

**A Guide to  
PERICLES**

*by William Shakespeare*



Alistair McCallum

*“The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them.” Simon Callow*

## **The Shakespeare Handbooks**

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*Further titles in preparation.*

## **Setting the scene**

*Pericles* was written during the period 1607–8. Shakespeare was in his early forties, and for over ten years had been the principal playwright for London's leading theatre company. Founded as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company came under the patronage of England's new king, James I, a great lover of the theatre, when he succeeded Queen Elizabeth in 1603; the company then became known as the King's Men.

Although collaboration between playwrights was common at the time, Shakespeare rarely worked with other writers. *Pericles* is exceptional in this respect; substantial portions of the text, particularly in the early scenes, do not seem to be typically Shakespearean, and are generally believed to be by a different playwright, although this cannot be proved. The critical consensus is that Shakespeare adapted, improved and completed an unfinished text that was supplied to the King's Men by a freelance writer.

The debate over the authorship of *Pericles* clearly did not worry theatregoers and readers of the time: following its first performances at the Globe Theatre in London, the play continued to be enormously successful for many years, both with the public and at King James's court. By the 1660s, however, the play had fallen out of favour, and it was not until the twentieth century that it began to appear regularly on stage once more.

This strange, mythical tale of the wanderings of the long-suffering Prince of Tyre was unlike anything Shakespeare had written before. Even now, with its tempests and its twists of fate, this story of losses, births, deaths and rebirths, of separation and ultimate reunion, can provide an incredibly powerful theatrical experience:

*"The audience shed a tear and gave a standing ovation for about fifteen minutes. In terms of audience reaction it was one of the most successful productions I have ever done in my life. The response was overwhelming. People were crying and shouting ... the story is very emotional because it's about finding that which is lost."*

Director Adrian Noble on his 2002 production of *Pericles* for the Royal Shakespeare Company

## Marriage in mind

We find ourselves in the classical world of ancient Greece. Over the centuries, Greece has grown and spread; the seafaring Greeks have founded a network of cities along the coastline of the eastern Mediterranean, far from the mainland, independent cities whose names – Tyre, Ephesus, Tarsus, Antioch – still carry a faint resonance to this day.

These city-states, each with its own ruler, are connected not by land but by the perilous waters of the Mediterranean sea. The wanderings of our hero, Pericles, Prince of Tyre, will take him across these waters many times as he voyages from one city to another before finding his final destination.

When Pericles first sets sail from Tyre, however, he is blissfully unaware of the hazards that lie ahead. He sets out with one simple aim: to find a wife.



**Curtain up**

## A voice from the past

The medieval poet and storyteller John Gower appears on stage. He has come back to life, he announces, to recount one of his old tales. When he wrote his own rendering of the story, he tells us, it was already an ancient fable, and it is one that has given delight and comfort through the ages:

*Gower:* To sing a song that old<sup>1</sup> was sung,  
From ashes ancient Gower is come,  
Assuming man's infirmities,<sup>2</sup>  
To glad your ear and please your eyes.  
It hath been sung at festivals,  
On ember-eves and holy-ales,<sup>3</sup>  
And lords and ladies in their lives  
Have read it for restoratives.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *since long ago*

<sup>2</sup> *I have returned from the dead, taking on human form*

<sup>3</sup> *evenings before periods of religious fasting, and church festivities*

<sup>4</sup> *healing and renewal*

Tastes have changed since his day, Gower admits, but he hopes nonetheless that his story will please the audience. If he could have his life again, he would gladly spend it providing entertainment for his listeners:

*Gower:* If you, born in these latter times  
When wit's more ripe,<sup>1</sup> accept my rhymes,  
And that to hear an old man sing  
May to your wishes pleasure bring,<sup>2</sup>  
I life would wish, and that I might  
Waste it for you, like taper-light.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *ideas are more mature and sophisticated*

<sup>2</sup> *and if you are satisfied with an old man's storytelling*

<sup>3</sup> *I would use my time for your benefit, like a candle that consumes itself while giving illumination*



Gower now sets the scene. On the far eastern shores of the Mediterranean, he tells us, lies the magnificent city of Antioch, named after its founder and ruler, King Antiochus the Great. This mighty king has a terrible secret:

*Gower:*        This king unto him took a peer,<sup>1</sup>  
                      Who died, and left a female heir,  
                      So buxom, blithe, and full of face,<sup>2</sup>  
                      As<sup>3</sup> heaven had lent her all his grace;  
                      With whom the father liking took,  
                      And her to incest did provoke.

<sup>1</sup> *companion, partner*

<sup>2</sup> *bright, lively and beautiful*

<sup>3</sup> *as if*

King Antiochus' daughter has many admirers, keen to marry the wealthy, beautiful princess. However, the king has decreed that anyone who asks for her hand in marriage must first solve a riddle that he has devised. The penalty for failing to answer the riddle correctly is death.

In *Pericles*, the narrator John Gower – a poet who lived two centuries before Shakespeare – speaks in rhyming, sing-song verse, and frequently uses medieval vocabulary. In this way, Shakespeare emphasises the antiquity and the mythical quality of the tale:

*“Gathered together as members of the audience at the feet of the storyteller, we are continually reminded that what we are watching and hearing is Gower’s own story come to life ... the audience is engaged in linguistic time-travel of a sort, one which makes the narrative a kind of magic-carpet ride to exotic places in the archaic past.”*

Doreen DelVecchio and Antony Hammond,  
Introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare  
edition of *Pericles*, 1998

Many hopeful young men have tried and failed, Gower informs us. He then draws our attention to the grisly spectacle of a row of severed heads:

*Gower:* ... he made a law  
To keep her still, and men in awe:<sup>1</sup>  
That whoso asked her for his wife,  
His riddle told not,<sup>2</sup> lost his life.  
So for her many a wight<sup>3</sup> did die,  
As yon grim looks do testify.

<sup>1</sup> *so that he could keep her for ever, and deter her suitors*

<sup>2</sup> *if he failed to solve the king's riddle*

<sup>3</sup> *many unfortunate creatures*

Gower, his introduction over, now leaves the stage.

## A hopeful suitor

I, i

Pericles, ruler of the city of Tyre, has come to Antioch. Like many before him, he hopes to marry King Antiochus' daughter, the princess widely renowned for her worth and her beauty. He is undeterred by the knowledge of his fate if he should fail to solve the king's riddle:

*Antiochus:* Young Prince of Tyre, you have at large received<sup>1</sup>  
The danger of the task you undertake.

*Pericles:* I have, Antiochus, and with a soul  
Emboldened with the glory of her praise,  
Think death no hazard in this enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *fully understood*

<sup>2</sup> *I am unafraid of death in pursuit of my goal*

The king commands his musicians to play, and his daughter enters, resplendent in her bridal clothes. Pericles is instantly smitten:

*Pericles:* See where she comes, apparelled like the spring ...  
You gods that made me man and sway in love,<sup>1</sup>  
That have inflamed desire in my breast  
To taste the fruit of yon celestial tree  
Or die in the adventure,<sup>2</sup> be my helps,

As I am son and servant to your will  
To compass<sup>3</sup> such a boundless happiness.

<sup>1</sup> *who created me, and who govern us in matters of love*

<sup>2</sup> *attempt, pursuit*

<sup>3</sup> *achieve, embrace*

Antiochus reminds Pericles once again of the danger he faces, comparing his quest to the mythical labours of Hercules. To emphasise his point, the king draws Pericles' attention to the grim row of severed heads, the princess's failed suitors, who look down on them as if watching over the proceedings:

*Antiochus:* Prince Pericles –

*Pericles:* That would be son<sup>1</sup> to great Antiochus.

*Antiochus:* Before thee stands this fair Hesperides,  
With golden fruit, but dangerous to be touched;  
For death-like dragons here affright thee hard.<sup>2</sup>  
... Yon sometimes<sup>3</sup> famous princes, like thyself,  
Drawn by report, adventurous<sup>4</sup> by desire,  
Tell thee with speechless tongues and semblance pale<sup>5</sup>  
That, without covering save yon field of stars,<sup>6</sup>  
Here they stand, martyrs slain in Cupid's wars,  
And with dead cheeks advise thee to desist ...

<sup>1</sup> *son-in-law*

<sup>2</sup> *one of Hercules' tasks was to steal golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, three female nature deities; the apple tree was guarded by a deadly dragon*

<sup>3</sup> *previously, during their lifetimes*

<sup>4</sup> *driven to act recklessly*

<sup>5</sup> *pallid appearance*

<sup>6</sup> *clothed only by the sky*

Pericles, undaunted, declares that he will accept the challenge of solving the riddle. If he is to be executed, he will bear no ill will towards the king, and will not mourn the loss of his earthly possessions. His love for the king's daughter is all that matters to him:

*Pericles:* [to Antiochus] So I bequeath a happy peace to you  
And all good men, as every prince should do;  
My riches to the earth from whence they came,  
[to the princess] But my unspotted fire of love to you.<sup>1</sup>  
Thus ready for the way<sup>2</sup> of life or death,  
I wait the sharpest blow.

<sup>1</sup> *if I die, I leave the pure passion of my love to you*

<sup>2</sup> *to take the path*

With a final warning, Antiochus hands Pericles the document containing the riddle. His daughter, it seems, favours her latest suitor above all the others:

*Antiochus:* Scorning advice, read the conclusion,<sup>1</sup> then:  
Which read and not expounded,<sup>2</sup> 'tis decreed,  
As these before thee, thou thyself shalt bleed.

*Daughter:* Of all 'sayed<sup>3</sup> yet, mayst thou prove prosperous;<sup>4</sup>  
Of all 'sayed yet, I wish thee happiness.

<sup>1</sup> *riddle, enigma*

<sup>2</sup> *if, having read it, you fail to explain it*

<sup>3</sup> *who have made the attempt, taken the challenge*

<sup>4</sup> *I hope you are successful*

## A shocking revelation

Pericles reads the riddle:

*Pericles:* [reads] 'I am no viper, yet I feed  
On mother's flesh which did me breed.<sup>1</sup>  
I sought a husband, in which labour  
I found that kindness in a father.  
He's father, son, and husband mild;  
I mother, wife, and yet his child.

*How they may be, and yet in two,  
As you will live resolve it you.’<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *vipers were believed to eat their way out of their  
mother’s womb when born*

<sup>2</sup> *make sense of this conundrum if you wish to live*

Realising at once what this means, Pericles recoils in horror: the princess is clearly in an incestuous relationship with her father. His feelings for her change in an instant:

*Pericles:* Fair glass of light,<sup>1</sup> I loved you, and could still  
Were not this glorious casket stored with ill.<sup>2</sup>  
But I must tell you now my thoughts revolt ...

<sup>1</sup> *lantern, shining glass vessel*

<sup>2</sup> *filled with evil*

Pericles is faced with a terrible dilemma: if he claims not to understand the riddle he will be executed, but accusing the king of incest would surely lead to the same fate. He decides to avoid confronting the king directly, while hinting that he knows the truth:

*Pericles:* Great king,  
Few love to hear the sins they love to act.  
'Twould braid yourself too near<sup>1</sup> for me to tell it.  
Who has a book of all that monarchs do,  
He’s more secure to keep it shut than shown.

<sup>1</sup> *it would be too harsh a condemnation*

*“The riddle that Antiochus presents epitomizes the self-consuming wasteland in which the hero finds himself. The first four lines make the incest so transparent that one can only assume the former contestants were beheaded not for failure to solve the riddle but for their success.”*

Suzanne Gossett, Introduction to the Arden  
Shakespeare edition of *Pericles*, 2004

Monarchs are free to follow their desires, says Pericles, but making their sins public only leads to further rumour and exaggeration:

*Pericles:* Kings are earth's gods: in vice their law's their will;<sup>1</sup>  
And if Jove stray, who dares say Jove doth ill?  
It is enough you know, and it is fit,  
What being more known grows worse, to smother it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *kings are governed only by their will; their desires are unconstrained*

<sup>2</sup> *only the king should know of his own vices, and it is best to conceal things that would be made worse if they were widely known*

It is clear to Antiochus that Pericles, even though he declines to give a direct answer, has understood the riddle. However, the king, claiming that the young visitor has failed in his quest, puts on a show of magnanimity. Pericles will not be put to death at once:

*Antiochus:* [*aside*] Heaven, that I had thy head!<sup>1</sup> He has found the meaning ...  
[*to Pericles*] Though by the tenor<sup>2</sup> of our strict edict,  
Your exposition misinterpreting,  
We might proceed to cancel of your days,<sup>3</sup>  
Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree  
As your fair self, doth tune us otherwise.<sup>4</sup>  
Forty days longer we do respite you ...

<sup>1</sup> *I wish he were dead*

<sup>2</sup> *terms, demands*

<sup>3</sup> *I could end your life, as you have failed to explain the riddle*

<sup>4</sup> *persuades me to change my mind, to be more lenient*

Pericles has forty days to produce an answer to the riddle. In the meantime, the king informs him, he is to remain in Antioch as an honoured guest.

Antiochus, his daughter and their attendants all depart, leaving Pericles to contemplate his situation. He is convinced that the king, despite his benevolent words, is guilty of incest; and he is equally sure that he himself is in terrible danger, as Antiochus will stop at nothing to prevent his crime from becoming known to the wider world. Pericles decides that he must escape from Antioch as soon as possible:

*Pericles:* Antioch, farewell! For wisdom sees, those men  
Blush not in actions blacker than the night  
Will 'schew no course to keep them from the light.<sup>1</sup>  
One sin, I know, another doth provoke;  
Murder's as near to lust as flame to smoke.  
... lest my life be cropped to keep you clear,<sup>2</sup>  
By flight I'll shun the danger which I fear.

<sup>1</sup> *those who shamelessly commit terrible sins will not shrink from any action that will keep their deeds secret*

<sup>2</sup> *in case my life should be cut short to save the king's reputation*

Pericles sets off, determined to leave the city before the king silences him for ever.

## A strict command

It now emerges that Pericles' fears are justified. Antiochus, alone, is brooding on the young prince's discovery of the truth:

*Antiochus:* He hath found the meaning,  
For which we mean to have his head.  
He must not live to trumpet forth my infamy,  
Nor tell the world Antiochus doth sin  
In such a loathed manner ...

Antiochus calls for his attendant Thaliard, a trusted member of his household. There is an important task to be done, he tells Thaliard, one which must be performed without question. Appealing to the man's loyalty and ambition, Antiochus gives his attendant poison with which to carry out his mission, as well as payment in advance.

Without hesitation, Thaliard promises to obey the king:

*Antiochus:* Thaliard, you are of our chamber,<sup>1</sup> Thaliard,  
And our mind partakes her private actions  
To your secrecy;<sup>2</sup> and for your faithfulness  
We will advance you,<sup>3</sup> Thaliard. Behold,  
Here's poison, and here's gold.  
We hate the Prince of Tyre, and thou must kill him.  
It fits thee not<sup>4</sup> to ask the reason why:  
Because we bid it.  
Say, is it done?

*Thaliard:* My lord, 'tis done.

<sup>1</sup> *a close attendant; part of my inner circle*

<sup>2</sup> *I can trust you with my private thoughts*

<sup>3</sup> *promote you, improve your fortunes*

<sup>4</sup> *it is not your place*

At this moment a messenger rushes in with urgent news for the king: Pericles has fled. Antiochus immediately orders Thaliard to track the prince down relentlessly, and not to return until he has succeeded in his task. As long as Pericles is alive, Antiochus will never be at ease:

*Antiochus:* Till Pericles be dead,  
My heart can lend no succour to my head.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *my worries cannot be relieved; I will have no peace of mind*

*“Pericles holds our attention with the immemorial spell of the story-teller. The truth it aims at is not the truth of realistic character-portrayal or closely observed and probable action. It is the truth of fable, which expresses things close to the heart by means of symbolic action.”*

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964



## No escape

I, ii

Pericles, having evaded the wrath of Antiochus, has returned to Tyre. His experience in Antioch, however, has left him in low spirits. He tries to persuade himself that King Antiochus, now at a safe distance, is no longer a threat, but he cannot shake off a sense of gloom and anxiety:

*Pericles:* Here pleasures court mine eyes,<sup>1</sup> and mine eyes  
shun them;  
And danger, which I feared, is at Antioch,  
Whose arm seems far too short to hit me here.<sup>2</sup>  
Yet neither pleasure's art can joy my spirits,  
Nor yet the other's distance comfort me.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *sources of enjoyment are all around me*

<sup>2</sup> *Antiochus is too remote to trouble me*

<sup>3</sup> *I cannot find cheer in things that usually give  
pleasure, nor can I find comfort from the fact that  
danger is far away*

One way or another, believes Pericles, Antiochus will catch up with him. Even if Pericles promises not to reveal the king's secret, Antiochus will not believe him; and the small city of Tyre will not be able to resist the mighty kingdom ruled by Antiochus. The city and its innocent inhabitants will be punished mercilessly:

*Pericles:* The great Antiochus,  
'Gainst whom I am too little to contend,  
Since he's so great can make his will his act,<sup>1</sup>  
Will think me speaking<sup>2</sup> though I swear to silence ...  
With hostile forces he'll o'erspread the land,  
And with th'ostent of war will look so huge  
Amazement shall drive courage from the state,<sup>3</sup>  
Our men be vanquished ere they do resist,  
And subjects punished that ne'er thought offence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *whose greatness allows him to do whatever he wants*

<sup>2</sup> *will believe that I will reveal the truth*

<sup>3</sup> *his warlike display of strength will create such terror  
that our state will lose its courage*

<sup>4</sup> *our citizens will be punished although they had no  
quarrel with Antiochus, even in their thoughts*

## Another departure

As he reflects on the suffering that Antiochus could inflict on Tyre, Pericles is joined by a group of attendants. They greet him with their usual courtesy and deference, but one of them, Helicanus, is blunt and honest about his concerns.

It is clear to Helicanus that the prince is troubled about something. Whatever is distracting him must be brought into the open and resolved, not smoothed over with flattering words:

*Lord:* [to Pericles] Joy and all comfort in your sacred breast.

*Helicanus:* ... Peace, peace, and give experience tongue.<sup>1</sup>  
They do abuse the king that flatter him,  
For flattery is the bellows blows up sin<sup>2</sup> ...  
Whereas reproof, obedient and in order,  
Fits<sup>3</sup> kings as they are men, for they may err.

<sup>1</sup> *let a wiser, more experienced voice be heard*

<sup>2</sup> *those who soothe Pericles with gentle words are only making matters worse*

<sup>3</sup> *befits, is appropriate for*

Helicanus kneels, knowing that he may have offended the prince. Pericles asks the other lords to leave, and questions Helicanus. At first displeased at his courtier's bluntness, he soon accepts that Helicanus is right to raise his concerns:

*Pericles:* How durst thy tongue move anger to our face?

*Helicanus:* How dares the plants look up to heaven, from whence  
They have their nourishment?

*Pericles:* Thou knowest I have power  
To take thy life from thee.

*Helicanus:* I have ground the axe myself;  
Do but you strike the blow.

*Pericles:* Rise, prithee, rise.

[*Helicanus rises from his knees*]

Sit down; thou art no flatterer,  
I thank thee for't; and heaven forbid  
That kings should let their ears hear their faults hid.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *that rulers should allow themselves to listen to speeches which conceal their faults*

Pericles admits that he is indeed deeply troubled, and can no longer contain his anguish. He recounts everything about his visit to Antioch: his desire to marry the princess, his discovery of her incestuous relationship with her father, the king's deceitful amiability, and his own nighttime flight from the city.

Although he has done nothing wrong, Pericles realises that the king, in his determination to protect his reputation, will stop at nothing; he has already put to death his daughter's previous suitors. As a result, Tyre and its citizens are in mortal danger.

Helicanus agrees that Pericles is right to fear Antiochus, and suggests that the prince should leave Tyre for a while, until the king's rage has subsided; with luck, the king may even die in the near future. If the worst happens, and Antiochus invades Tyre, Helicanus promises that there will be fierce resistance.

Pericles reluctantly agrees. He will escape to the city of Tarsus, he decides, entrusting the government of Tyre to Helicanus while he is absent:

*Helicanus:*                   ... my lord, go travel for a while,  
Till that his rage and anger be forgot,  
Or the destinies<sup>1</sup> do cut his thread of life.  
Your rule direct to any; if to me,  
Day serves not light more faithful than I'll be.<sup>2</sup>

*Pericles:*                   I do not doubt thy faith.  
But should he wrong my liberties<sup>3</sup> in my absence?

*Helicanus:*               We'll mingle our bloods together in the earth,<sup>4</sup>  
From whence we had our being and our birth.

*Pericles:*               Tyre, I now look from thee then, and to Tarsus  
Intend my travel, where I'll hear from thee,  
And by whose letters I'll dispose myself.<sup>5</sup>  
The care I had and have of subjects' good  
On thee I lay, whose wisdom's strength can bear it.

<sup>1</sup> *the Fates; the three goddesses who governed human life and death*

<sup>2</sup> *if you select me to rule in your absence, I will be as faithful as the day is light*

<sup>3</sup> *invade my territory, interfere with the state*

<sup>4</sup> *the people of Tyre will die fighting him*

<sup>5</sup> *make decisions*

An assassin has come to Tyre, bringing with him a deadly poison: it is Thaliard, sent by King Antiochus to silence Pericles for ever. Thaliard is uneasy about his role, but he has no choice other than to follow his orders; he knows that failure to kill Pericles will result in his own death at the hands of the king.

Thaliard overhears a group of courtiers talking about Pericles. The group includes Helicanus, who is explaining to the others that the prince has had to leave Tyre urgently and undertake a dangerous voyage. Helicanus tells them that King Antiochus may be displeased with Pericles in some way, but he does not mention the true reason for the prince's flight:

*Helicanus:* Royal Antiochus, on what cause I know not,  
Took some displeasure at him – at least he judged so –  
And, doubting lest he had erred or sinned,  
To show his sorrow he'd correct himself;<sup>1</sup>  
So puts himself unto the shipman's toil,<sup>2</sup>  
With whom each minute threatens life or death.

<sup>1</sup> *fearing that he had offended Antiochus in some way, Pericles decided to punish himself to demonstrate his remorse*

<sup>2</sup> *he has subjected himself to the dangers of a sea-voyage*

Thaliard is relieved. He will not need to carry out his unpleasant task, at least in the near future; and Pericles may well die at sea, which will please the king equally.

His mood lightened, Thaliard now greets the assembled lords, who recognise him and welcome him warmly. He has a message for Pericles, he claims, but since his arrival he has been informed of the prince's departure. Although the visitor's journey has been wasted, Helicanus invites him to enjoy the court's hospitality before he returns:

*Thaliard:* Peace to the lords of Tyre!  
*Helicanus:* Lord Thaliard  
From Antiochus is welcome.  
*Thaliard:* From him I come  
With message unto princely Pericles,

But since my landing I have understood  
Your lord has betook himself to unknown travels.<sup>1</sup>  
Now my message must return from whence it came.

*Helicanus:* ... Yet, ere you shall depart, this we desire:  
As friends to Antioch we may feast in Tyre.

<sup>1</sup> *has set off on a journey with an unknown destination*

## At death's door

I, iv

The city of Tarsus, Pericles' destination, is in crisis. Once rich and powerful, Tarsus is now in the grip of a long, terrible famine. Citizens of all ages and classes are starving, and many are too weak even to bury their dead. The city's governor Cleon and his wife Dionyza are lamenting their past complacency, when the idea of food shortages was unthinkable:

*Cleon:* This Tarsus, o'er which I have the government,  
A city o'er whom Plenty held full hand,<sup>1</sup>  
For Riches<sup>2</sup> strewed herself even in her streets;  
Whose towers bore heads so high they kissed the clouds,  
And strangers ne'er beheld but wondered at;<sup>3</sup>  
Whose men and dames so jetted and adorned,  
Like one another's glass to trim them by;<sup>4</sup>  
Their tables were stored full to glad the sight,  
And not so much to feed on as delight.<sup>5</sup>  
All poverty was scorned, and pride so great  
The name of help grew odious to repeat.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *fed by a cornucopia of abundance; blessed by endless gifts*

<sup>2</sup> *the personification of wealth*

<sup>3</sup> *whose lofty buildings were always admired by visitors*

<sup>4</sup> *whose inhabitants strutted around proudly in fine clothes, forever copying one another's fashions*

<sup>5</sup> *their feasts were prepared more to please the eye than to satisfy hunger*

<sup>6</sup> *people were so proud of their wealth that they despised any mention of needing help*

A courtier arrives with a message for the governor. Cleon accepts that, in these times of suffering, the man is probably bringing bad news, and he is not surprised to hear that a fleet is approaching Tarsus. Sooner or later, he believes, it was inevitable that an enemy would exploit the city's weakness:

*Lord:* We have descried upon our neighbouring shore  
A portly sail of ships<sup>1</sup> make hitherward.  
*Cleon:* I thought as much.  
One sorrow never comes but brings an heir<sup>2</sup>  
That may succeed as his inheritor;  
And so in ours.<sup>3</sup> Some neighbouring nation,  
Taking advantage of our misery,  
Hath stuffed the hollow vessels with their power<sup>4</sup>  
To beat us down, the which are down already ...

<sup>1</sup> *we have spotted a large, majestic fleet of ships nearby*

<sup>2</sup> *one misfortune is always followed by another*

<sup>3</sup> *this is what has happened to us*

<sup>4</sup> *army*

The messenger is more hopeful; the ships are displaying white flags as a sign of peace. Cleon dismisses the man's optimism, telling him that the white flags are likely to be a subterfuge to hide the fleet's warlike intentions. In any case, Tarsus is too weak to resist an invasion, admits Cleon, and he sends the messenger away to find out more about the approaching ships:

*Cleon:* But bring they what they will and what they can,<sup>1</sup>  
What need we fear?  
The ground's the lowest, and we are halfway there.<sup>2</sup>  
Go tell their general we attend him here  
To know from whence he comes and what he craves.

*Lord:* I go, my Lord.

*Cleon:* Welcome is peace, if he on peace consist;<sup>3</sup>  
If wars, we are unable to resist.

<sup>1</sup> *whatever they bring, and whatever their strength*

<sup>2</sup> *we are in such dire straits that things can hardly get worse*

<sup>3</sup> *comes in peace, has peaceful intentions*

## Salvation

The fleet, it now emerges, is not a hostile one; it has come from Tyre, and is led by Pericles. The prince himself enters bearing good news. Unlike the Trojan horse, which was packed with ferocious troops, his ships are full of grain for the people of Tarsus:

*Pericles:* Let not our ships and number of our men  
Be like a beacon fired t'amaze your eyes.<sup>1</sup>  
We have heard your miseries as far as Tyre,  
And seen the desolation of your streets;  
Nor come we to add sorrow to your hearts,  
But to relieve them of their heavy load;  
And these our ships, you happily may think  
Are like the Trojan horse was stuffed within  
With bloody veins expecting overthrow,<sup>2</sup>  
Are stored with corn to make your needy<sup>3</sup> bread  
And give them life whom hunger starved half dead.

<sup>1</sup> *terrify you, like a beacon lit to warn of invasion*

<sup>2</sup> *which perhaps you thought are like the Trojan horse, which was filled with bloodthirsty soldiers anticipating victory over the enemy*

<sup>3</sup> *necessary, essential*

The reaction to Pericles' announcement is joyous, and all those hearing the news kneel in gratitude. Pericles does not wish to be regarded as a saviour, however, asking only for a place of safety and refuge:

*The Tarsians:* The gods of Greece protect you,  
And we'll pray for you.

*Pericles:* Arise, I pray you, rise.  
We do not look for reverence but for love,  
And harbourage<sup>1</sup> for ourself, our ships and men.

<sup>1</sup> *shelter*

*The gods of Greece protect you ...*

This mention of Greece – the first in the play – reminds us that the action of *Pericles* takes place in the ancient Greek world. However, this is not the world of Athens, but of the wider eastern Mediterranean; Tyre, for example, is now in Lebanon, while Tarsus is in southern Turkey.

In classical times the whole area was dominated by Greece, and Greek colonies and trade routes were established throughout the Levant. Greek influence had become particularly strong when, in the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire which had governed the area for centuries. In the wake of this conquest, during the ‘Hellenistic’ period, Greek culture and language spread through much of the Middle East.

## **Disaster at sea**

The poet Gower now reappears and addresses the audience. In Tarsus, he tells us, Pericles is greatly loved, even revered. However, says Gower, his fortunes soon take a turn for the worse.

As the poet narrates, events are silently acted out in a dumb-show on stage. We see Pericles and Cleon, governor of Tarsus, in conversation; a letter is delivered to Pericles, who anxiously shows it to Cleon; the two men, with their attendants, then separately take their leave.

Gower explains, in his archaic language, what has happened. Back in Tyre, Helicanus is acting as Pericles’ deputy, as agreed, and keeps in touch with the prince by letter. Helicanus has learnt that Thaliard, the visitor from Antioch, was in fact an assassin, and has written an urgent message warning his master of the danger. In the letter, Helicanus advises Pericles that he is not safe even in Tarsus:



*Gower:* Good Hellicane ...  
... to fulfil his prince' desire  
Sends word of all that haps<sup>1</sup> in Tyre,  
How Thaliard came full bent with sin,<sup>2</sup>  
And hid intent to murder him;  
And that in Tarsus was not best  
Longer for him to make his rest.

<sup>1</sup> *happens*

<sup>2</sup> *utterly determined to commit his evil deed*

Pericles left Tarsus and set sail once again, Gower tells us, but in seeking safety met only with disaster:

*Gower:* ... now the wind begins to blow;  
Thunder above, and deeps below  
Makes such unquiet that the ship  
Should house him safe is wracked and split,<sup>1</sup>  
And he, good prince, having all lost,  
By waves from coast to coast is tossed.

<sup>1</sup> *in the raging storm, the ship that should keep him safe is wrecked*

Pericles was finally washed ashore, bereft of all his companions and possessions, exhausted and alone:

*Gower:* All perishen of man, of pelf,<sup>1</sup>  
Ne aught escapend but himself<sup>2</sup>  
Till Fortune, tired with doing bad,  
Threw him ashore to give him glad.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *all the men perished, and their belongings were lost*

<sup>2</sup> *and no one except Pericles escaped*

<sup>3</sup> *console him, give him relief*

Apologising for delaying the action, Gower takes his leave, and the play resumes.