MULTIFACETED GEOGRAPHY AND THE SEA IN SHAKESPEARE'S *PERICLES*

Claudia Bujoreanu Gheorghe
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract*: Geography in Shakespeare's* Pericles *is very complex as it is not just a representation of the play's setting; it is linked with the idea of travel and with psychological, political, and moral aspects. Therefore,* Pericles *has several meanings; it can simply be seen as an exploration of different parts of the world, but it can also be understood as a spiritual journey, and even as an individual's life journey. This paper aims to explore the idea that geography in the play is not merely a linked set of static locations, but a dynamic part in the story, transforming the reading of the play into an "allegory of human life" (Laureano Domínguez 75). The symbolic meaning of the sea that Roychoudhury analyses will be discussed in order to explore the relationship between people and the impact that the sea metaphor has on their lives. Pericles is trapped in several voyages across the sea, which are, in fact, images of both life and death. The port cities that Pericles crosses are different stages of his life, just as the cities are closely linked to the sea; in the same way, human life is linked to the development of the self, as it is to death.*

Keywords*: spiritual journey, sea/geography, allegory of human life, travelling, symbolic meaning of the sea*

The interpretation of space in Shakespeare's *Pericles* has been examined in various critical approaches. Robert T. Tally's geocritical perspective has set the ground for multiple re-examinations of space in literature. As Tally observes, "Geocriticism explores, seeks, surveys, digs into, reads, and writes a place: it looks at, listens to, touches, smells, and tastes spaces" (2). Indeed, multiple representations of space and geography in *Pericles* can be re-read from the geocritical point of view. From a psychological perspective, the play can be seen as a sum of experiences, troubles, desires, fears, and lived moments forming Pericles' self (Laureano Domínguez 81). At the same time, a political dimension of geography can be observed, if we consider the different forms of government and political power represented in the play. Pericles's inner journey is mirrored in the factual geographical journey. He is trapped in several voyages across the sea, which are images of both life and death. Therefore, the sea is the central part of geography in *Pericles*.

The metaphor of the sea in the play is both a symbol of the unconscious and of inner psychological turmoil and development. This sea has classical and Hellenistic features, but it is also the Eastern Mediterranean Sea of trade and conflicts of power between the Ottomans and the Venetians in the sixteenth century. All these times and seascapes are encapsulated in the *seascape* of *Pericles*, which is "a clearly circumscribed zone existing within defined spatial parameters" (Klein 132). As Suparna Roychoudhury states about the sea in the play, "Populated with fishermen, mariners, and pirates, *Pericles* unfolds on ships, in a number of ports, on high seas, in tempest and in calm" (1014). Reviewing current criticism concerning this play, Roychoudhury observes the allegorical meanings of the sea in the play: "*Pericles*'s sea points to the human voyages through life, its severest tribulations and consummate joys"

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

(1014). The movement from one place to another, the events taking place in each location make us wonder whether the different locations are phases in the development of the psyche. The exploration of geography not only as a mere static location, but as a dynamic part in the story, transforms the reading of the play into an "allegory of human life" (Laureano Domínguez 75). Therefore, the representation of the sea in *Pericles* is a metaphor of the self, with various troubles and misfortunes, symbolized by tempests, but also with the final atonement and happiness which comes from the understanding of life, destiny, and the self.

All the port cities that Pericles crosses are different stages of his life; just as the cities are closely linked to the sea, so human life is linked to the development of the self, as it is to death. Gower, the narrator, who enters the scene in *Pericles*, asks the audience to use their imagination, being aware of the variety of places in the world's geography. Gower's intervention at the beginning of the play, and at certain key moments in the development of the plot, shows the difficulties in translating the narrative sources into the medium of drama:

> Thus time we waste and longest leagues make short;
> Sail seas in cockles, have and wish but for't,
> Making to take your imagination
> From bourn to bourn, region to region.
> By you being pardoned we commit no crime
> To use one language in each several clime
> Where our scenes seem to live. (18.1–7)[1]

The sea imagery used in Gower's monologue—spoken just before the dumb show featuring Pericles, Dionyza and Cleon mourning at Marina's tomb—is significant for the metaphoric connection of space, the sea, imagination, and the theatre. Gower invites the audience to "Sail seas in cockles," which are seashells; this is an impossible action in real life, but it is possible in the imaginary world of the theatre, where anything may happen.

The main locations in which the action of *Pericles* develops are six ancient port cities of the eastern Mediterranean, which lay across Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and also Libya. All six port cities in *Pericles* are connected not only through the Greek / Hellenistic setting, but also through the sea. In this way, relationships between people are exclusively maritime. According to Bernhard Klein, these six locations unfold themselves to the reader in three different historical guises: "first as forming part of the ancient Hellenistic kingdoms"; "second, as part of the biblical past and landscape, referenced frequently in the New Testament"; and "third, as the destination of contemporary voyages by English merchants trading into Constantinople, Aleppo, northeast Africa and the Aegean Sea" under the auspices of Levant Company (122). The Hellenistic world is evoked through the urban setting, the reference to local politics and culture, and also the names of people and places. The biblical reference is made through association with the early Church, as all six port cities appear in the New Testament. The third exploration of geography, as a destination for English merchants, unfolds the information that, by the time *Pericles* was written, English trading with the Eastern Mediterranean sea ports had grown significantly in volume. These three directions of development of the geographic paradigm in *Pericles*—extended to various places, times, and cultures—reveal the play's multifaceted geography.

In order to fully understand the geographical dimension in *Pericles*, the reader / audience needs to stop thinking of geography as a mere location, but rather as a symbolic and

[1] All *Pericles* citations are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997); further references to the play are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

meaningful element, inherent to plot and character. Even though, geographically, Pericles's voyages determine the formal pattern of the play, the role of geography and travel is not as a mere strategy, but it becomes significant in relation to plot and characters. It goes deep into moral and psychological areas. The plot of the play extends into six different kingdoms, and the representation of these cities and their relationship with the sea is highly symbolic. Both plot and character in *Pericles* are constructed geographically. There is action, as long as the characters travel, and there is geographical movement. Laureano Domínguez's study of the dimension of geography in *Pericles* reveals that the play demonstrates a geographic organisation of plot and character:

> *Pericles* displays a peculiar configuration of plot and character that cannot be adequately understood unless we analyse it from the perspective of geography and geographical movement. Both plot and character in *Pericles* are conceived *geographically*. The action advances as long as there is geographical movement, as long as the characters travel. The periods of spatial stasis correspond to moments when the action is frozen. On the other hand, characters evolve as they travel. We come to know them as they are placed successively in different locations.
>
> (Laureano Domínguez 83)

Indeed, as Laureano Domínguez argues, from the opening scene of the play, we get to meet a displaced Pericles, as he is not in his court at Tyre, but in Antioch (83). Throughout Pericles's travels, the Eastern Mediterranean geography unfolds before the audience, as if in a geography book.

All the six different locations in *Pericles* (Antioch, Tyre, Tarsus, Pentapolis, Mytilene, Ephesus), separated by the sea, are still related by so many similarities, and, as I argue, represent a way of depicting the human psyche. The most conclusive example in the play would be that of Antioch, which could be seen as the unconscious, as mapped by Freud, because of King Antiochus's incestuous relation with his daughter. From this event emerges Pericles's subsequent behaviour, since he does not denounce Antiochus's incest. It might be that Pericles wants to protect his life, according to the life-preservation instinct, which is another human psychological trait. With this burden of incest, Pericles travels form Antioch to Tyre and form Tyre to Tarsus. Then, he is shipwrecked on the coast of Pentapolis. After his marriage with the king's daughter in Pentapolis, and after King Antiochus's death, Pericles sails back to Tyre, but during the storm his daughter Marina is born, and his wife is presumed dead and buried at sea. After many years, Pericles sails again, this time to Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, where he is fortunately reunited with his daughter, in what looks like a psychological session during which he learns who Marina really is. Thus, *Pericles* represents not only three tempests in the real sense, at sea, caused by the weather, but also the tempests of the soul, caused by the troubles of Pericles's mind and soul.

After the confrontation in Antioch at the beginning of the play, Pericles crosses the sea and goes back to Tyre, for a while, only to muse melancholically about his predicament and arrange for his flight from Antiochus's anger. At this moment, Pericles's sad companion is "dull-eyed melancholy" (2.1). Sadness and melancholy are troubles of the soul, and the metaphor reminds of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); this is a medical textbook in which Burton examines the subject of melancholy from several perspectives. In his satirical preface to the reader, Burton's persona and pseudonym, "Democritus Junior," explains in a tongue-in-cheek tone: "I write of Melancholy, by being busie to auoid Melancholy" (Burton 6). Similarly, in his monologue in the play, it is as if Pericles is playing a mind game: by pretending to be melancholic, like Burton, he is trying to avoid being caught

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

by Antiochus and, thus, escape the consequences of having guessed the incest riddle. In this way, the play's hero superimposes his subjectivity on that of a melancholic person, only to highlight the paradoxical nature of the theatre: pretending to be something that he is not.

Extending the comparison with Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, travel in the play becomes a metaphor of imagination, extensive knowledge, and the possibility of comparing the psychological traits belonging to various nations. Burton's persona in his treatise on melancholy claims: "I neuer trauelled but in a Map or Card, in which mine vnconfined thoughts haue freely expatiated (Burton 4). What better way to travel than by means of the imagination, looking at maps? Reading books about travel may seem as rewarding as travelling is, as Burton implies. In Shakespeare's time, when travel was both expensive and dangerous, many literate stay-at-homes preferred to travel vicariously, by using their imagination, to the faraway lands described in travel accounts or in other fictional narratives. Similarly, the theatre, as discovered in *Pericles*, through the characters of Gower as narrator and Pericles as imaginary / real traveller, gives the impression of travelling to various countries by means of the imaginative capacity, which is a characteristic of the human psyche. In this way, the inner movement of the imagination becomes the play's metaphoric spatial movement.

In the same monologue in which Pericles professes his melancholy—but soon he travels at the sea to experience numerous adventures—audiences can see the hero reasoning about his predicament:

> Then it is thus: the passions of the mind,
> That have their first conception by misdread,
> Have after-nourishment and life by care,
> And what was first but fear what might be done
> Grows elder now, and cares it be not done (2.11–15)

The "passions of the mind" are the obsessions that haunt a melancholic brain, generated by misunderstood fear ("misdread") and nourished by worry ("care"), so that what starts out as simple fear matures into a more rational concern for safety. Therefore, the hero tries to overcome his irrational fears and move towards a more pragmatic stance, in which he recognizes the danger and tries to face it. This active energetic attitude towards life, however, is not one of Pericles's characteristic traits, as revealed later in the play. When faced with sorrow and despair caused by his wife's and his daughter's presumed deaths, Pericles falls into depression.

The metaphor "passions of the mind," which Pericles uses in his initial monologue on melancholy, recalls another popular psychological treatise of the time, Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1601). Wright was "a Renaissance controversialist on rhetoric," according to Thomas O. Sloan (38); he wrote six or seven extant published writings, most of which were on theological controversies. In this book, Wright argues that the will is moved best when one engages the passions of the mind by means of rational control over the imagination. In his dedication to the Reader, in *The Passions of the Minde*, Wright compares English scholars to those of other European nations and concludes: "as all trauellers can well affirme" that the English are "farre superior to the Spaniardes, and nothing inferior vnto the Italians" (Wright sig. A3^{r}). The argument goes that the first cause for the English being superior to these southern nations is "a natural inclination to virtue and honestie," which is characteristic to people in the northern climate (Wright sig. A3^{v}); the second cause is "education" (Wright sig. A4^{r}); and the third cause is "a certaine natural complexion and constitution of body," which makes people in southern countries worry more than those in

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

northern countries (Wright sig. A4^{v}). Indeed, we see that Pericles is a traveller from a southern country (Tyre), so he has a tendency to worry too much, though he is educated, being a prince. All these comparisons among people of different locations are drawn by means of the travellers' accounts, whose narratives are testimonies of communities from different climates and how they have distinctive psychological traits.

These sweeping generalizations drawing on Wright's *Passions of the Minde* seem to fit Pericles's personality; in his monologue at the start of the play, Pericles wallows in self-pity and melancholy, until Helicanus and his lords try to comfort him and make him take action, at the danger of their lives. In the ensuing dialogue, Helicanus counsels Pericles "To bear with patience / Such griefs as you do lay upon yourself" (2. 69–70). Indeed, Helicanus seems to give Pericles the advice drawing on Stoic philosophy, according to which a person should endure with patience the adversities of fortune rather than revolt against destiny and take matters in hand. As if convinced by Helicanus's words, Pericles accepts the counsel, saying that the counsellor of Tyre speaks "like a physician" (2. 71). It is as if Thomas Wright or Robert Burton—physicians and authors of manuals of psychology in Shakespeare's time—came on stage and counselled Pericles indirectly about the necessity of raising arms against adversity; or, as Hamlet would say, "to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And, by opposing, end them" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.61–62). However, there is a geographical distance—measured by the sea—between the start of the trouble (in Antioch) and the expiation of suffering (in Mytilene). Pericles's mind became unstable as a result of the shock of learning about incest in Antioch, but also because he felt his life was threatened. At the end of the play, in Mytilene, in the company of his daughter Marina, Pericles learns to face his own self and compensate for inner suffering.

At this early point in the play, after his monologue on melancholy, Pericles is convinced by Helicanus and his counsellors to narrate the story of the riddle and incest in Antioch, as he perceived it, and which caused his melancholy. According to Pericles's narration, which is also a form of exorcising the psychological trauma, the incest episode affected him greatly:

> Drew sleep out of mine eyes, blood from my cheeks,
> Musings into my mind, with thousand doubts,
> How I might stop this tempest ere it came
> And finding little comfort to relieve them,
> I thought it princely charity to grieve them. (2.101–5)

The psychological "tempest" in Pericles's mind is associated with mental torment, but it also foreshadows the three tempests and shipwrecks through which Pericles will pass through before he can reach emotional calm. Pericles's sea voyages and travels are, thus, metaphors of the development of the self.

The characters and the plot in *Pericles*, therefore, are created geographically. The characters evolve as they travel; the voyages are temporal, and we can see changes as we advance with our reading / viewing of the play. At the same time, we get to know these changes as the hero travels from one location to another. Representations of space in *Pericles* are also psychological metaphors; places are not just geographical locations, but they define the character's identity. Descriptions and examinations of different spaces and locations show that they go beyond their role as concrete spaces, but they work as materializations of Pericles's desires and fears. Laureano Domínguez considers that Pericles is the typical voyager, the voyager as a "discoverer" (94). The voyager is a conqueror, an explorer, and in *Pericles* the exploration "cannot be exclusively understood literally, but in a more symbolistic

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

dimension as a self-exploration of the human psyche" (Laureano Domínguez 94). Moreover, the play's psychological exploration is not linear in narrative, such as, for instance, in the psychological texts by Richard Burton and Thomas Wright, but it is a multifaceted geography triggered by the hero's voyages and the sea as a metaphor of displacement.

The use of geography in *Pericles* is rich in symbolic and poetic implications. Geographic locations exist in the mental geography of the characters. Pericles has encountered tyranny, incest, murder, and all of these, in the end, are metaphors for the character of the play *Pericles*. He is the most complex character of all. In opposition to the others, such as Antiochus, who is flat because he is static, fixed in one location, Pericles is a voyager. John Gillies argues that "Shakespeare's voyages are dangerous representatives of the commonwealth. Unlike the ruler who characteristically controls the centre, the voyager controls the boundaries" (101). Indeed, Pericles aims to control the fine boundary between the inner self and the other. Just as, in Thomas Wright's psychological compendium, travellers can draw comparisons and extract significant conclusions on national or individual character, in *Pericles* the psychological dimension shapes the play's multifaceted geography. According to Hurwitz, "*Pericles* is a play seeking to represent the psyche itself" (7), and "the protagonist traverses a psychological landscape of sorts, facing, and coming to terms with dramatic representations of elements of the unconscious" (5). However, unlike in a narrative text, such as the narrative source of *Pericles*—the Hellenistic story of Apollonius of Tyre—the play juggles with the changing locations in a puzzling manner, showing the unstable nature of the human psyche.

The reader of a psychological text in Shakespeare's time, or the reader of the source story of Apollonius of Tyre, for example, could transfer his / her imagination to those places while reading. In the theatre, however, not only what one sees and hears becomes important, but what one experiences. Audiences live and experience what they see; they can visualize events as if they were in the middle of action. Thus, Shakespeare's focus is not only on mere geographical details, locations and facts, but also on the mental geography created by means of these locations. Hurwitz argues about *Pericles* that "the pattern underlying the surface of the text and the mechanism driving its actions are primarily psychological, that the play itself attempts to represent and resolve certain fundamental processes of the psyche" (4). Therefore, we can talk about geography as an environment that contributes to representations of inner conflicts, experiences, and the psychological tempests of the main character. Pericles's voyage is not only a voyage of physical movement, but a quest, a complex passage through life. The geographical exploration of this play cannot be fully achieved without taking into account the psychological implications of the readers and audiences, and their experiences when reading / viewing this play.

WORKS CITED

Burton, Robert. "Democritus Iunior to the Reader." *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Oxford: John Lichfield and James Short, 1621. 1–72. STC 4159.

Gillies, John. *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Klein, Bernhardt. "The Sea in *Pericles*." *Shakespeare and Space: Theatrical Explorations of the Spatial Paradigm*. Ed. Ina Habermann and Michelle Witten. Palgrave Shakespeare Studies Series. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 121–140.

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)

Hurwitz, Gregg Andrew. "A Tempest, a Birth, and Death: Freud, Jung, and Shakespeare's *Pericles*." *Sexuality and Culture* 6/3 (2002): 3–73.

Laureano Domínguez, Lorena. "Pericles' 'Unknown' Travels: The Dimensions of Geography in Shakespeare's *Pericles*." *SEDERI Yearbook: Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies* 19 (2009): 71–97.

Roychoudhury, Suparana. "Mental Tempests, Seas of Trouble: The Perturbations of Shakespeare's *Pericles.*" *ELH: English Literary History* 82 (2015): 1013–1039.

Shakespeare, William. *Pericles*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

---. *Hamlet*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Robert S. Miola. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Sloan, Thomas O. "A Renaissance Controversialist on Rhetoric: Thomas Wright's *Passions of the Minde in Generall*." *Speech Monographs* 36/1 (1969): 38–54.

Tally, Robert T., Jr. "Introduction: On Geocriticism." *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 1–9.

Wright, Thomas. "To the Reader." *The Passions of the Minde*. London: W. S. for W. B., 1601. Sig. A2^{r}–A6^{r}. STC 26039.

BDD-A27699 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:17 UTC)