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STRANGE IMAGES OF DEATH

By PHILIPPA TRISTRAM

In the heat of action, death holds for Macbeth no terrors - "Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make, / Strange images of death" - but in contemplation it assumes a different aspect: "Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings".¹ From the fourteenth into the seventeenth century there is a continuity in those "strange images" that, in literature as in art and in commonplace speech, interpose between men's present fears when faced with the fact of death, and those "imaginings", which may sometimes be so much more horrible than the fact. Some of these traditional images are themselves horrible, for, as Bacon said, "Men fear death, as children fear to go into the dark, and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other";² but there are many others that seek to transcend that fear, or at least allay it. Indeed, it is one of the signs of the greatest literature that, in its understandings, life and death are inextricably related.

Images of death from the medieval past which survive into the Jacobean present are not to be found in sources, such as books, that can be easily authenticated. But the persistence of a living medieval presence into Shakespeare's time - in objects still visible, in tales still told, in insights that had dwindled to commonplace aphorisms - must have been more marked than can now be easily imagined. Two to three centuries could be described as the period of envisageable history: Georgian England is still very much a part of our present life, as medieval and Elizabethan England are not. In Shakespeare's time the medieval legacy would have required no painstaking reconstruction; it would still have been an everyday part of the usual landscape.

It is, however, true that Renaissance attitudes to death differed significantly from those of the Middle Ages in England. Bosola, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, sardonically describes the new Jacobean emphasis in tomb sculpture:

Princes images on their tombes
Do not lie, as they were wont, seeming to pray
Up to heaven: but with their hands under their cheekes,
(As if they died of the tooth-ache) - they are not carved
With their eies fix'd upon the starres; but as
Their mindes were wholly bent upon the world,
The selfe-same way they seeme to turne their faces.³

This worldly emphasis, sustained by rotund Latin epitaphs which

dwell upon a man's dignities in this life, not his ignominy and anonymity in death, marks the difference between that earlier age, which sought the significance of this life in an afterlife, and the later which, though by no means irreligious, looked for the significance of this life in this world.

Nonetheless, what the Duchess describes as new "fashion in the grave" was so because still paralleled by the old medieval mode. Not only the serene effigies of the high Middle Ages, but their later and stranger images of death, find their way into Shakespeare's plays. The double tomb, where the composed effigy of the body in its final state surmounts the anguished, decaying cadaver beneath, is recalled in Hal's dual epitaph for Hotspur. His resilient words - "This earth, that bears thee dead, / Bears not alive so stout a gentleman" - delineate the effigy *au vif*; but the recognition that Hotspur is now but dust and food for worms images the *en transit* and spells out its meaning:

When that this body did contain a spirit,
 A kingdom for it was too small a bound,
 But now two paces of the vilest earth
 Is room enough.⁴

One may glimpse the Dance of Death in the words of the dying Hamlet, though the image has retreated from literalism into the metaphor whence it originated: "Had I but time, as this fell sergeant, Death, / Is strict in his arrest".⁵ The popular medieval legend of the three living and the three dead is newly enacted as Pericles gazes upon the skulls of his predecessors and spells out the significance of the *memento mori*.⁶

It is in *Pericles*, of all the plays of Shakespeare, that this aspect of the medieval past is most fully exhibited and understood. These unauthenticated medieval sources are quite different from those more immediate, which have of course been thoroughly authenticated. They are Gower's story of Apollonius of Tyre in Book VIII of his *Confessio Amantis*, written in the late fourteenth century, and Laurence Twine's *Patterne of Paynfull Aduentures*, registered in 1576, "the most excellent, pleasant and variable history of the strange accidents that fell unto Prince Apollonius". But *Pericles* is undoubtedly medieval in more respects than its debt to Gower and his story; it is perhaps the most medieval of all Shakespeare's plays, more so even than the early histories of Henry VI, for its imagination seems more profoundly attentive to the legacies of that earlier age which must have persisted into Shakespeare's lifetime. Sometimes these are felt as visible survivals, in the tombs and paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which must, before the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, have been much more numerous in parish churches than they are today. Sometimes one is made powerfully aware of oral as distinct from written traditions, of stories passed down by tellers of tales amongst the humble, as much as those transmitted by writers to the educated. As Shakespeare's Gower remarks of his story of Pericles:

It hath been sung at festivals,

On ember-eaves and holy ales;
 And lords and ladies in their lives
 Have read it for restoratives.⁷

Sometimes the afterlife of that medieval past may be felt in the aphoristic wisdom, of old saws and old sayings, that permeates the play, for the older a good thing is of course the better:

The purchase is to make men glorious;
 Et bonum quo antiquius, eo melius.

It is however that rustic character, together with its exclusion from the first folio, which have led both critics and scholars to suggest that *Pericles*, at least in its first two acts, is the work of another and inferior writer. Scholarship, at present, entertains two possibilities: that, on the one hand, it is indeed the play of that inferior writer, taken over by Shakespeare in the last three acts; or, on the other, that the text is actually Shakespeare's, incompetently reported in the two first acts. It is perhaps possible to argue a third position: that the inferiority of those first two acts has been over-emphasized, and that their old wisdoms are essential to the rest of the play. If he did not write them, Shakespeare was clearly willing to accommodate them, as he accommodates into the acceptable last three acts the stumbling metres and drasty rhymes of the reincarnated Gower, Chaucer's moral friend. The play as a whole seems to afford ample testimony that, at the end of Shakespeare's writing life, he became newly attentive to the simplicities of old stories, old sayings and old imaginings of death. For *Pericles* is, in at least one major perspective, a play about death - and not death only, but its transcendence too, through purgation and resurrection. It is Shakespeare's debt to the strange images of that medieval past, and his transformation of them through the three stages of death, purgation and resurrection, which this article is concerned to trace.

The fear of death, expressed in one of the darkest and strangest of medieval imaginings of mortality, is the play's point of departure. The stage direction - "Before the palace of Antioch, with heads displayed above the entrance" - does to that macabre spectacle a justice as scant as the brief allusions of Twine and the original Gower. In *Pericles*, however, the attention of the audience is repeatedly drawn to the exhibited fate of those previous unsuccessful suitors. Shakespeare's Gower indicates the heads:

So for her many a wight did die,
 As yon grim looks do testify.

Antiochus himself recalls his guest to their significance: "Yon sometimes famous princes, like thyself . . .". *Pericles*, in acknowledging that relation, confirms their connection with the late medieval legend of the three living and the three dead, a tale, in Bacon's terms, calculated to increase the natural fear of mortality. In words related to those that the dead in the legend offer to the living, he interprets the significance of that macabre *memento mori*:

Antiochus, I thank thee, who hath taught
 My frail mortality to know itself,
 And by those fearful objects to prepare
 This body, like to them, to what I must;
 For death remembered should be like a mirror,
 Who tells us life's but breath, to trust it error.⁸

That is the response which - to take only one example - Henryson's three dead skulls intend to elicit from the living through their address:

O sinfull man, into this mortall se
 Quhilk is the vaill of murnyng and of cair,
 With gaistly sicht behold our heidis thre,
 Oure holkit ene, oure peilit pollis bair:
 As ye ar now, into this world we wair,
 Als fresche, als fair, als lusty to behald;
 Quhan thow lukis on this suth examplair
 Off thyself, man, thow may be richt unbalde.⁹

The legend is not only the first, but remains in England by far the most popular, of the many charnel representations of death. The story may be visually expressed in a single scene, where three princes, usually engaged in hunting, encounter three animate skeletons representing their fathers or predecessors. The moral does not need to be spelt out, but the words of the dead are actually inscribed at Wensley: "As we are nove thus sal ye be . . . bewar wyt me". The earliest surviving versions of this tale are to be found in four French poems of the late thirteenth century. A reduced version of one of these, accompanied by a manuscript illumination, appears in England in the Arundel Manuscript in about 1330. Thereafter the theme acquires an extraordinary popularity, not so much in literature although it has a presence there, as in manuscript illumination and particularly in wall painting. Representations may still be seen in quite humble parish churches throughout the country, though they are most numerous in the Midlands and home counties. They would therefore have been thoroughly familiar, not to Shakespeare only, but to his audience. It is possible that, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England, no single subject was as frequently depicted, since certain other themes (like the Corporal Works of Mercy), which exist or are recorded in equal numbers, have not been so vulnerable to the depredations of the disapproving. For depictions of the legend can be graphically horrible: the animate dead are often visibly putrefying, and may even parody in the stages of corruption - bloated, dessicated, skeletal - the three ages into which the living are sometimes distinguished. The medieval enthusiasm of the Victorians did not extend to its charnel aspect, and these curious lapses in an age of supposed faith were often scraped from the walls or whitewashed over.

Victorian parsons were not, however, merely prudish; they had their point. In terms of most Christian thinking, the legend - as distinct from its moral - was quite unorthodox. However useful and instructive its intentions, the dead body had no business to walk

about; it was supposed to lie quietly in the grave while the soul departed for its individual judgement. Both the legend itself, and those other animate dead it seems to beget in the Dance of Death and the personification with scythe and hourglass, are aberrations in Christian thinking so marked that they may indicate an uncertainty about the origin and purpose of death itself. The Bible and the Church did not make clear whether it was natural or unnatural, and who had created it, God or the Devil. The urgency of such questions must have been intensified by recurrent outbreaks of plague from 1348 to the end of the Middle Ages. Its inexplicability, the suddenness and arbitrariness of its manifestations, could not but have given an edge to such problems, and done much to foster the charnel imagination which embodied them.

When Bosola describes those old images who gaze up to heaven, their eyes fixed upon the stars, he is alluding to the effigy *au vif*, to the intention rather than the fact of the *en transit*. In Pericles' words, "Death remembered should be like a mirror, / Who tells us life's but breath, to trust it error." The *memento mori* is intended to redirect the attention from the transient joys of this world to the eternal, unchanging aspect of the heavens. But the effect of the charnel image is often the reverse of its intention; far from fixing the eyes of men upon the stars, it limits their vision to the grave. The late medieval preacher, like Chaucer's parson, needed to look no further for the torments of the damned; the sentient experience of corruption was hell enough. It was, moreover, the fate awaiting all men.

The greatest writers of the Middle Ages, perhaps for this reason, have no truck with the charnel imagination. They allude to it certainly, but their questioning of death's meaning goes far beyond it. Chaucer's attitude is of particular interest in the context of *Pericles*, for his *Pardoner's Tale* seems to allude, much as Shakespeare's first scene does, to the familiar legend of living and dead. Three young rioters in their pride of life, who set out actually to hunt for death, must not only have related, in the mind of the audience, to that well-known story, but must have led them also to anticipate its denouement. The frustration of that expectation is part of the point. There is no figure of death. This tale at least refuses to increase that natural fear.

From the tale's beginning the genesis of such horrible imaginings is traced in the strange growth of language, from metaphor through personification to actual figure. "Beth redy for to meete [Death] everemoore" the boy servant was once enjoined by his mother.¹⁰ That embryonic metaphor becomes personification as the taverner confirms that Death has his dwelling in a neighbouring, plague-stricken village, and the figure is actualized when one of the rioters declares in response: "He shal be slayn, he that so manye sleeth".¹¹ As events develop, they dispose systematically of such literalism. The Old Man is sometimes interpreted as a figure of death, and it is true that Age, in medieval writing, is often tantamount to a walking corpse and serves the same instructive purpose. But Chaucer's Old Man is not charnel; rather, he dwindles decently to mere bone. He is moreover exceptional in his

longing for death; for the first time in English literature - and the last until the Renaissance - he addresses earth as a mother in death as in birth. Death in age is thus natural and desirable, while death in youth, though unnatural, is not arbitrary. The rioters are destroyed by their own avarice, and death is thus assimilated to man's moral being.

This tale has a peculiarly humanistic cast, in that it confines itself to the insights this life affords; but, while Chaucer rarely writes from an explicitly religious viewpoint, he often indicates it tacitly. The Pardoner draws his gloomy texts from St Paul's Epistles: "Ther walken manye of whiche . . . the ende is deeth"; "Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete, / Shal God destroyen bothe".¹² In context, however, one finds those others for whom the end is not death, but the contrary prospect of the flesh glorified through Christ, "Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body".¹³

Shakespeare's allusion to the legend in *Pericles* contrasts surprisingly with Chaucer's, in that the later instance is the more medieval, for it restores to the story the significance it was meant originally to have by disposing of the animation of the dead princes. The image of the mirror, which *Pericles* employs, recurs in medieval literature that alludes to the legend:

Makes youre mirroures bi me, men bi youre trouthe -
This schadowe in my schewere schunte ye no while

Elde enjoins in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*.¹⁴ In some written versions the dead are revealed to be the fathers of the living; in some visual representations they still sport the signs of office - sword, crown and crozier - which the living bear. They are only a step away from the Dance of Death, where the individual both is, and is not, its victim's future. In *Pericles* the skulls of "Yon sometimes famous princes" are not *Pericles*, in that they represent the fate he evades, yet he recognizes in them the mirror of himself. On the physical level they represent the corruption of the body within the fair exterior; on the spiritual level they recall him to an incorruptible beauty which the grave cannot deface. Thus he wills his corruptible riches to the earth "from whence they came", and bequeaths his unspotted fire of love to the maiden.

That bequest, consigning the corruptible part of man to earth, while avowing an incorruptible, enduring love, lies of course within the romance convention; but, in its distinction between body and spirit, it also has religious significance. Amongst other things, this opening scene is an allusion to the Fall of Man, and it was with the Fall that death became man's destiny. Antiochus alludes to his daughter in classical metaphor:

Before thee stands this fair Hesperides,
With golden fruit, but dangerous to be touched.

But *Pericles* has already given to that metaphor another, Christian emphasis:

You gods that made me man and sway in love,
 That have inflamed desire in my breast
 To taste the fruit of yon celestial tree
 Or die in the adventure, be my helps.¹⁵

The desire to taste the fruit of another celestial tree once led to man's mortality through Adam's sin. When Pericles understands the riddle, he acquires the knowledge of good and evil and endangers his life. Antiochus's daughter, so fair without, "apparelled like the spring", is corrupt within in the sense that the living princes of the legend are, in the pride of life which is also spiritual death. The opening scene of *Pericles*, although it follows a different path, arrives ultimately at the same destination as Chaucer's. The charnel aspect of man, the corruption of the body after death, has in itself little to tell us about mortality. Death, properly understood, is a state of sin, intrinsic to man's moral being. Where that moral being remains unspotted, it is incorruptible in more senses than one.

The original sin in the play (the incest of Antiochus and his daughter) is not of Pericles' making, any more than Adam's was the sin of his descendants; it acts, however, like original sin. As mankind was driven from the earthly paradise into the thorns and brambles of a fallen world, so Pericles is driven from his earthly kingdom into the perils of the "mortal sea", Henryson's "vail of murnyng and of cair". This is the journey of life, the long road back to an original state, but it is also in some sense a journey beyond life, a pilgrimage of expiation whose end is redemption.

From the first, again as in the case of Adam, this long voyage is not without its prospect of future comfort. The sin of Adam was a *felix culpa*, the sin of Eva was also the Ave of Mary. The wisdom of old saws and old sayings is, from the first, as essential to this play as it once was to medieval thought. Every thesis implies its antithesis, every vice its corresponding virtue. The play opens with a destructive riddle, the solution to which, the daughter of Antiochus, is death:

I am no viper, yet I feed
 On mother's flesh that did me breed.
 I sought a husband, in which labour
 I found that kindness from a father.
 He's father, son, and husband mild;
 I mother, wife, and yet his child.¹⁶

The play is resolved by a constructive riddle, the answer to which, Marina, is life: "Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget".¹⁷ The play departs from a destructive proposition, "Fair without, but foul within"; it is resolved by its constructive antithesis, "Foul without, but fair within". Along with many other medieval parallels, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* invites and rewards a related range of perceptions - that inward worth has more value than fair outward seeming, that a foul appearance may belie a fair reality. Pericles, contending in rusty armour for Thaisa's hand, prompts one spectator

to comment:

He had need mean better than his outward show
Can any way speak in his just commend.¹⁸

Thaisa, more discerning, finds that armour transparent: "To me he seems like diamond to glass".¹⁹ Lysimachus is at first misled by appearances when he discovers Marina in a brothel - "Why, the house you dwell in proclaims you to be a creature of sale" - but he is forced by her to admit that, despite appearances, she is "a piece of virtue".²⁰ Those whose fair seeming conceals an inward corruption are redeemed in the play by those whose foul seeming masks their inward beauty.

The Middle Ages had great faith in the truth of language, in its logic, its structure and its grammar. A pun was not a poor joke but an inward truth; a traditional saying was no cliché, but embodied the authority of ages; a thesis demanded its antithesis as a subject its object. Thus in Langland's *Harrowing of Hell*, Christ argues out his right to redeem mankind on grounds that are logical and grammatical as well as legal:

Ergo, soule shal soule quyte, and synne to synne wende,
And al that man hath mysdo, I, man, wyl amende.²¹

That truth, of necessary opposites, is the basis of his affirmation of an afterlife:

"And I shal preue," quod Pees, "her peyne mote have
ende,
And wo in-to wel mowe wende atte laste;
For had thei wist of no wo, wel had they noughte knowen.
For no wight wote what wel is that nevere wo suffred,
Ne what is hote hunger that had nevere defaute."²²

One may sense in *Pericles* a related confidence.

It would, however, be a mistake to confine this confidence too much to the "folk wisdom" of the play. It can extend to the more sophisticated insights of the moral Gower and his philosophical friends. The meaning of Fortune, her relation to providence, and the difficulty of reconciling fate with freewill, was of course a dominant preoccupation, not only of Chaucer's, but of many late medieval writers. Fortune is the dynamic, at once deterministic and arbitrary, of the original Gower's story of Apollonius:

Fortune hath evere be muable
And mai no while stonde stable;
For now it hiheth, now it loweth,
Now stant upriht, now overthroweth,
Now full of blisse and now of bale,
As in the tellinge of mi tale.²³

This figure, sometimes foul when fair in seeming, sometimes the reverse, enters Shakespeare's play on the level of folk wisdom,

and seems at first quite as arbitrary and cruel a goddess as in the most despairing of medieval renderings:

And he, good prince, having all lost,
By waves from coast to coast is tossed.
All perishen of man, of pelf,
Ne aught escapend but himself;
Till fortune, tired with doing bad,
Threw him ashore, to give him glad.²⁴

This sea-sick motion of arbitrary chop and change, mimetic of the wheel, can be found in the original Gower, in Lydgate and in many others. In *Pericles*, however, that familiar rhythm is brought into contact with the choppy sea, and the mechanical rise and fall of the wheel becomes the movement of intractable waters:

but fortune's mood
Varies again; the grisled north
Disgorges such a tempest forth,
That, as a duck for life that dives,
So up and down the poor ship drives.²⁵

The wheel of Fortune and the moods of the sea are alike, however, only in some respects. Although Philosophy urged Boethius to believe so, fortune is rarely felt by medieval poets to be a manifestation of providence in a fallen world. In *Pericles*, her obedience to a higher order is re-established. The presiding Goddess of the play is Diana, the moon, to whom both Marina and Thaisa dedicate themselves. Beneath the accidents of terrestrial weather, the arbitrary alternation of storm and calm, lies the steady rhythm of the tides themselves which answer predictably to the pull of the moon, a celestial, not a terrestrial, power.

In assimilating Fortune to the natural order, responsive in its turn to celestial powers, Shakespeare has at once recognized and resolved a figure which exercised as dark an influence on the medieval imagination as did those charnel images of mortality. But even this transformation is effected by medieval means, by eliciting the significance of certain elements intrinsic to the genre of medieval romance. Of all the available forms of medieval writing, the romance is least tainted by the terrors of mortality, least daunted by the arbitrary deity, Fortuna. This is not because the romance hero, as in renaissance drama, gathers into his hands the reins of his own destiny; it is because he surrenders himself, with unquestioning faith, to the journey of life.

The specific story of Apollonius of Tyre is, as it were, only the occasion of *Pericles*. Gower's version in the *Confessio Amantis* is a particular kind of romance, its moral variety. Shakespeare's play is much more than this: it is a recreation as much of the romance genre as of a particular tale; it is written, moreover with a complex awareness of the forms that genre may assume. The basic romance begins in catastrophe, which results in the severance of families, often parents from children. The offence of others is expiated by the "child", whose apparently random journey, across

perilous seas to strange lands, bring him at last, by what then seems to be a directed path, to the recovery of that which was lost. That journey to a preordained destination, whose meaning will only emerge with the final landfall, is an image of man's life; death waits for all at a place and time now unknown, holding the key to the meaning each life will ultimately assume. It is also an image of human history.

Pericles, like *Emaré*, is a tale of that kind, but it is also the moral tale of Constance, told by Chaucer's Man of Law. Pericles himself is an embodiment of fortitude, for he endures the sufferings of Job, while he himself successively identifies Marina with the moral personifications of Justice, Truth and Patience. But the moral romance may also, by another protean transformation, become the holy tale, the story of a saint. Connections have been made between Marina's plight in the brothel and the trials of Theodora, Serapia, Denise and St Agnes. A more inclusive relationship may be found to an incident which occurs in the later life of Mary Magdalene, when the saint converts the King of Marseilles and his wife to Christianity. This story, the moral tale of Constance and the romance of *Emaré*, all trace, as it were, the voyage of *Pericles*.

The Play of Mary Magdalene in the Digby MS dramatizes the incident, but it is on the whole a clumsy, routine affair, with little trace of the romance imagination. The version found in Caxton's translation of *The Golden Legend* has far more truth to that spirit, and indeed to *Pericles*. It is, of course, another unauthenticated source, but it could have been familiar to Shakespeare, either in that version, or in the traditional tales of "ember eves". The barren queen of Marseilles is made quick with child by the miraculous agency of the saint; in gratitude the couple set sail for Rome, on a pilgrimage of faith to find St Peter. Like Thaisa, the Queen gives birth at sea and dies, and here too sailors demand that the body be committed to the deep in order to satisfy the raging sea. At the King's intercession, however, both dead wife and living child are instead marooned on a rock so hard that no grave can be dug. The king persists in his pilgrimage of faith, and, when returning from Rome some two years later, receives his reward.

And as they sailed by the sea, they came, by the ordinance of God, by the rock where the body of his wife was left, and his son . . . And the little child, whom Mary Magdalene had kept, went oftsithes to the seaside, and, like small children, took small stones and threw them into the sea . . . And when the child saw them, which had never seen people tofore, he was afraid, and ran secretly to his mother's breast and hid him under the mantle. And then the father of the child went for to see more appertly, and took the mantle, and found the child, which was right fair, sucking his mother's breast.²⁶

The tale is beautifully told, with touches of that same domestic tenderness detectable in Shakespeare's storm at sea, "this poor

infant, this fresh-new seafarer". As in *Pericles*, that which was lost is found.

The story is at once of this life and of the afterlife, and as such it touches upon the resurrections of the play. Despite the medievalism of *Pericles*, it is clear from Caxton's translation how different Shakespeare's version also is from the simplicities of the medieval version. It is no explicit "ordinance of God" that directs Pericles, no saint's miracle that restores his dead to life. Yet the play is inescapably religious in a different sense, for it has the power of the finest romances, where mysterious journeying to an unseen end is as much the image of an afterlife as of this life. *Sir Gawain*, for example, although so fully a poem of this life, nonetheless traces the encounter with death which awaits Everyman. When Gawain survives the axe, it is because he has survived the trials of life, and thus death's scythe can hold for him no perils. In *Pericles* too the afterlife and this life are related. Thaisa, in Pericles' eyes and those of the audience, does die in childbirth and is buried at sea; Marina, "born at sea" is "buried at Tharsus". Pericles regards his own condition, his face unwashed, his hair unkempt, his mind deranged, as a death from which Marina raises him. As in the romances, the resurrections in this play may have their terrestrial explanations, but they are resurrections nonetheless.

Shakespeare's confidence in the restorative power of "wayward seas" has, in its submarine aspect, no precedent either in literature or in travellers' tales. On the contrary, death by drowning from Virgil through Dante is normally regarded as a desolate end, and those who suffer it are not at peace until they return to the kindlier element of earth. The words with which Pericles commits Thaisa to the deep acknowledge to the full that desolation:

A terrible childbed hast thou had, my dear;
 No light, no fire: th'unfriendly elements
 Forgot thee utterly; nor have I time
 To give the hallowed to thy grave, but straight
 Must cast thee, scarcely confined, in the ooze.

But he transcends that desolation instantly, in an image of quite alien marine beauty:

Where, for a monument upon thy bones,
 And e'er remaining lamps, the belching whale
 And humming water must o'erwhelm thy corpse,
 Lying with simple shells.²⁷

It seems possible, however, that the symbolic seas of romance, together with that medieval lore which determined portrayals of the afterlife both in poetry and painting, were mysteriously fused in Shakespeare's imagination. The coral and pearl of *The Tempest* do not figure in the imagined fate of Thaisa's body, but the jewelled world of the *Gawain*-poet's precious pearl has its presence in the scene where Cerimon recalls Thaisa to life. As Elizabeth Salter

once finely wrote of Pearl:

Only by removing the ground of action from a world which celebrates "whatever is begotten, born and dies", to one in which the revolution of seasons is stilled, and the accident of death precluded, can the poet win for his dreaming self a measure of calm. The contrast is dramatic, as he exchanges his little mundane "paradise garden", with its flowers shining in sunlight, for a land which proclaims itself, in every detail, a heightened and perfected vision of what the senses are accustomed to register.²⁸

Precious metals and jewels, the most beautiful and durable of all earth's creations, are the materials from which the Gawain-poet, like so many medieval painters, built his recovered garden of earthly delights and his heavenly Jerusalem.

When Thaisa's coffin is opened, Cerimon recognizes that "heightened and perfected vision of what the senses are accustomed to register":

She is alive; behold,
Her eyelids, cast to those heavenly jewels
Which Pericles hath lost, begin to part
Their fringes of bright gold; the diamonds
Of a most praised water doth appear
To make the world twice rich.²⁹

Thaisa, like the Pearl maiden, is a perfected figure, her being now of gold. But where the Pearl maiden is transformed from a flower in that little mundane garden into an unchanging, imperishable being, Thaisa is retrieved from that perfected image to become again "a flower, shining in sunlight":

This queen will live; nature awakes; a warmth
Breathes out of her; she hath not been entranced
Above five hours; see how she 'gins to blow
Into life's flower again!³⁰

Alchemy, that art which seeks to distill the permanent from perishable being and to accelerate the process of its perfection, may have its part to play in both *Pearl* and *Pericles*. Cerimon is skilled in the curative power that "dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones". Where the jeweller of *Pearl* uses his art to transform the mortal child into immortal metals, precious stones, Cerimon employs his to transform the immortalized Thaisa back into the living, perishable flower of earth. It is most unlikely that Shakespeare knew *Pearl*, just as it is unlikely that the poet of *Pearl* knew Dante. But it is not improbable that exceptional imaginations, sharing certain related visual and verbal representations of the afterlife, should have drawn on that communal inheritance in ways that suggest an affinity.

Works of art themselves may have strange burials and still stranger resurrections. It is well known that the single manuscript

of *Pearl*, known only as a catalogue entry through five centuries, survived a major fire though slightly charred to flourish again in nineteenth century England. It is less well known that the house of Sir John Yorke, which saw the second recorded performance of *Pericles*, now lies under an inland water in Nidderdale. *Pericles* and *Pearl* indeed have one further connection, their confidence in the immortality of art. In the Renaissance this confidence is not, of course, unusual. Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, constantly oppose to the mortality of man and the transience of his other works, an art of "eternal lines". Where war will overturn statues, and "sluttish time" besmear "the unswept stone", poetry itself will endure "As long as men can breath or eyes can see".³¹ Medieval writers rarely exhibit such confidence. Their manuscript pages, as instanced by the fate of the *Gawain*-poet's, were more vulnerable than stone; there was no print to immortalize them in the eyes of future readers. Their attitude to the artist also differed; the poet was merely the mouthpiece of a tale that had existed before him and would endure after him. But the claim made for art by *Pearl* is for the middle ages unusually firm, where that made by *Pericles* is, for the Renaissance, unusually modest.

Because the flower is mortal, it is not enough for the poet of *Pearl* that his child should flower again within the poem; as she herself reminds him, "that thou lestes was bot a rose/That flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef".³² He must create for her a more lasting memorial from his jeweller's craft of metal and precious stone. The poem is lapidary in more senses than one. Its finely wrought texture, with its complex craft and visual brilliance, is the verbal equivalent of the intricate work of the medieval jeweller. To that extent it immortalizes its *Pearl*. And yet, as Elizabeth Salter also insisted, it remains a poem of loss, lapidary in that other sense of the epitaph carved upon the tombstone, an elegy with an elegiac cadence.

In *Pericles* the unusual modesty of Shakespeare's claim for art is appropriate to its medieval poet, Gower. His Gower is no Prospero, no wonder-worker, the protagonist in his own drama. True to the sentiments of medieval poetry, he is merely a mouthpiece, for a tale of others' making long ago. He claims a renewed life no longer than a candle's, the measure of the play's duration:

If you, born in these latter times
When wit's more ripe, accept my rhymes,
And that to hear an old man sing
May to your wishes pleasure bring,
I life would wish, and that I might
Waste it for you like taper-light.³³

At the play's end he traces, in the sift of an hour-glass, his return to dust:

Now our sands are almost run;
More a little, and then dumb.³⁴

His return from ashes is of brief duration; nonetheless it parallels

the great scenes of temporal resurrection in the play; and if his claim for his art is never large, it opens on a prospect of repeated revivals.

NOTES

- 1 *Macbeth*, I, iii, ll.96-7, 137-8.
- 2 *Essays*, "Of Death".
- 3 *The Duchess of Malfi*, IV, ii, ll.153-9.
- 4 *Henry IV*, Pt. I, V, iv, ll.89-92.
- 5 *Hamlet*, V, ii, ll.334-5.
- 6 *Pericles*, I, i.
- 7 *Ibid*, I, Prologue, ll.5-8.
- 8 *Ibid*, I, i, ll.41-6.
- 9 "The Thre Deid Pollis", ll.1-8 (in *Poems*, ed. C. Elliott, Oxford, 1974).
- 10 *The Pardoner's Tale*, l.683 (in *Works*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
- 11 *Ibid*, l.700.
- 12 *Ibid*, ll.530-3, 522-3.
- 13 *Philippians*, iii, 21 cf. *Philippians*, iii, 18 and *I Corinthians*, vi, 13.
- 14 *The Parlemt of the Thre Ages* (ed. M.Y. Offord, EETS 246, 1959), Thornton MS, ll.290-1.
- 15 *Pericles*, I, i, ll.27-8, 19-22.
- 16 *Ibid*, I, i, ll.63-9.
- 17 *Ibid*, V, i, l.199.
- 18 *Ibid*, II, ii, ll.48-9.
- 19 *Ibid*, II, iii, l.35.
- 20 *Ibid*, IV, vi, ll.79 and 113.
- 21 *Piers Plowman* (ed. Skeat, Oxford, 1886), B. XVIII ll.338-9.
- 22 *Ibid*, ll.201-5.
- 23 *Confessio Amantis*, Bk. VIII, ll.585-90 (in *English Works*, ed. G.C. Macauley, Oxford, 1901).
- 24 *Pericles*, II, Prologue, ll.33-8.

- ²⁵ *Ibid*, III, Prologue, ll.46-50.
- ²⁶ *The Golden Legend*, Temple Classics edition, Vol. IV, p.81.
- ²⁷ *Pericles*, III, i, ll.56-64.
- ²⁸ Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London, 1973) p.104.
- ²⁹ *Pericles*, III, ii, ll.103-8.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, III, ii, ll.98-101.
- ³¹ Sonnets 18 and 55.
- ³² *Pearl*, ll.269-70 (ed. A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson, London, 1976).
- ³³ *Pericles*, I, Prologue, ll.10-16.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, V, ii, ll.1-2.