try to fudge? Which is what Pericles does now, telling Antiochus he knows the answer but does the king really want to hear it? Antiochus, realizing Pericles has solved the riddle but, no, doesn't want it made public, tells Pericles he misinterpreted but will give him 40 days to work it out. Pericles, figuring he'll be lucky to live out the night if he stays, takes flight, and Antioch sends Thaliard, an assassin, after him.

### Act I, Scene 2

Back in Tyre, Pericles is sad. Lords of the court give him good cheer, but one of them, Helicanus, tells the others they wrongly flatter their king, who's obviously despondent. Pericles dismisses the others and

after threatening Helicanus with execution, thanks him for his forthrightness. He tells Helicanus what happened in Antioch and worries that Antiochus will come after him in Tyre. Helicanus agrees that's a real danger, so Pericles should "go travel for a while." The prince takes this advice.

### Act I, Scene 3

Thaliard arrives in Tyre, and overhears Helicanus tell the other lords that Pericles is gone to sea as penance for doing some wrong in Antioch. On this note, and though he still intends to pursue Pericles at sea, Thaliard knows it's safe to present himself. Helicanus, who knows Thaliard and why he's there, greets him and invites him to feast in Tyre.

### Act I, Scene 4

We are now in Tarsus, which is enduring a great famine. The governor, Cleon, and his wife, Dionyza, bemoan their fate when they hear that a fleet of ships is approaching. Cleon figures it's an invasion, but it turns out to be Pericles who, having heard of Tarsus's plight, has brought food to help lift the famine.

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. Pericles stays in Tarsus until messengers sent by Helicanus warn Pericles that Thaliard is, indeed, looking for him on behalf of Antiochus. Pericles shows the letter to Cleon, knights the messenger, and departs. But once at sea, a mighty storm wrecks the ship, and Pericles is washed ashore, bereft of all his belongings, in a foreign land.

### Act II, Scene 1

Pericles is wet and pretty annoyed at his bad luck. Three fishermen come near and speak of the shipwreck and otherwise converse in wise fables. Pericles approaches, appearing to the fishermen like a beggar. Nevertheless, they give him a cloak and, as two of the fishermen leave to pull up their nets, the other tells Pericles he is in Pentapolis where reigns "the

good King Simonides," who the next day, in celebration of his daughter's birthday, will be hosting a tournament of the knights courting her. The other fishermen return with the net, which has caught up a rusty piece of armor. It is Pericles's own armor, so he asks the fishermen to take him to the court and he will, eventually, repay them for their kindness.



Thaisa (Gia Crovatin), daughter of Simonides (John Rothman) in the background, greets the knights and inspects their shield emblems during the parade of contestants in Pentapolis in the 2016 Theatre for a New Audience production of *Pericles*. Photo by Gerry Goodstein, Theatre for a New Audience.

### Act II, Scene 2

At the court of Pentapolis, Simonides and his daughter, Thaisa, preside over the ceremonies of the tournament. During the parade of knights, she describes the emblem on each one's shield. The knights come from Sparta, Macedon, and Antioch, and two more from countries not identified. The sixth is Pericles, "a stranger," according to Thaisa, and the subject of gossiping ridicule among the lords for his mean attire. They all move into the gallery for the tournament, which incites great shouts and the cry, "The mean knight!"

### Act II, Scene 3

Simonides and Thaisa host all the competitor knights at a banquet, where Thaisa honors Pericles with the wreath of victory and he gets a seat of honor, though he contends "some other is more fit." The other knights are courteous though, and the banquet

begins. Pericles broods over his state and how Simonides reminds him of his father. Simonides ponders the state of Pericles, and Thaisa wants to be sated by Pericles. Simonides orders his daughter to offer Pericles a cup for a health; she pretends to demur but is glad for the assignment. Pericles tells her he is “a gentleman of Tyre” who was washed upon these shores after a shipwreck, which she passes on to her father. There is dancing and music and flirting (except by Pericles) and Simonides is playing the merry host the whole while, and when it is time for bed, he assigns Pericles the lodging next to his own.

### **Act II, Scene 4**

Back in Tyre, Helicanus reveals to Escanes what really happened with Pericles in Antioch. He also relates that the “most high gods” paid home the incestuous Antiochus and his daughter with a lightning strike while they were seated in a chariot, and their bodies raised such a stink no one would bury them. Other courtiers enter, wondering whether the long-absent Pericles is dead or not and declare that Helicanus should be king. He tells them to wait out another year for Pericles’s return, or they can go search for him themselves. They agree to both.

### **Act II, Scene 5**

Speaking of waiting one more year, Simonides informs the visiting knights in Pentapolis that his daughter has chosen to remain unmarried for another 12 months, “Her reason to herself is only known.” The knights bid the king farewell, after which Simonides pulls out a letter he’s received from Thaisa with her reasons clearly stated: she chooses the “stranger knight,” to which he concurs. But when Pericles enters, Simonides dissembles, showing him his daughter’s letter and accusing him of bewitching Thaisa and treason. Pericles is confused by the first assertion but angered by the second and pretty much challenges the king to combat for calling him a traitor. Thaisa enters and Pericles appeals to her to set the record straight with her father, that he never made love to her. She says she wishes he had, so Simonides turns his dissembling on her and in a seeming rage sentences them to be man and wife. She’s pleased, if Pericles loves her; he professes he does love her and is pleased; Simonides is beside

himself being so pleased, but that’s his nature.

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. Thaisa is soon pregnant. Messengers come from Tyre informing Pericles that Antiochus and his daughter are dead and that the court in Tyre is agitating to crown Helicanus. This is the first Simonides and his court learn that Pericles is, in fact, a king himself. Pericles decides he needs to get home, Thaisa wants to go with him, and the couple along with her nurse Lychorida set sail. But true to Pericles’s luck, they run into a bad storm.

### **Act III, Scene 1**

As Pericles bewails the winds, thunder, and lightning, Lychorida comes up from below deck to present Pericles his just-born daughter and tell him that Thaisa died giving birth. The sailors want the queen’s body off the boat, claiming the storm won’t subside until “the ship be cleared of the dead.” Though Pericles thinks it’s only superstition, he gives in. They place her in a coffin along with a letter and a casket of jewels, dump the coffin overboard, and head for Tarsus.

### **Act III, Scene 2**

Cerimon is a doctor in Ephesus, treating men who have been shipwrecked. Some servants enter with the coffin that had washed up on the shore nearby. They open the trunk, find Thaisa (along with the letter and jewels), and Cerimon thinks she might still be alive. He does, in fact, revive her, proving what the gentlemen have been saying earlier in this scene that he’s the best darn doctor in the world.

### **Act III, Scene 3**

Meanwhile, in Tarsus, Pericles turns his infant daughter, whom he names Marina, over to Cleon and Dionyza to raise while he returns to Tyre. They agree to raise her as their own—for they do, in fact, have a daughter—and Lychorida stays in Tarsus to care for the baby.

### **Act III, Scene 4**

First, Pericles and company assumed Thaisa was dead; now she returns the favor, assuming she will never see Pericles again. Cerimon suggests she

become a votary at Diana's temple nearby.

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. With Pericles returned to Tyre and Thaisa settled in to the sisterhood of Diana, we cross over the years of Marina's life in Tarsus, where she has blossomed into a young woman. True to their promise, Cleon and Dionyza have raised her like their own, and Marina and their daughter, Philoten, are like sisters, at least in their affection for each other. But Marina is superior in every way: looks, sewing, weaving, singing. Dionyza grows jealous for the sake of her daughter and, upon the death of Lychorida, determines to have Marina murdered.

### Act IV, Scene 1

Dionyza hires Leonine to murder Marina. They are on a seashore, and Marina now approaches with flowers for Lychorida's grave. Dionyza, feigning great concern for Marina's health, insists that she walk a while with Leonine accompanying her. After Dionyza departs, Leonine tells Marina to say her prayers because he's about to kill her. She tries to talk him out of it (she never did the queen or anybody wrong; she once trod upon a worm against her will and wept for it, for goodness sake). Just as Leonine is ready to strike, a band of pirates suddenly show up, grab Marina, and run off with her. Leonine resolves to let her go and report her as dead, as the pirates will surely kill her after they are done with her.

### Act IV, Scene 2

Business is bad at the brothel in Mytilene. The place is too wenchless: only three prostitutes are working there, and they are diseased. Pandar sends Boulton out to get some new women. He returns with the pirates bearing Marina. They attest to her virginity and sell her to Pandar for

a thousand pieces. As Pandar goes off to finish the transaction with the pirates and Boulton goes off to advertise the new virgin in the marketplace, Marina is left with the Bawd, who instructs her in how to be a good whore. Boulton returns with tidings of a number of customers planning to descend on the brothel in the next day.

### Act IV, Scene 3

Back in Tarsus, Cleon is angry with Dionyza for murdering Marina, much against their promise to Pericles, who did, after all, save their country from starvation. Dionyza accuses Cleon of being a bad father. He reluctantly goes along with Dionyza's scheme to build a monument to Marina and put on a show of mourning for Pericles.

### Act IV, Scene 4

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. Pericles, this time accompanied by Helicanus (they leave behind "Old Escanes" to govern Tyre), returns to Tarsus. Cleon shows Pericles Marina's tomb, and this sends Pericles into a deep depression. He puts on sackcloth, vows to never wash his face or cut his hair, and sail the seas. Meanwhile, back in Mytilene...

### Act IV, Scene 5

Rather than getting laid, customers at the brothel get some good preaching from Marina, the new virgin there. The converted johns determine to hear the vestals sing or any other such virtuous things rather than rutting.

### Act IV, Scene 6

Needless to say, Marina is not providing good return on investment for Pandar, Bawd, and Boulton. Boulton offers to rape her before she turns all the cavaliers into priests. Just then, the governor of Mytilene, Lysimachus, shows up. He's a regular customer



Pirates carry away Marina (Lauren Ballard) in the Blackfriars Playhouse 2014 production of *Pericles*. Photo by Lindsey Walters, American Shakespeare Center.

and, as such, a protector of the business. They bring in Marina and warn her to do her job for this guy. She doesn't. Instead, she plays on the governor's own sense of guilt (he can't even say the word "prostitution") and presents her sense of true personhood in such a wise way that the governor is not only impressed, he promises he will help her some day. His departure, condemning the business, leaves the brothel owners in such a tizzy, they allow Boulton to go ahead and rape Marina. Before he can do so, she makes a proposition: pimp her skills in singing, weaving, sewing, and dancing along with her "other virtues" to the wealthy households of Mytilene. She even gives Boulton gold as earnest. He agrees to broach the idea with his employers and is certain "I shall find them tractable enough."

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. Boulton is good to his word. He places Marina in "an honest house," and what she earns with her skills, she gives to the bawd. Meanwhile, Lysimachus has spied a Tyrian ship put into his city's harbor. You know who is on board that ship.

### **Act V, Scene 1**

Lying on a couch is Pericles, unkempt, unshaven—a real mess. Helicanus greets Lysimachus aboard the ship. They look at Pericles, and Helicanus assures Lysimachus that nothing will get through to the king, who is suffering intense grief at the loss of his wife and daughter. One of the lords accompanying Lysimachus suggests a certain maid in Mytilene who "would win some words of him," and Lysimachus, knowing who she is, orders a lord to fetch Marina. Lysimachus tells Helicanus that if he were assured she "came of gentle kind and noble stock," he would marry her in a heartbeat. Marina sets about trying to recover the mystery man, first with music, then speaking with him. He does rouse, somewhat irritably, until he looks at her. He demands her history; she gives it somewhat protractedly to draw out the suspense. Overjoyed to realize this is really his long-lost daughter, Pericles calls in Helicanus, excitedly presents his daughter to him and meets Lysimachus for the first time (who, in a heartbeat, realizes that Marina does, in fact, come of gentle kind and noble stock). But Pericles is suddenly distracted with

"music of the spheres" that no one else can hear. He falls asleep and the others leave him alone. Diana comes to Pericles in a dream, telling him to go to her temple in Ephesus and repeat his and his daughter's life stories. Pericles awakes and orders the ship prepare to sail for Ephesus. But first, he wants to refresh himself ashore at Mytilene, whereupon Lysimachus welcomes him and says he plans to ask him another suit. "You shall prevail, were it to woo my daughter; for it seems you have been noble towards her," Pericles says, channeling his father-in-law.

Gower reappears to continue the narrative. Mytilene greets Pericles with great pageantry and Lysimachus is engaged to Marina. Then they all head to Ephesus.

### **Act V, Scene 2**

At the temple of Diana, Thaisa is now high priestess accompanied by a number of virgins, and Cerimon happens to be there, too. Pericles approaches the altar, begins telling his story, and when he reaches his reunion with his daughter, Thaisa names him and faints. This causes much consternation for Pericles that his story has caused a nun to pass out and she clearly needs urgent medical attention—Pericles being unaware that the best darn doctor in the world is right there. Cerimon now tells Pericles that the nun is his wife. Thaisa recovers, verifying what Cerimon has said is true. Husband and wife reunite. Mother and daughter reunite. The ever-true Helicanus bows before his queen, though Thaisa hasn't a clue who he is. Pericles introduces him to her and also introduces their future son-in-law. Thaisa then tells Pericles that her father is dead, so Pericles intends to reign in Pentapolis with Thaisa and put Lysimachus and Marina on the throne in Tyre.

Gower reappears to conclude his narrative with its moral. Pericles, Thaisa, Marina, Helicanus, and Cerimon are good people and end up happy. Antiochus, his daughter, Cleon, and Dionyza are wicked people and end up burned, by heavenly fire or, in the case of Cleon and Dionyza, by the citizens of Tarsus learning what their king and queen did to Pericles and torching their palace. And here Gower's play has ending.

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