Inner and Outer Tempests

The sea is as crucial a presence in this play as Pericles or Marina themselves, and it operates on multiple levels. It forms the primary metaphor and central setting of the work, so much of which is about being at sea, in both a literal and symbolic sense.

Suggestively liminal, the sea is the scene of transitions: birth, death and rebirth. Pericles emerges from the sea after a shipwreck kills everyone aboard but he; Marina is born at sea and named for the sea; Thaisa is cast into the sea on her apparent death and, like Pericles, emerges from it into a new life. Even less ritualistic moments of transition play out by the shore, such as Marina’s near-murder and her abduction.

Yet as much as the sea suggests boundaries and crossings, its ever-shifting force and form also capture the unchartable, seemingly random nature of the world the characters struggle through. The sea takes on the one hand, wiping out a whole crew. It gives on the other, casting up the sole survivor’s “heritage” from his father just at the moment he needs it. That survivor, Pericles, will describe himself as “A man whom both the waters and the wind / In that vast tennis-court, hath made the ball / For them to play upon . . .” Notably the god of the seas, who might impose some kind of pattern upon the indifferent elements under his control, is portrayed as utterly inscrutable. As Cleon and Dionyza see Pericles off on his sea journey, they bring him “e’en to the edge o’th’ shore, / Then give [him] up to the mask’d Neptune. . . .”

Tempests also describe characters’ interior experience of the turmoil that such capriciousness brings. “Patience, good sir, do not assist the storm,” the midwife admonishes Pericles upon his wife’s apparent death. Marina describes her entire world as a tempest. And when Marina is finally revealed to be alive, Pericles begs, “put me to present pain, / Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me / O’erbear the shores of my mortality / And drown me with their sweetness.” The greatest, riskiest, most rewarding journeys of this play are those of the mind.—Judith Rosen

An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2015 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, click here. Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring a school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.