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Question # 4

Meaningful Suffering: Christian Allegory, Cycles, and Divine Order in Shakespeare's
Romances *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*

In his plays *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, William Shakespeare offers Christian allegories as the plays' protagonists trace a cycle through a fall, suffering, and final redemption coupled with literal and symbolic resurrections. This patterns out a version of the "seasonal cycle" that Walter Cohen argues is present in Shakespearean romance, as *Pericles* and *Leontes* move from darkness into light (1627). As well, the specifically Christian influence upon these characters' transformations parallels what Cohen writes of "the providential guidance of mortal affairs" and the tendency towards "resolutions that are rationally inexplicable...but Christian in nature" that characterize Shakespeare's romance plays. In *Pericles*, this supernatural cycle takes the form of divinely mediated knowledge, building upon the biblical theme of the fall of man, as *Pericles* moves from the near-fatal realization of *Antiochus*' relationship to epiphany represented by the goddess *Diana* and the resounding "music of the spheres!" (5.1.217). In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare parallels the Christian narrative of *Jesus* as *Leontes* suffers the weight of his sinful actions before arriving at redemption through the resurrections of his daughter and wife. Shakespeare's use of a Christian framework in these plays not only justifies their characters' suffering and redemptive states, but also connects them as romances with a shared cycle that

transforms pain into miraculous hope and a spiritually-mitigated order that eclipses the protagonists' previous tragedy.

Both *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* begin by tethering their protagonists to a negative moral state that alludes to humankind's fall in Eden. In the former play, Pericles enters as a typical character of romances who risks death for a beautiful woman, but Shakespeare also transforms this scene into an oblique replica of the garden of Eden. Most obviously, Pericles and Antiochus both describe Antiochus' daughter in biblical terms, with Pericles stating that he is "To taste the fruit of yon celestial tree / Or die in th'adventure" (1.1.22-23). Likewise, Antiochus announces to Pericles that "Before thee stands this fair Hesperides / With golden fruit, but dangerous to be touched" (1.1.28-29). Such descriptions clearly align Antiochus' daughter with the "celestial" forbidden fruit in Eden that, in this case, tempts Pericles. Shakespeare also uses more subtle language to forge the connection between Pericles' quest and the biblical garden. Pericles describes Antiochus' daughter as "appareled like the spring," providing connotations of nature and fertility, as in a garden, and Antiochus claims that "Her face like heaven enticeth thee to view," connoting her with divine paradise (1.1.13, 31). The word "like" in both cases may also imply illusion, as Antiochus and his daughter lure Pericles towards his fall. Antiochus' daughter representing forbidden fruit also connects her to the tree that bears such fruit: the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The specific moment of Pericles' decline occurs when he solves Antiochus' riddle and gains knowledge of the king and his daughter's "foul incest" (1.1.127). Though Pericles rejects their actions with disgust, giving up the lure of hedonistic pleasure, by solving the riddle he unlocks a cascade of tragic consequences—despite his best efforts he bites the proverbial apple. The knowledge of incest that he now possesses seals his fate, as Antiochus and his daughter—importantly both described by Pericles as

“serpents,” another biblical illusion—tempt and lead Pericles down a dangerous path that initiates his fall (1.1.133). In his own way, then, Pericles acts as the Eve that brings chaos and tragedy upon himself and his future family.

Shakespeare also draws parallels to a fallen state with Leontes’ cold winter court in *The Winter’s Tale*. Unlike *Pericles*, however, the play begins in turmoil, with the prelapsarian state of boyhood friendship between Leontes and Polixenes already fractured. Shakespeare sets up a pre- and post-fall contrast by using biblical terms to describe this plummet into the darkness and uncertainty that characterizes Leontes’ court. As Polixenes tells Hermione, he and Leontes “were as twinned lambs that did frisk i’th’ sun / And bleat the one at th’other. What we changed / Was innocence for innocence” (1.2.67-69). The specific use of the word “lambs” here evokes a state of spring that foreshadows the later seasonal turn in Bohemia, but it also brings to mind heavy connotations of Christ and his role as a “lamb of god.” Even more, Polixenes directly claims that their boyhood relationship was based upon “innocence” that exempted them from original sin (1.2.69-74). Women, however, have tainted them “With stronger blood” and “temptations” (1.2.73, 76). Shakespeare’s use of such highly charged language in this passage implies that the kings’ youths amounted to a state akin to that of Christ, and that sexual desire generated by women—Eves, or serpents, of sorts—have wrenched them out of the Edenic, springlike garden of “sun,” and placed them into a fallen state represented by the darkness of winter. The words “blood” and “temptations” bring to mind Christ’s suffering that the original sin in Eden necessitated, nearly aligning the collapse of Leontes’ and Polixenes’ youthful, homosocial relationship with martyrdom. Following this, Leontes’ irrational jealousy conjures up more sin as his scattered speech, full of stops and starts, brings his world into a climactic hellish chaos as he wishes even his wife and child to be “instantly consumed with fire” (1.2.133).

In the end, Leontes receives nothing but the cold and darkness of winter, and the pain of seemingly irreparable sin.

In both plays, intense suffering follows the protagonists' fallen states, and only the resurrections of their daughters and wives can catalyze final order and redemption. For Pericles, this suffering takes the form of an ignorance that follows from his descent into the evil information of Antiochus' incest. Pericles gropes around the world blindly, stuck in darkness as he fails to realize the plot against him by the Lords in Tyre, misjudges Dionyza's character, and mourns for a wife that he does not know still lives. Only divine will working through his daughter Marina, a metaphoric Christ figure, can save and bring him to the heavenly knowledge that leads to final redemption. Shakespeare associates Marina with Christ in several ways, first by linking her with spring and rebirth as she "rob[s] Tellus of her weed / To strew thy green with flowers" (*Pericles* 4.1.14-15). Secondly, Marina works miracles in the brothel, as "she's able to freeze the god Priapus / and undo a whole generation" (4.6.3-4). Like Jesus, Marina treats the lecherous and downtrodden with empathy, and has the remarkable ability to reverse their sinful ways. Most importantly, however, Marina, who "sings like an immortal, and...dances / As goddess-like," performs the ultimate miracle of lifting Pericles out of despair and into the knowledge of her symbolic resurrection as they are providentially reunited (5.0.3-4). Marina's presence leads to Pericles finally obtaining the power of divine knowledge as his hazy ignorance resolves into the emphatic "music of the spheres!" and the reversal of his original sin (5.1.217).

With this "most heavenly music," Pericles also gains access to the final piece of his redemption: the knowledge that his wife Thaisa still lives (5.1.220). Interestingly, Shakespeare uses the pagan goddess Diana as the messenger who orders Pericles to "Awake, and tell thy dream" (5.1.236). Despite this, Thaisa's earlier resurrection by Cerimon forges parallels

between her character and that of Christ and his resurrection (3.1.80-95). As well, Shakespeare uses specific language at the end of the play to promote the idea of divine guidance: “the gods have shown their power” through Cerimon’s work, there is no one “to thank, / Besides the gods, for this great miracle,” and, according to Gower, “Virtue [is] preserved from fell destruction’s blast / Led on by heaven” (5.3.60, 57-58; Epilogue.5-6). Though Shakespeare uses a syncretic approach here, turning to a more loosely defined spiritual redemption, framing Pericles’ cycle as one of knowledge reveals an overall Christian allegory. Pericles moves from an initial fall with the “evil” knowledge of incest to a journey of suffering that parallels Christ’s trials and temptations, and humanity’s postlapsarian state of ignorance. Finally, Marina and Thaisa’s resurrections, allusions to Christ’s resurrection, lead Pericles to divine knowledge and final redemption.

Leontes, too, is saved by the resurrection of his Christlike daughter and wife. Through Leontes’ daughter Perdita, Shakespeare follows a unique version of the Christian narrative of Jesus. Perdita is born in winter, and a divine oracle prophesies of her that “the King shall live without an heir / if that which is lost be not found,” both which allude to Christ’s story in the Bible (*Winter’s Tale* 3.2.132-33). Just as Christ ostensibly fulfills the role of predicted messiah, Perdita acts as the chosen daughter to bring new life into the world and perpetuate the king’s lineage. As well, a shepherd raises Perdita and she becomes a shepherdess herself, complimenting the common image of Christ as a shepherd. In the heady Bohemian spring, Perdita also personifies “Flora, / Peering in April’s front,” as she gathers and shares flowers, representing nature and rebirth (4.4.2-3). Shakespeare even references “Whitsun,” the celebration of the Pentecost and Jesus’ ascension and resurrection (4.4.134). Even more, just as Christlike Marina saves her father in *Pericles*, Perdita journeys back to Leontes, renewing him

and lifting him out of tragedy and darkness as “The oracle is fulfilled; the King’s daughter is found” (5.2.21-22). Interestingly, Shakespeare recounts this reunion through second-hand accounts; he necessitates *faith* on the part of the audience to believe in this miracle.

Furthermore, Leontes’ wife, Hermione, takes on a role similar to that of Thaisa in *Pericles* as she undergoes an (arguably) literal resurrection that brings about final order. As Paulina urges Hermione’s statue back to life, she warns Leontes that “It is required / You do awake your faith,” a command that echoes back upon the play’s audience (5.3.94-95).

Hermione’s resurrection forces Leontes into humility as Paulina questions whether “in age / is she become the suitor?,” reversing their previous roles (5.3.108-109). This awakening, and accompanying spiritual revelation, transforms the cold death of Leontes’ fallen court to the warmth of redeemed and resurrected life, just as in Christian theology Christ brings about absolution from humanity’s fall. Leontes even apologizes for his sins, rewriting misplaced jealousy in religious terms as “holy looks” (5.3.148). Hermione’s willingness to return to Leontes after his fall also embodies the love and forgiveness of Christian ideals, as she shows that even the worst faults are redeemable. Just like *Pericles*’, Leontes’ tragedies follow the Christian belief that necessary suffering leads to new life through Christ, as Leontes suffers the consequences of his sins in order to gain true forgiveness through his Christlike daughter and wife.

The Christian allegorical cycle present in *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale* connects them as romances, as described by Cohen, and justifies their protagonists’ suffering and supernatural redemptions. This interpretation, however, also brings up several parallel points. Firstly, the end of the cycle in both plays not only coincides with redemption and resurrection, but also with a restoration of order. This suggests the influence of Renaissance Neoplatonism, which Cohen

describes as “a mystical belief in...cosmic harmony that gives meaning to the apparently random vicissitudes of earthly existence” (1634). In *Pericles*, this order is best represented by the “music of the spheres,” and the constant divine intervention that brings about final resolution. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the union of Perdita and Florizel and the reunion of Leontes and Hermione override the play’s earlier negative sexuality that portrays women as pathways to sin. In both cases, a miraculous regeneration of heterosexual relationships and familial ties moves the plays’ worlds from darkness back into light, and brings about a new order of hope that surpasses earlier suffering and chaos. A Christian perspective gives even more meaning to this order, as the pattern of a fall, suffering, and final forgiveness and redemption justifies both plays’ intense tragedies as necessary elements of the movement towards harmony. Secondly, Shakespeare subverts the traditional Christian narrative by composing the Christlike figures in his plays—Marina and Thaisa, and Perdita and Hermione—as women. Rather than being the “devils” that Polixenes implies them to be, women end up as saviors, acting in the role of Christ as redeemers to fallen men (*Winter’s Tale* 1.2.83). A cycle towards ultimate divine order, as explained through a Christian paradigm, and the role of women as indispensable conduits of spiritual forgiveness are two ways that these plays may be analyzed as specifically *Shakespearean* romances. This also underscores the importance of categorizing these plays as such—without a Christian perspective, the suffering endured by Leontes, and especially by Pericles, may seem unjustified and cruel, undermining the plays’ happy endings. By understanding *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale* as romances with underlying Christian allegories, Shakespeare’s turn to hope and the promise of light emerging from darkness gain true meaning and show us that we may truly be in the end “precious winners all” (*Winter’s Tale* 5.3.131).

Works Cited

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