

## Women in Caskets: Commodities in Shakespeare's *Pericles*

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English

Fair glass of light, I loved you, and could still  
Were not this glorious casket stored with ill. (1.1.77-78)

The choice of the word “casket” in these early lines of *Pericles* brings to mind other famous Shakespearean caskets: the gold, silver and lead caskets with which Portia's deceased father negotiates her marriage in *The Merchant of Venice*. Few scholars have explored the possible parallels of these two scenes, perhaps because of their varied genres – comedy versus romance – and the contentious authorship of *Pericles* itself. But the allusion back to *Merchant* with the word “casket” begs for a deeper analysis of these two scenes. What emerges are surprisingly direct parallels that link not just the action of the two plays, but several of their underlying themes. The incest taboo arises in *Merchant*, while an involvement with commerce and commodity comes to light in *Pericles*. The hypothetical incest in the *Merchant* casket episode has been well-documented in scholarship, particularly by Robert Darcy in his article “Freeing Daughters on Open Markets: The Incest Clause in *The Merchant of Venice*.” But the language of exchange and commodity – especially the commodification of the female body – that permeates *Pericles* beyond the brothel scene has mostly escaped notice. Once these two casket scenes are put into conversation, commodity as a theme becomes more prominent throughout *Pericles*, potentially complicating other genre-specific themes identified by critics, including “a celebration of benign generativity and of the restored ‘natural’ family” and its “ritualistic” and folkloric elements (Adelman 186, Gorfain 133). A close comparison to the *Merchant* casket episode exposes the language of exchange throughout *Pericles* and complicates the romantic reunion conclusion and the folkloric aura that surrounds it.

Because “money and commercial thinking abound in the literature of the period,” it is no surprise that *The Merchant of Venice* has often been identified as a play that “places *homo economicus* under the microscope” (Woodbridge 9, Grav 84). Within the casket episode, this theme of exchange focuses on the commodification of women. Portia says:

...O me, the word “choose”! I may neither  
choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is  
the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of  
a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot  
choose one, nor refuse none? (*Merchant* 1.2.22-26)

Portia's late father created the casket test in order to regulate the exchange of his daughter in marriage, ensuring his will is still met even when he is not there to broker the deal in person. Luce Irigaray's seminal work *This Sex Is Not One* provides a useful feminist reading of Marx's

notion of commodity, which informs *The Merchant of Venice*'s treatment of women. According to Irigaray, "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom" (170). Irigaray places the exchange of women as commodity at the center of any patriarchal society, and as the system on which all social order is based. As such, "the exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other 'wealth' among groups of men" (172). This becomes clear through Bassanio's marriage to Portia, which puts the economic exchanges between Venetian men into motion. He first identifies her as "a lady richly left" and once he wins her hand by the casket test, claims that she is his "new int'rest" (*Merchant* 1.1.161; 3.2.221). She has become a vehicle for the exchange of inheritance and wealth, and Bassanio immediately capitalizes on this by inviting his friends to his newly acquired house and uses Portia's wealth to pay his debt to Antonio.

Intrinsically linked to the notion of woman as commodity as highlighted in *The Merchant of Venice* is what Darcy coins "psycho-symbolic" incest (196). For Darcy, the casket test is an example of a "a closed arrangement, an incestuous hoarding and withholding of the daughter until such time as a paternal surrogate and endogamous match can arrive in Bassanio's person" (193). Irigaray explains Darcy's use of the phrase "endogamous match" to refer to Bassanio's role within the play because "exogamy doubtless requires that one leaves one's family, tribe, or clan...[but] it does not tolerate marriage with populations that are too far away, too far removed from the prevailing cultural rules" (172). Thus, even though Bassanio is not from Belmont and not of Portia's family, he embodies the traits valuable to Portia's father. Portia's father, in withholding his daughter's sexuality, participates in psycho-symbolic incest, regulating her sexual behaviors according to his own desires. Portia herself alludes to this incestuous hoarding when she laments "I will die as / chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner / of my father's will" (*Merchant* 1.2.105-107). Again, when Bassanio, a man "worthy of thy praise," tries his luck, she insinuates her desire for his success in the test: "I am locked in one of them; / If you do love me, you will find me out" (1.3.120; 3.2.40-41). She is symbolically trapped in the casket of her father's making, denied any freedom to choose her sexual partner, even when an appropriate match presents himself. The link between female exchange and incest is made clear through Irigaray, who notes, "the passage into the social order ... is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo" (170). The incest taboo, which "represents [a] refusal to allow productive nature to enter into exchanges among men," compels men to both remove mothers from the exchange market and exchange virgin daughters to thwart any potential sexuality between father and daughter (185). The casket test, however, highlights the contradiction inherent within the exchange market, as a father must participate in psycho-symbolic incest by regulating daughterly sexuality in order to secure her successful marriage to an appropriately chosen mate.

Incest, and its often characteristic economic underpinnings, is again portrayed by Shakespeare in *Pericles*, although this play stages not psycho-symbolic but physical incest. Sharon Hamilton, in her book *Shakespeare's Daughters*, is one of the few critics to notice that

Antiochus's riddle "is a malevolent form of the contest that Portia's late father establishes for her suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*" (153). As the play's chorus, Gower tells the audience in the first few lines of the play:

So buxom, blithe, and full of face  
As heaven had lent her all his grace;  
With whom the father liking took  
and her to incest did provoke. (*Pericles* 1.Cho.23-26)

This incest, unlike that alluded to in *The Merchant of Venice*, disrupts the female exchange market because Antiochus is both the broker and the buyer for his daughter. In order to combat the social upheaval this would inevitably cause, he creates a riddle "to keep her still, and men in awe" (1.Cho.36). On the surface, the riddle operates with the same intentions as Portia's casket test: a "mechanism ... which offers Portia [and Antiochus's daughter] blindly to any and all comers" (Darcy 193). However, the repercussions for guessing wrong signify the magnified stakes in Antioch. In Belmont, Portia tells her suitors "if you choose wrong / Never to speak to lady afterward / In way of marriage" (*Merchant* 2.1.40-42). Because there is no secret to contain, "the trial effectively sterilizes some of the more influential members of a generation of foreign bachelors, disrupting local dynasties all over the Mediterranean and Europe" (Darcy 190). As an economic tool, Portia's test is extremely effective because "it manages to insure one's own advantage while seriously compromising the strength of one's competitors, even as it makes a convincing show of even odds and equal chances for all" (190). In contrast, the riddle in *Pericles* goes to the extreme, not just sterilizing the competitors for the daughter's hand but killing them. Gower proclaims that for Antiochus's riddle, "That whoso asked for her for his wife / His riddle told not, lost his life" (*Pericles* 1.Cho.37-38). Considering Pericles's plight upon realizing the answer to the riddle, it is likely many of the unfortunate suitors perceived the meaning and were killed anyway to keep the secret. While this riddle also disrupts the foreign dynasties, it does so with the expressed intent of hoarding the daughter indefinitely in the father's house as his own prize.

Because Antiochus's riddle is designed with drastically different intentions, it propagates a drastically different outcome from that of Portia's casket test. Portia marries Bassanio, directly addressing the exchange of goods in the process:

...But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,  
This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring. (*Merchant* 3.2.167-171)

She may have preferred him to all other suitors, but she also realizes the loss of freedom that comes with marriage. Not only did Bassanio win Portia through the casket test but the test also transfers her land and financial security to him. Pericles has no such luck in Antioch, where he

finds not a desirable commodity but something akin to damaged goods. Pericles initially travels to Antioch with similar hopes as Bassanio, the “purchase of a glorious beauty” (*Pericles* 1.2.71); but after interpreting the riddle, he realizes the danger of actually winning the daughter, saying: “being played upon before your time, / Hell only danceth at so harsh a chime. / Good sooth, I care not for you” (1.1.85-87). Incest has stripped her of value, and Pericles no longer wants the goods being offered. Understood in Irigaray’s terms, because she has been “deflowered,” she is now “relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men” (186). The riddle in Antioch works to hide this seeming virgin’s deflowering while at the same time removing her from the exchange market. She has already been “played upon” before her time and transferred from exchange value to use value – and is thus already relegated to the private property of her father. As a valuable commodity, being the king’s daughter, the exchange market assumes her participation as a virgin bride, and only a riddle with such deadly consequences could mask her un-exchangeability with a show of open contest for her hand.

After his encounter with incest and the disrupted marriage market, Pericles flees, beginning a series of maritime adventures. Walter Cohen argues that *Pericles* is one of only a few plays to avoid a mercantile theme. According to him, “the doubts about maritime experience are complemented by the play’s anti-commercial outlook, an outlook that links it especially with *Timon of Athens* (1607)” (Cohen 150). He goes on to mention both the feeding of Tarsus and Pericles’s interaction with the Pentapolis fishermen as examples of denounced commercial ventures. However, Cohen ignores the underlying preoccupation with exchange that saturates both of these scenes. Linda Woodbridge generalizes that “commercial language permeates even plays whose plots are not primarily money-oriented, even lyrics devoted primarily to love or to religion, even the most heroic of epics, the most elegiac of elegies” (10). Thus, comparing *Pericles* to *The Merchant of Venice* reveals that it is not a play with an “anti-commercial outlook,” but one steeped in the language of exchange.

Pericles first flees Tyre and heads to Tarsus, a country fraught with famine, and King Cleon laments that “Those mothers who to nuzzle up their babes / Thought nought too curious, are ready now / To eat those little darlings whom they loved” (*Pericles* 1.4.42-44). Pericles arrives with a fleet bearing “corn to make [their] needy bread,” just in time to save the country from starvation (1.4.95). Critics such as Jeanie Moore and Leonard Tennenhouse argue that this episode stands as an example of Pericles’s generosity, supporting Cohen’s thesis that the play condemns any language of commodity (Moore 38). However, Stephen Dickey posits that the “gesture, however commendable, is a bribe for asylum in his flight from Antiochus” (556). Dickey alludes to Pericles’s response to Cleon’s gratitude, and Moore, Tennenhouse, and Cohen all fail to notice the exchange implied in the following lines: “We do not look for reverence, but for love, / And harborage for ourself, our ships, and men” (*Pericles* 1.4.98-99). Fleeing from Antiochus’s assassin, Pericles needs a place to rest, as well as food and shelter for his fleet. While the corn saves the nation, it also acts as a bartering tool for Pericles. Desperate for relief

from the famine, Cleon cannot turn Pericles away and must accept the exchange of corn for safe anchorage for the Tyrian fleet.

The corn, which bought a safe haven for Pericles initially, once again surfaces as a tool of exchange when Pericles is in need of another safe harbor later in the play. He seeks foster parents for his motherless child in Act III, and he heads for Tarsus as the closest friendly shore. Reversing the role of assistance, Pericles asks Cleon: “Here I charge your charity withal, leaving her / The infant of your care, beseeching you to give her / Princely training, that she may be mannered as she is born” (3.3.14-16). Even though he asks Cleon to care for his daughter out of “charity,” Cleon immediately recognizes the debt that still regulates his relationship with Pericles. He promises:

Fear not, my lord, but think your grace,  
That fed my country with your corn, for which  
The people’s prayers still fall upon you, must in your child  
Be thought on. If neglection should therein make me vile,  
The common body, by you relieved,  
Would force me to my duty ... (3.3.17-22)

Taking charge of Marina is a continued repayment for the corn, and Cleon understands that it is his duty, particularly in the eyes of his people, to defer to Pericles’s needs. This exchange between two men places Marina into the exchange market, where she is transferred from one man to another through an exchange of commercial goods: corn. Although the exchange is not a marital exchange, it nonetheless highlights the interchangeability between women and other economic commodities within the play. It also harkens back to the incest plot, as Pericles must rid himself of his infant daughter to distance himself from any future incest. Lagretta Lenker relates Pericles’s abandonment of Marina in Tarsus to his fear of incest, saying, “After the blatantly incestuous couple in the first two acts of *Pericles*, Shakespeare recoils from the sight of ‘evil’ and depicts the approach / avoidance technique of father-daughter distancing to avoid any temptation to incest” (63). The distancing method depicted here is through a commercial exchange which reverses that of the marriage exchange. Pericles pays for the care of his infant daughter with corn, rather than Cleon paying for a marriageable bride. Pericles, using Cleon’s debt to him, is thus safely removed from his daughter.

A second episode highlighted as “anti-commercial” by Cohen is the conversation between Pericles and the fishermen of Pentapolis. Cohen notes that “The Master fisherman who helps Pericles at Pentapolis denounces ‘our rich misers’” (150). Despite the fishermen’s denouncement, their interaction with Pericles is saturated with the language of commercial exchange. Pericles has just lost his fortune in the shipwreck and needs help reclaiming his honor, so asks “Thou givest me somewhat to repair myself / And though it was mine own, part of my heritage / Which my dead father did bequeath to me” (*Pericles* 2.1.123-125). He begs them to return his armor so that he can compete for the affection of the king’s daughter. Although Hamilton notes that “Pericles’ material fortunes may be at a low point, but his emotional and spiritual heritage is rich,” Pericles nonetheless looks forward to an increase in material fortunes

by marrying the king's daughter (154). Having nothing in his possession with which to barter, he promises: "if that ever my low fortune's better, / I'll pay your bounties; till then rest your debtor" (2.1.143-144). Pericles is promising a theoretical repayment, yet the fishermen clue in immediately to the more immediate financial benefits of a marriage with Thaisa. Their response proclaims the obvious economic exchange inherent in marriage with the king's daughter: "Why, wilt thou tourney for the lady?" (2.1.145). Knowing he is pursuing a fortune, the fishermen then help Pericles prepare, and what on the surface seems to be charity is nothing more than an understanding of future repayment for services rendered. The fishermen are sure to remind Pericles of his debt to them as he leaves, saying, "I hope, sir, if you thrive, you'll remember from / whence you had it" (2.1.152-153).

The bartering between Pericles and the fishermen alludes to the commodification intrinsic in the marriage exchange with King Simonides: Pericles's initial motivations for marrying Thaisa are financial. According to Darcy, "much work has been done to show how Renaissance traffic in women is an act not limited to the brothel and how in fact daughters are commonly used as commodities of transaction in marriage suits" (196-197). The tourney and subsequent marriage between Pericles and Thaisa exemplify this commodification, and King Simonides admits that "He hopes by you [Thaisa] his fortunes yet may flourish" (*Pericles* 2.2.47). Even though Pericles gains financial security and a new kingdom in the marriage, he strangely becomes the commodity within the courting scenes. Both father and daughter view Pericles as a desired commodity, saying "These cates resist me, he not thought upon" and "All viands that I eat do seem unsavory, / Wishing him my meat. – Sure he's a gallant gentleman" (2.3.29, 31-32). Like the corn in Tarsus, Pericles here becomes a much desired food commodity. Thaisa further characterizes Pericles as a precious jewel, claiming "To me he seems like diamond to glass" (2.3.36). Wary from his first failed marriage exchange, Pericles fears "'Tis the king's subtlety to have my life," understanding that he has become a commodity the King is trying to procure for his daughter (2.5.44). In an ironic twist, the commodification of women as exchangeable goods in a marriage instead plays out as the commodification of the groom, where Pericles is the merchandise for which the king is bartering. In an exact inversion of the *Merchant* casket test, Pericles is at the mercy of Thaisa, who has the ability here to choose her groom among many suitors, regardless of the tourney. The inverted exchange wins for Thaisa an entire kingdom, as Simonides suspects that Pericles may be "as great in blood as I myself" (2.5.80).

Once Pericles and Thaisa marry – combining the kingdoms of Pentapolis and Tyre – the play's plot focuses on the second generation: their daughter Marina. Here, even Cohen admits that the language of commerce penetrates the text, although "with predictably negative connotations" (150). Marina becomes the property of a brothel, and "Naturally, such crass exploiters are interested in Marina only for the price she can command" (Hamilton 158). Boulton, after demanding no less than "one doit of a thousand pieces" for Marina, is instructed by the Bawd to seek customers for her (4.2.48):

Boulton, take you the marks of her – the color of her hair, complexion, height, her age, with warrant of her virginity; and cry, "He that will give most shall have her first." Such a

maidenhead were no cheap thing, if men were as they have been. Get this done as I command you. (4.2.53-58)

Marina is extremely valuable as a virgin in this market of use value. Irigaray explains the transformation of the exchange market in the world of the brothel when she states, "Prostitution amounts to usage that is exchanged. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman's body is valuable because it has already been used" (186). While "deflowered" women are usually "relegated to the status of use value" and "removed from exchange among men" (as discussed in relation to Antiochus and his daughter), in the brothel market women are valuable *because* they have use value (186). Marina, as a virgin, is more valuable because she still operates, at least for the first buyer, as "pure exchange value" (186).

However, Marina refuses to participate in the exchange, and only remains valuable as a commodity of domestic productivity. She is paid for her virtue by customers like Lysimachus, who says: "Thou are a piece of virtue, and / I doubt not but thy training has been noble. / Hold, here's more gold for thee" (4.6.105-107). She in turn transfers this wealth to Boult, in effect buying her virginity from him. She tells Boult:

...That the gods  
Would safely deliver me from this place!  
Here, here's gold for thee.  
If that thy master would gain by me,  
Proclaim that I can sing, weave, sew, and dance,  
With other virtues, which I'll keep from boast;  
And I will undertake all these to teach. (4.6.172-178)

She replaces her value as an embodied commodity with value as a domestic laborer. She continues to work within the language of brothel exchange, prostituting her skills rather than her body, daring Boult: "Prove that I cannot, take me home again / And prostitute me to the basest groom" (4.6.82-183). Although Grav believes "Marina's forays into the brothel in *Pericles* coalesces with that play's thematic concern with rebirth and reconciliation," this episode also blatantly addresses the commodification of women, both within and outside of the brothel (121).

Some of the most overt references to commodity in the play interrupt the sentimental and emotional reunion scenes between Pericles, Thaisa, and Marina. According to Hamilton, "In that fable of the resurrection of the beloved daughter and the forgiven father, Shakespeare once again taps the deepest sources of drama's capacity for healing ritual" (164). Pericles and Marina exchange their stories and perform an "exquisite scene" of recognition and reuniting (Beckwith 89). However, this "healing ritual" is immediately compromised by Pericles's sudden bequeathal of Marina to Lysimachus. Pericles recognizes Marina at line 207 in Act V, scene I, and promises her to Lysimachus only 45 lines later. Realizing Marina is in fact "of gentle kind and noble stock," Lysimachus informs her father "when you come ashore, / I have another suit" (*Pericles* 5.1.64; 5.1.250-251). With barely a thought, Pericles promises: "You shall prevail, / Were it to woo my daughter; for it seems / You have been noble towards her" (5.2.252-254). For Moore,

Lysimachus is not noble, but “shallow, if not opportunistic” (42). Only a few scenes prior to this betrothal, he attempted to purchase Marina as a prostitute, and his quick conversion remains suspect not only because he pays her then, but because he immediately solicits for her hand in marriage once she is revealed to be a wealthy princess. Darcy attempts to explain Pericles’s sudden decision to exchange Marina, saying:

Despite their ostensible love and fondness for their children, and for daughters in particular, fathers nonetheless are expected to offer them as tokens of liberal exchange...softened though it may be by the gestures of love and kindness that fathers can make in compensation for their economic machinations. (197)

Darcy sees this exchange as the necessary machinations of the marriage market, and even Pericles, reunited with his daughter for only a few minutes, is not exempt from the commodification inherent in having a marriageable daughter. Likewise, exchanging Marina as soon as he meets her “will allow him to avoid ever confronting the Oedipal problem” (Moore 42). In direct contrast to the riddle in the play’s opening scene, Pericles participates fairly in the marriage exchange, ensuring a continued sexual distance from his virginal daughter. Even in this restorative scene, the language of both exchange and incest permeate the text, grounding the action in socially understood familial complications.

The final reunion scene between Pericles and Thaisa is even more saturated with the language of commerce and wealth. According to Sarah Beckwith, “The more normal route taken in romance recognition scenes is the revelation of identity through tokens and signs” (89). Following Beckwith’s “normal route,” Shakespeare uses tokens – in this case economically significant jewels – as the mode of romantic discovery in what seems to be a purely sentimental scene. Cerimon proves that Thaisa is Pericles’s wife, and says “I oped the coffin, / Found there rich jewels; recovered her, and placed her / Here in Diana’s temple” (*Pericles* 5.3.23-25). When first discovered by Cerimon, “like the leaden casket in *The Merchant of Venice*, this coffin contains a human rather than an inanimate treasure” (Dean 134). However, as evidenced by Cerimon’s obsession with the jewels, Thaisa is trapped in a casket even more valuable than Portia’s; this one *does* contain treasure, not lead, and Cerimon is sure to remind Pericles of it. Upon seeing Thaisa for the first time in fourteen years, Pericles does nothing more than ask after the jewels, questioning Cerimon “May we see then?”, ignoring his fainting wife on the floor in favor of riches long lost (5.3.26). Likewise – and no surprise, given Pericles’s fourteen-year beard – Thaisa only believes in Pericles’s return once she recognizes the ring her father had given. Exchanges and reunited wealth take precedent in the scene, and amid the joyous reunion, Cerimon reminds Pericles of his buried wealth, claiming, before he reveals Thaisa’s rescue story:

Beseech you first, go with me to my house,  
Where shall be shown you all was found with her;  
How she came placed here in the temple;  
No needful thing omitted. (5.3.66-69)



The jewels have become just as, if not more, important in this final reunion. Critics fail to notice that Pericles gains not just his wife, but some of his former wealth as well, and the parting words of the play's hero do not relate to his reunited family, but to his restored empire. Pericles says, after finding out Simonides is dead:

Heavens make a star of him. Yet there, my queen,  
We'll celebrate their nuptials, and ourselves  
Will in that kingdom spend our following days.  
Our son and daughter shall in Tyrus reign. (5.3.79-82)

Pericles has recovered not just his family, but he has also regained control of both Pentapolis and Tyre, and he formulates a plan that divides his family in order to keep control of both empires.

As one of Shakespeare's last plays, *Pericles* has been highlighted by critics as romantic and folkloric, and Hamilton in particular argues that "Generic conditions of the romance have been fulfilled" by the final scenes of the play (43). Yet, the entire text is fraught with the language of exchange and commerce, which resists the romantic conclusion. Moore identifies one of the major complications in the play, stating: "while the play may clearly state what is wrong or evil [incest], the alternative remains undetermined" (34). The comparison between the opening scene of *Pericles* and *The Merchant of Venice* uncovers both the commodification of women and psycho-symbolic incest, suggesting the alternative *good* in *Pericles* is undetermined simply because it is tainted with the language of exchange. The most romantic reunions still operate within the same system as Antiochus and his riddle. Thaisa is trapped in a casket with her husband's wealth, and Pericles exchanges his daughter as soon as possible, valuing his wealth and empire above a reunited family unit. Once the language of exchange reveals itself in the text, Pericles becomes not the romantic hero, the "benevolent patriarch" as Hamilton concludes, but the typical, economically driven suitor and father (154). Looking below the surface of the text, particularly with a comparison to *The Merchant of Venice*, reveals "idiosyncrasy and individuality that make any discussion of romance typology a drastic oversimplification (Dickey 551). What emerges is not just a folkloric tale, but also a play that struggles with contemporary issues of capitalist language and female commodification.

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