

"Of Every Nation a Traveler": Pericles and Refugees

Shakespeare's *Pericles* dramatizes the courage and heartbreak of refugees from ancient times to today's crisis in Europe. The title character is the young prince of the ancient city of Tyre in modern-day Lebanon.

We first meet him in Antioch – "The fairest [city] in all Syria" – where he hopes to win a new bride and return to his kingdom in triumph. But bad luck – and an assassin – follows him home and Pericles is forced to flee for his life. His dangerous journey reflects many of the hardships that refugees continue to endure including shipwreck, famine, and the forced separation of families.

Pericles' wanderings through cities in Turkey, Libya, and Greece recall the journeys that thousands of migrants have made since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011. The Za'atari refugee camp, built to house migrants fleeing the conflict, is only 200 miles east of Tyre, and was at one point the fourth largest city in Jordan with over 200,000 refugees within its bounds.

Many migrants have continued their journey west, hoping to reach Europe by boat. Almost every week there is a new story, a new video or photo demonstrating the terrible dangers of their crossing. We experience these events from afar, like the fishermen in *Pericles* who, watching the Prince's ship sink, declare: "I am thinking of the poor men that were cast away before us even now... Alas, poor souls, it grieved my heart to hear what pitiful cries they made to us to help them."

Some help has come, and some of it through Shakespeare. A 2014 production of *King Lear* at the Za'atari camp featured over 100 refugee children speaking Shakespeare's lines in Arabic, and the Globe Theatre tour of *Hamlet* performed there in 2015. In the same year, the actor Benedict Cumberbatch ended his sold-out performances of *Hamlet* in London by asking audience members to donate to refugee relief efforts.

Gower's opening promise in *Pericles* to "sing a song that old was sung" proves sadly true with regards to refugees: the young prince of Tyre was not the first and will not be the last to travel far in search of safety. England's recent promise to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020 is an encouraging step for a country that has had a sometimes-troublesome history with migrants.

When the historical author John Gower – the inspiration for Shakespeare's character – was writing in the 14th century, peasants attacked and killed Flemish weavers in London in retaliation for competing with native workers. The 16th century play *Sir Thomas More* – thought by some scholars to have been partly written by Shakespeare – dramatizes a 1517 anti-immigrant riot against French Huguenots.

There is one speech in particular from *Sir Thomas More* that scholars attribute to Shakespeare. In it, More rails against the "monstrous inhumanity" of the rioting Londoners who are attacking migrants. If Shakespeare did indeed write the speech, it prefigures the stirring empathy for the displaced that he would go on to demonstrate so vividly in *Pericles*.

Despite his best efforts, Pericles cannot always keep those closest to him safe or solve the great evils of his world. He and his family must fight against the forces of nature, humans, gods, and yes, pirates, in order to come safe home at last. All he can do – all we can do – is strive to answer his wife Thaisa's question when she wakes into a strange land: "What world is this?" and act accordingly.



Katharine Pitt
Humanities Programs
Assistant, Folger
Shakespeare Library