



# Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

## Episode Guide

### Season 3, Episode 5

#### *Pericles: The Liminality of Pericles*

Hosts: Anna Bigham and Cece Richardson

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*A note on content: This episode includes discussion of prostitution, references to sexism, and mention of implied threat of sexual assault in the context of Pericles.*

## Episode Resources

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### Episode Transcript

*Sound: Crashing waves, gulls, nature ocean sounds, royalty-free "Farewell to Tarwathie" instrumental*

**Cece:** Hello! Thank you for listening to *Writ in the Margins*. My name is Cece Richardson.

**Anna:** And my name is Anna Bigham!

**Cece:** And this podcast episode is all about *Pericles*, a play written by Shakespeare... mostly. Probably.

**Anna:** He had help.

**Cece:** It's complicated.

**Anna:** And *Pericles*, as a story, is complicated—it's a fairytale that ends in tragedy halfway through and then keeps going, with a prince who doesn't save a princess and a princess who saves herself as well as the princes. It takes place on the high seas, with six locations, two and a half shipwrecks, one queen raised from the dead, a doctor who is probably a wizard, an unfortunate amount of prostitution, and a literal goddess.

**Cece:** On top of all of that wild wonderful weirdness, *Pericles* itself is a strange and unusual play, for two main reasons. Firstly, in terms of authorship, *Pericles* is not a straightforward Shakespearean text (if there even *is* such a thing as a "straightforward" Shakespearean text in terms of authorship).

**Anna:** There's not.

**Cece:** Probably not.

**Anna:** *Pericles* is generally agreed upon to be a collaboration, with most scholars nominating George Wilkins as the other writer. Wilkins is credited with the first nine scenes of the play, but his involvement with the play doesn't end there.

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**Cece:** Wilkins was determined to make the most of having collaborated with Shakespeare, and he wrote a novelization of the play after it had enjoyed some success on the stage. The novel, *The Painfull Adventures of Pericles*, is self-described as being based on the stage play, but it takes lots of liberties with the story. Most likely, Wilkins wrote the novel from memory, as opposed to using a play manuscript, despite his own contributions. Some editors have reconstructed parts of Wilkin’s novel into scenes of the original stage play, so both the play and the novel inform each other. It’s like adaptation-ception!

**Anna:** Secondly, *Pericles* can be difficult to stage because it is a story told through multiple locations. The titular character moves from Antioch to Tyre, from Tarsus to Pentapolis, from Mytilene to Ephesus, making pit stops and meeting a new cast of characters in each location.

**Cece:** This quick back-and-forth between so many locations gives the play an unusually episodic structure. Rather than encountering a single straightforward challenge to overcome, the character of Pericles is presented with multiple characters, adventures, and losses as he moves between multiple worlds.

**Anna:** And there are worlds *between* worlds in *Pericles* too, with some scenes occurring in the in-between place of the ocean itself as Pericles embarks on multiple ill-fated voyages throughout the play.

**Cece:** These two aspects of *Pericles*, authorship and travel, have given the play a bit of a bad rep onstage.

**Anna:** The extensive amount of travel in the play can present a practical challenge for designers and directors: how can you clearly portray so many different worlds on the same stage? And even if different locations in the play *are* clearly communicated to audiences, how can you get audiences to invest in such an episodic plot? It can be easy to see the events of this play as disconnected or even meaningless because they don’t conform to the more familiar theatrical structures.

**Cece:** A lot happens in this play, and the plot doesn’t always build in a linear way.

**Anna:** Sometimes, pirates show up out of nowhere... just because!

**Cece:** And the authorship of the play is often used as an explanation for *Pericles*’ episodic plot, or even as an excuse for staging difficulties. A *New York Times* review of the Target Margin theatre’s 2023 production of *Pericles* called the script “a stale jumble of a play,” but the reviewer quickly recovered from this “Shakespeare slander” by blaming Wilkins for the script’s perceived shortcomings, writing: “it’s not exactly Shakespeare’s best work, and many scholars believe he shares authorship with the dramatist George Wilkins.”

**Anna:** Later, the same review claims *Pericles* to be: “a text that has survived this long not on merit, but because it bears Shakespeare’s name.” The general consensus seems to be that the good parts of *Pericles* come from Shakespeare, the messy parts come from Wilkins, and the play as a whole is too overloaded and confused to make good theatre.

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**Cece:** But we don't think the play can be written off as easily as that. Blaming Wilkins for the play's problems threatens to establish Shakespeare as an infallible author-god, and we don't need to keep him on that pedestal. He's been dead for a long time.

**Anna:** And who's to say that these perceived problems are really problems at all?

**Cece:** Exactly! Looking at *Pericles* through the lens of ecofeminist theory and deconstruction can reveal that the episodic plot and multiple locations can function as a positive feature of the text that can be embraced in performance, rather than a negative that needs to be corrected.

**Anna:** *Pericles* certainly jumps between many terrestrial locations, but the common thread between all of the locales of the play is that they are coastal. The sea is a driving force for the play, almost a character in and of itself.

**Cece:** Steve Mentz, in his article "Shakespeare and the Blue Humanities" uses the phrase "blue humanities" to describe scholarship that prioritizes the ocean, and discusses Shakespeare's contributions to the "blue humanities" field of literature.

**Anna:** The Mediterranean, home to the various settings of *Pericles*, is described by Mentz as Shakespeare's favorite sea, which "represents a salty combination of the historical past, the exotic Other, and an almost limitless range of metaphors and symbolic codes."

**Cece:** Mentz continues, "As European culture increasingly voyaged out to the deep seas during the early modern period, the poetics of maritime depth became an index of subjective depth and emotional power," accessing the idea of the sea as a metaphor for feeling and intensity.

**Anna:** Think of Juliet's "boundless bounty," or Florizel's love sworn by the unknown fathoms of the sea. These are only a couple of examples in the canon of oceanic language being used to describe things that are beyond human understanding and exploration.

**Cece:** But in *Pericles*, the characters don't just discuss the ocean, they sail on it.

**Anna:** That's where Miriam Kammer comes in! Her article "Shakespeare as Ecodrama: Ecofeminism and Nonduality in *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*" explores the way that *Pericles* "moves the very idea of setting from the background to the fore."

**Cece:** Kammer argues that this prioritization of environment, almost over the characters themselves, is one element that characterizes *Pericles* as an ecodrama: "a type of theater variously defined as plays that highlight the connections between the human and the more-than-human world; plays that point to social and environmental crises, such as the exploitation of indigenous lands; and plays in which the setting takes precedence."

**Anna:** Certainly, *Pericles* describes the war between humans and the natural environment that is too big and powerful for them to overcome - Pericles is shipwrecked several times, describing himself as "A man whom both the waters and the wind / In that vast tennis court hath made the ball / For them to play upon" (2.1.61-63).

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**Cece:** The “more-than-human” is here given personality and agency, and that agency is used to toss Pericles around and take away his control over events.

**Anna:** Not to mention, *Pericles* also deals with what Kammer calls “social and environmental crises.” When Pericles lands in Tarsus, he finds the locals suffering from a food crisis, all starving until he brings them supplies. Even on land, nature exerts control over human life.

**Cece:** And that struggle between the natural world and the human world takes us back to the multiple locations in *Pericles*, a perceived problem that can become a positive reading of the play through ecofeminism.

**Anna:** Ecofeminism – that’s a reading of the play that combines ecological concerns with feminist concerns.

**Cece:** And in *Pericles* – and in many other plays, poems, and novels – there’s a large overlap between the ecological and the feminine. The language we most often use to refer to the natural world is feminine, positioning nature itself as a gendered concept. Kammer writes: “to be ‘female’ is to be ‘natural’ and by extension exploitable.”

**Anna:** We’ll revisit that idea of the exploitable feminine in just a moment.

**Cece:** But first, a detour into more theory!

**Anna:** Specifically: Deconstruction.

**Cece:** The literary theory of deconstruction was pioneered by Jacques Derrida, who used the idea of binary opposition to describe how humans make meaning out of language.

**Anna:** Binary opposition describes a process of setting two (theoretical) opposites against each other. The words and ideas gain meaning in this oppositional relationship. Derrida writes that “one of the two terms governs the other.”

**Cece:** For example, the idea of “heat” only has meaning in association with the idea of “cold.” According to Derrida, humans turn towards these strict binaries in order to make meaning of the world around us.

**Anna:** Theodora Goss further develops Derrida’s ideas of binary opposition into a theory of monstrosity in her article “Listening to Krao: What the Freak and Monster Tell Us.” Goss recognizes that humans “understand the world through categories, which are often oppositional. We distinguish good from evil [...] human from inhuman, woman from man, adult from child.”

**Cece:** Goss goes on to identify that the things that scare and upset us – “monsters” – are monstrous because they transgress these binaries. She writes: “The monster is monstrous precisely because, by crossing such boundaries, it reminds us that the categories are human rather than natural: that we have made them up, and that underneath lies boundless primordial chaos.”

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**Anna:** She cites several mythological monsters, like the minotaur, a creature that crosses the human/ animal binary by existing as both a bull and a man. She also describes some more modern monsters like Frankenstein, who carries “the intellect of a man and the impulses of a child.”

**Cece:** Thinking of *Pericles* in terms of binary opposition reveals the importance of the in-between places and characters in the world of the play. This is a play that continuously resists binary categorization.

**Anna:** Even aside from the often-elusive genre of *Pericles* and the play’s refusal to be defined as solely the work of Wilkins or Shakespeare, the story of the play itself presents powerful liminal spaces and characters.

**Cece:** The plot’s extensive travel allows the ocean to operate onstage as an in-between space of shipwrecks and storms, an area of the play that resists easy categorization. Nobody owns the ocean, and nobody can control it. It’s a liminal traveling place, not a destination in and of itself.

**Anna:** And that resistance to categorization makes the ocean a scary place to the characters onstage. It resists definition, and it remakes characters, bringing tragedy in the form of multiple shipwrecks and the loss of Thaisa.

**Cece:** It also completely upends the social structure of the world: the sailor’s speak out and overrule Pericles after Thaisa’s death, insisting that her body is sent overboard against their king’s wishes. This sense of social confusion also appears when Pericles is rescued by fishermen in Act 2, Scene 1.

**Anna:** Following Goss’s definition of monstrosity, the ocean as a transgressive liminal space exists as a sort of a “monster” in *Pericles*, confusing human boundaries and (in Goss’s words) reminding us that underneath these boundaries “lies boundless primordial chaos.”

**Cece:** But there’s another monster in *Pericles*, another boundary-crosser that draws power and even inspires fear with her transgressive liminality.

**Anna:** We’re talking about the scariest monster of all: a young girl.

**Cece:** Marina as a character completely resists definitional binaries: she exists as both a young girl and a woman ready for marriage, a virgin and a whore, a princess and a pauper.

**Anna:** From the moment of her birth, Marina is connected “metaphorically and materially” to the sea: she is born on a ship, mid-storm, and given a name that means “from the sea.” This positions her in the same transgressive, monstrous liminal space as the ocean itself.

**Cece:** As she grows up and is kidnapped into a brothel, Marina is viewed as an object of desire, control, and exploitation – much like the natural world of the play.

**Anna:** We told you we’d come back to the overlapping ideas of the exploitable feminine and the exploitable natural world!

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**Cece:** The attempted exploitation of Marina in the brothel is dependent on a strict social hierarchy reliant on binary gender roles and class structures. As a woman with no family and no money, Marina is not meant to have any power in the brothel. She is meant to be defenseless and easily exploitable.

**Anna:** But she isn't defenseless. Marina holds immense power in the brothel precisely because she refuses to conform to any binary understanding of her identity. She repeatedly uses her language to associate her identity with the sea, describing her position in the world as:

**Marina:** Born in a tempest when my mother died,  
This world to me is as a lasting storm,  
Whirring me from my friends.

Marina's self-identification with the sea establishes her as something in-between and uncontrollable.

**Cece:** Marina continues to build this liminal identity by forcing other characters to reconsider their own binary assumptions. When Lysimachus hesitates to call her a whore, Marina asks him to finish his sentence, wanting him to name her "trade" so that she can establish her own identity as something entirely outside of Lysimachus' narrow understanding.

**Anna:** Here's a brief snippet of the scene, read by Abigail Olshin as Marina and Matthias Bolon as Lysimachus:

**Marina:** I cannot be offended with my trade. Please you to name it.

**Lysimachus:** How long have you been of this profession?

**Marina:** E'er since I can remember.

**Lysimachus:** Did you go to 't so young? Were you a gamester at five or at seven?

**Marina:** Earlier too, sir, if now I be one.

**Cece:** In this passage, Marina establishes her own identity as something unnameable and undefinable. She uses Lysimachus' own language to link her childhood self to her current self, implying that what she was then, she is now: herself.

**Anna:** As she says in 5.1, upon meeting Pericles, she is:

**Marina:** No other than I appear.

**Cece:** Marina resists the easy definition of binary opposition. She is simply herself: nothing more, and nothing less, "no other than" she appears.

**Anna:** But that self consistently resists control and exploitation, and that resistance can be terrifying to other characters onstage, especially the Bawd and Bolt, who fear she will destroy their business.

**Cece:** Where is that fear coming from? Liminal spaces – and liminal people – can be terrifying, but why?

**Anna:** In "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," Julia Kristeva explores the terror of liminal spaces with the term "abjection." The abject is what viscerally terrifies us, and according to Kristeva, it terrifies us because it exists in-between, forcing us to question our own understandings of the world and of ourselves. Kristeva defines the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."

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**Cece:** The abject has the ability to powerfully affect us. This power can be terrifying – the Bawd and Bolt are clearly upset by it – but Marina’s liminal monstrosity also bring healing and closure to the play and the people around her.

**Anna:** This power comes from a sense of wholeness, not division. Marina’s liminal status is not necessarily a rejection of either side of a binary, but instead a celebration of both sides, a state of being in which she can embrace an un-self-conscious identity as “no other than” she appears.

### **Wilkins and the Marina/Lysimachus Scene**

**Cece:** In a thematically fitting way, it is in the tangled web of holistic adaptation that Marina’s liminal power becomes most apparent.

**Anna:** Wilkins’ novel provides a great example of the unique power of Marina’s character, and includes a longer version of Act 4 Scene 6, the scene in which she convinces the governor of Mytilene (and potential client) Lysimachus not to have sex with her in the brothel to which she has been sold by pirates (we know, it’s a lot to take in).

**Cece:** The Oxford Shakespeare reconstructs part of Wilkins’ prose into iambic verse as dialogue, arguing that the dialogue in Wilkins’ novel may have originally been written in verse. Most other versions of the play that are printed or performed leave out Wilkins’ additions.

**Anna:** We think this version might be worth a look, though! In Wilkins’ version, Marina has more dialogue than she does in the traditional Shakespeare play text, forming several rhetorically dense arguments that eventually convince Lysimachus of her position, while in the traditional Shakespeare text, Lysimachus is won over with little effort.

**Cece:** Regardless of its twisty history, this version of the scene develops Marina as a definition-defying character with power and agency. Matthias and Abigail are going to show us the differences between these two versions, but first, let’s set the scene!

**Anna:** First, we’ll hear part of a reconstructed scene referenced from the Oxford Shakespeare, which uses Wilkins’ novel as a source. Next, we’ll hear the scene as it appears in the Folger Library’s edition of the play. The scene begins with Lysimachus entering the brothel to speak with Marina, who has been advertised as a virgin.

**Cece:** The two have a brief conversation, which we mentioned above, where Marina pushes Lysimachus to admit why he has come, which he is reluctant to do. She explains that despite her current situation, she is not what she seems to be. Lysimachus, confused, tries to get on with things, and you’ll see what happens next!

**Anna:** Here’s the version of the text that re-purposes dialogue from Wilkins’ novel:

### **Scene Time!**

**Lysimachus:** Come, bring me to some private place. Come, come.

**Marina:** My lord, I entreat you but to hear me.

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If you say you are the governor,  
 Let not authority which teaches you  
 To govern others be the means  
 To make you misgovern much yourself.  
 If you were born to honour show it now;  
 If put upon you, make the judgement good  
 That thought you worthy of it.

**Lysimachus:** How's this?

How's this? Some more, be sage.

**Marina:** What reason's in

Your justice, who hath power over all,  
 To undo any? If you take from me  
 Mine honour, you are like him that makes  
 A gap into forbidden ground, whom after  
 Too many enter, and you are guilty  
 Of all their evils. My life is yet unspotted,  
 My chastity unstained even in thought.  
 Then if your violence deface this building,  
 The workmanship of heaven, made up for good,  
 And not for exercise of sin's intemperance,  
 You kill your honour, abuse your justice,  
 And impoverish me.

**Lysimachus:** Why, this house

Wherein thou liv'st is a receptacle of all men's sins, and nurse of wickedness.  
 How canst thou then be otherwise than naught  
 That liv'st in it?

**Marina:** My yet good lord,

If there be fire before me, must I fly  
 There straight and burn myself? Suppose this house –  
 Which too too many feel such houses are –  
 Should be the doctor's patrimony and  
 The surgeon's feeding, follows it that I  
 Must needs infect myself to give them maintenance?  
 O my good lord, kill me but not deflower me,  
 Punish me how you please but spare my chastity,  
 And since 'tis all the dowry that the gods have given

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And men have left me, do not take it from me.  
 Make me your servant, I willingly obey you,  
 Make me your bondmaid, I'll account it freedom.  
 Let me be the worst that is called vile;  
 So I may still live honest, I am content.  
 Or if you think't too blest a happiness  
 To have me stay so, let me even now,  
 Now in this minute die, and I'll account  
 My death more happy far than was my birth.

**Lysimachus:** I did not think thou couldst have spoke so well,  
 Ne'er dreamt thou couldst.

**Cece:** Now let's hear the standard version:

**Lysimachus:** Come, bring me to some  
 private place. Come, come.

**Marina:** If you were born to honor, show it now;  
 If put upon you, make the judgment good  
 That thought you worthy of it.

**Lysimachus:** How's this? How's this? Some more. Be sage.

**Marina:** For me  
 That am a maid, though most ungentle Fortune  
 Have placed me in this sty, where, since I came,  
 Diseases have been sold dearer than physic—  
 That the gods  
 Would set me free from this unhallowed place,  
 Though they did change me to the meanest bird  
 That flies i' the purer air!

**Lysimachus:** I did not think  
 Thou couldst have spoke so well, ne'er dreamt thou couldst.

## Conclusion

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**Anna:** In the Wilkins reconstruction, Marina speaks forty lines of text, compared with Shakespeare's eleven Marina lines. The text from Wilkins' novel then lends much more power to Marina, clarifying the change in Lysimachus by locating the crux of the scene in Marina's speeches.

**Cece:** The extra text gives Marina additional opportunities for self-definition, establishing her character – and the play of *Pericles* itself – as one that exists holistically, not dualistically.

**Anna:** Instead of seeing the dual authorship and episodic elements of *Pericles* as detractors that make it a less-than-polished play, it's possible to view *Pericles* as an intentionally liminal play that investigates the redemption that is possible in the in-between spaces of the world.

**Cece:** To briefly refer back to Kammer and the perceived problem of *Pericles*' multiple locations, Kammer writes that the story of *Pericles* "is not an individualized tale of one man's life but rather a more complex story of multiple agents moving in and through an ecological system. Perceiving the play in this way breaks down traditional modes of dualistic and hierarchical thought."

**Anna:** *Pericles* – like Marina, and like the ocean itself – functions best when it's not trying to be Shakespeare or Wilkins, Pentapolis or Tyre, a comedy or a tragedy, or even a "good" play or a "bad" play. We don't need to define this play through binary opposition.

**Cece:** Instead, we can find value by viewing it holistically, interpreting the play's multiple settings and authorship complications as an interconnected web, something that can be worthy of performance without conforming to our own narrow definitions or preconceived expectations.