

TYLER ABBATE

How to Erase Shakespeare

The troubling history of *Pericles*

Why do we know Shakespeare plays like Romeo and Juliet, but not Pericles? This article explores the reasons why the popular Shakespeare play Pericles was targeted and erased by editors throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. From marketing strategies to concern for Shakespeare's reputation, I contend that the play was intentionally discarded by those who owned the copyright. This paper focuses on the tough and competitive printing market after Shakespeare's death in 1616. I explore how Shakespeare's business partners, Henry Condell and John Heminge, attempted to find literary success in 1623 by erasing what they thought was Shakespeare's failure: Pericles.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Pericles*, English Renaissance, English literature

I've questioned the purpose of Shakespeare countless times. I asked myself *why* we read Shakespeare, but I never considered *how* these plays survived through generations. *How* were the most important Shakespeare plays chosen for the masses to study? Who decides which plays are essential? Why does a play like *Romeo and Juliet* prosper, but other plays such as *Pericles* remain neglected? As *Pericles* was co-authored by George Wilkins and not written solely by Shakespeare, I initially believed that collaboration might be the reason; however, *Henry VIII*, co-written by John Fletcher, has not been ignored in the same way *Pericles* was—*Pericles* was consistently discarded from key Shakespeare collections. Yet *Pericles* was not forgotten; it was intentionally erased. If *Romeo and Juliet* survived in glamour, *Pericles* was a blemish to be removed. Eighteenth-century editors, and even fellow business partners of Shakespeare, tried to scrub away the play like a stain.

Pericles was actually a popular play during Shakespeare's life (Parr, 2004), so why would it have been targeted for erasure? There were two potential reasons: marketing and Shakespeare's reputation. Yet there may have been a human motivation beyond business, such as publishers (and even Shakespeare's business partners) wanting to protect the playwright's reputation. Alternatively, could concern over Shakespeare's



How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

legacy be interpreted as just business? If negatively affecting Shakespeare's legacy could hurt sales, at which point does love of the Bard become blurred?

The tough publishing market around the time of Shakespeare's death suggests that a main motivation for side-lining *Pericles* was due to marketing strategies. Henry Condell and John Heminge (who were fellow members of Shakespeare's company, The King's Men) wanted to print a collection of Shakespeare's work in a larger folio format. This folio was "expensive and risky" (Jowett, 2007, p. 74) for two reasons. First, many cheaper versions of Shakespeare plays (published in the smaller quarto format) had been printed before 1621. The market was already filled with cheap, single-edition Shakespeare plays. It would be hard for Condell and Heminge to justify selling a more expensive, multi-play collection. Second, large play collections of a dramatic nature did not have much of a precedent before Condell and Heminge's 1623 publication of Shakespeare's works. Very few folios had been published in England (Connor, 2012, p. 2), and the fact that history plays were the top sellers before Shakespeare's first folio suggested further uncertainties in the market (Lyons, 2012, p. 8). The only precedent for printing more serious dramatic works in this format was Ben Jonson's 1616 folio. Recognizing that an already expensive venture would be even riskier, Condell and Heminge needed a marketing strategy to ensure that the folio would stand out and sell.

What was the marketing strategy Condell and Heminge decided upon? They were aiming to create the appearance of a premium, textually legitimate product by achieving two principles: 1) they excluded the less-literary *Pericles* as an attempt to make the first folio seem more legitimate than the single-edition plays that flooded the market; 2) they included Edward Blount as a publisher. Blount was a notable publisher of literary texts that lent the project a sense of upmarket legitimacy (Jowett, 2007, p. 73). He had published authors such as Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, who were established and legitimate writers in the print market. Massai (2013) notes that Blount also included aesthetic choices to make his products seem more premium. For example, Blount's books would include lavish decorations to highlight powerful patrons, whose names he also flaunted to boost his own literary reputation, a testimony to his skill for transforming book products for upmarket consumption (pp. 133, 136). He had specific and painstaking strategies of patronage that elevated his worth in the business.

Blount's influence is important, as he held the rights for *Pericles* and ultimately had to make the choice (perhaps along with Condell) as to whether to include the play. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, Blount had to convince copyright holder John Smethwick to give permission to publish the play, but Blount did not need to seek permission to publish *Pericles* if he had truly wanted to. Why exclude such a popular play? As I see it, the answer lies in Blount's background: he was educated and well read, and recommended the books he published to his readers based on their literary value (Massai, 2013, p. 133). But from a monetary standpoint, not including the

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

popular *Pericles* is puzzling. The play had enough renown to be performed before high-profile guests, such as the French and Venetian ambassadors who are recorded as having attended a performance of it in London in 1608 (Graves, 1916, p. 546). Including the play might have secured more purchases and eased the initial risk of production. This suggests that Blount's primary commercial strategy was achieving a legitimate product, rather than preserving every play that Shakespeare wrote regardless of literary value.

The other strategy Heminge and Condell used was to delegitimize their competition. The only other Shakespeare collection that was going to be on the market was Thomas Pavier's quartos, which did contain *Pericles*. This collection would have been unprecedented and a possible source of serious competition. Thus, Heminge and Condell sought to portray Pavier, and the inclusion of *Pericles*, as illegitimate: while the order was not explicitly aimed at Pavier, Shakespeare's theatrical company (or potentially just Heminge [Jowett, 2007, p. 71]) presented a modern-day equivalent of a cease-and-desist letter that banned unauthorized printing of their plays. Condell remarked on this in the preface to fellow readers of their finished collection, writing "you were abused with diverse stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters" (as cited in Jowett, 2007, p. 88). Claiming that their competition was composed of criminals that stained Shakespeare's reputation, Condell made works such as *Pericles* seem illegitimate.

However, Pavier was a mostly reputable publisher who got mislabelled as a fraud due to the successful marketing and business approach of Condell and Heminge. According to Andrew Murphy (2003), Pavier served as Assistant Warden for the Stationer's Company and was a legitimate member of the publishing trade (p. 40)—he was hardly an injurious imposter, as Condell would claim. As Jowett suggests, Pavier may have had to go underground halfway through the edition's printing, thus needing to rearrange dates to finish off the remaining plays. If this theory is to be believed, Pavier may have wanted to recoup his losses and continue on. Either way, Pavier held the rights to most of the plays printed, or in the case of *Pericles*, the ownership had probably expired (Jowett, 2007, p. 71). In order for the King's Men to market their collection as the legitimate Shakespeare text, Heminge and Condell slandered Pavier to clear a spot in the market.

If *Pericles* was a success on stage, then why not print the play? Blount probably thought the play would lower the literary quality of their collection. *Pericles* suffers from an opening act that does not employ the same rhyme schemes as the rest of Shakespeare's oeuvre. It is possible that Blount may have felt that George Wilkins's contributions to the play—Acts One and Two—undermined Blount's marketing strategy. Not only are there many more rhymes in Wilkins's section, there are rhyme schemes that don't occur anywhere else in the Shakespeare canon (Jackson, 1993, p. 141)—and these differences do not lend distinction to Wilkins's sections. Every

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

line in the first chorus of *Pericles* is rhymed immediately with a subsequent couplet. The more complex rhyme scheme structure of a Shakespearean sonnet is absent, and in its place one finds a scheme that has a sing-song quality. Jackson also points out that rhymes like “consist and resist” (p. 242) appear nowhere else in Shakespeare’s works, and judges that Acts One and Two of *Pericles* have a generally amateur quality to them in comparison with the rest of Shakespeare’s oeuvre. Jackson counted the occurrences of these non-Shakespearean rhymes in Acts 1 and 2 compared with Wilkins’s other play, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*. Jackson found that simple three- and four-letter rhymes such as “ill/will” and “life/wife” had double the occurrences in *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* than in any Shakespearean work (p. 245). Act 3 of *Pericles* has no rhymes such as that cited above (“consist”/“resist”) where the same root serves as the rhyming element between two words. Blount attended the Merchant Taylor’s School with a natural talent for reading (Taylor, 2004) and could tell what stood up to Shakespeare’s name and what did not. He likely excluded *Pericles* due to his own literary taste and to the fact that the play did not befit the highbrow status that Condell and Heminge were aiming to achieve.

Another motivation for excluding *Pericles* was the play’s critical reception from Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s contemporary. Jonson panned the play’s quality and disparaged the common folk who made the play popular. He seethed: “No doubt some mouldy tale, Like *Pericles*; and stale As the Shrieves crusts, and nasty as his fish-scrap out every dish, Throwne forth, and rak’t into the common tub, May keepe up the *Play-club*” (1631, penultimate unnumbered page). If an acclaimed writer such as Ben Jonson dubbed *Pericles* a “mouldy tale” to be served to the masses, Blount might possibly have had a similar opinion. Jonson wasn’t just another critic, but a fellow playwright; he carved a path of success in a tough literary market. Given that Jonson’s folio was the first precedent for dramatic works printed in that format, Blount, Condell, and Heminge likely wanted to emulate Jonson’s acclaimed reputation in the market by selecting the plays that they considered as literarily important, not crowd pleasers. While there is no hard proof that Blount ever read Jonson’s comments, he was well read, educated, and had published Jonson’s works. Blount had a talent for predicting classics (Taylor, 2004), and would only want to include plays that had the best literary reputation. Furthermore, Blount had been apprenticed to William Ponsonby, who had pioneered commercial strategies for contemporary literature (Taylor, 2004), a model that Blount was in all likelihood inclined to emulate. *Pericles* was possibly ignored due to its “stale” critical contemporary reception and would have damaged Heminge and Condell’s upscale marketing strategies.

Marketing and money were not the only motivation for trying to erase *Pericles*. In fact, excluding *Pericles* could be interpreted as an act of compassion, an attempt to save Shakespeare’s image after his passing. As Heminge and Condell were instructed in Shakespeare’s will to purchase rings in his memory (Edmond, 2004), it is probable

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

that there was legitimate care for the Bard beyond economics. George Wilkins, Shakespeare's co-author of *Pericles*, did not enjoy a great reputation, for he found himself frequently before courts of law from 1602 until the end of his life (Parr, 2004). As Condell and Heminge were employees in Shakespeare's theatrical company, and were potentially friends with him, they would have wanted to present their late friend in the best possible light. To show Shakespeare in the most flattering way after death, as well as to ensure folio profitability, it is probable that Condell and Heminge intended to scrub away Shakespeare's association with a co-author with multiple felonies.

The impact of Condell, Heminge, and Blount's exclusion of *Pericles* in their folio collection would have significant consequences for the play's long-term reception. Although the play was eventually accepted as partially Shakespeare's in the 18th century (Jowett, 2007, p. 91), the exclusion of *Pericles* from the folio resulted in a long history of purposely burying the play. Protecting Shakespeare's reputation was also a motivation for Alexander Pope, who in addition to being 18-century England's most prolific poet, also edited a lavish collection of Shakespeare's works. Pope also excluded *Pericles* from his published edition of Shakespeare on the principle of enhancing Shakespeare's reputation (Kirwan, 2012, p. 12).

Pope held elitist views that were very similar to the principles of other editors of the time. As Harriman-Smith (2014) suggests, many 18th-century editors aimed to restore the texts as Shakespeare intended (p. 48). Pope thought he was editing to bring out Shakespeare's true authorial intent. While this sounds noble, Pope was still appealing to a wealthy audience for an expensive edition (Novak, 2014, p. 134). His selling point was to maintain authorial intent, but the long-term consequence was to tarnish the legitimacy of what had come before, just as Condell and Heminge had done to their competitors. Pope (1725) judged Condell's 1623 collection "far worse than the Quarto's" (p. xvi), undercutting the authority that Blount had tried to achieve for it. Whether it was salesmanship, a marketing fraud, or just arrogance, Pope employed the same marketing tactic against Condell that the 17th-century publisher had used against Pavier!

As for Blount, a primary motivation for Pope to erase *Pericles* was to project the best image of Shakespeare. Many other parts of his preface exhibit the same highbrow bias Blount had been guilty of. For example, Pope over-praises Shakespeare as an author who never borrowed ideas, even to the point of criticizing Ben Jonson. Pope writes, "If any Author deserved the name of an *Original*, it was *Shakespeare*" (p. 1), and, "Because *Shakespeare* borrowed nothing, it was said *Ben Jonson* borrowed every thing" (p. 6). However, Pope is wrong—many Shakespeare plays are based on other works. *Pericles*, for example, is based heavily on John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, to the extent that Gower is immortalized as a character in the play. Excluding *Pericles* helped Pope to engineer Shakespeare's reputation as

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

original. The greater the status that Pope fashioned for Shakespeare, the more copies of his expensive and risky collection he would sell.

Pope's reasons for erasing *Pericles* ran deep. As Harriman-Smith indicates, Pope had an anti-theatrical bias that may have informed his editorial and business decisions. Pope thought that the audiences of Shakespeare's time could not have appreciated fine art; any play that had appealed to these audiences was considered by Pope as a lower form of art. Pope opines, "the Audience was generally composed of the meaner sort of people... buffoonery would always please" (p. 3). Pope would not consider a popular crowd pleaser like *Pericles* to contain enough literary value. He continues, "the common Audience had no notion of the rules of writing" (p. 3), and claims that it was not until Ben Jonson that these under-educated masses learned the art of critical thinking. This not only severely undercuts the theatrical achievement of *Pericles* and the tastes of those who enjoyed it at the time, but also claims that the orality of the stage was worth less than Pope's written edition. This elitist view is embodied by Pope using the term "stage-poetry," which he employed to imply that the stage was a limit to Shakespeare's genius (Harriman-Smith, 2014, p. 51).

Pope congratulated Condell and Heminge for throwing away *Pericles* and other co-authored plays. He writes that they "did Shakespear [sic] the justice to reject those eight plays in their edition" (p. xx), exhibiting concern about Shakespeare's reputation above everything else. From Pope's perspective, theatrical popularity was damning to Shakespeare, for he did not care that these plays had once been thought to be Shakespeare's, or how important *Pericles* had been to Shakespeare's life; they were, in Pope's mind, a disservice to Shakespeare's reputation.

To be fair, Pope cannot be blamed entirely for declining interest in *Pericles* during the 18th and 19th centuries. Giddens (2009) suggests that, despite a 1780 edition by Edmund Malone, the play's lack of live performances might be attributed to the aversion to sexual content during the 19th century. As the play contains incest and prostitution, the few appearances of *Pericles* in that century were heavily altered. In *Charles and Mary Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), a book for children, Marina was sold into slavery instead of prostitution, and Antiochus's incest is only referred to as a shocking deed. Samuel Phelps put on an altered production in 1854, as the play had not been staged for almost a century at that point. Once again, the incest was removed, but Giddens also noted that a reviewer took note of the (lack of) prostitution scenes. That reviewer said the prostitution was "too gross for representation, save in a most attenuated form" (Giddens, 2009). Although Pope did harm to *Pericles's* canonical reputation, the preferences of generations also helped to erase the play.

In addition to morality, *Pericles's* decline could be linked to Shakespeare's figure as a source of national pride in the 19th century (Schoch, 2005, p. 112). Multiple Victorian essayists such as Thomas Carlyle wrote that "Shakespeare is ours... we are

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

of one blood and kind with him" (1840, p. 139). Carlyle went beyond feeling a national pride for Shakespeare, and felt a connection and physical bond for the Bard. The fact that the play featured prostitution and had been co-authored by a criminal would certainly diminish such an idolization. Victorians also generally believed that Shakespeare's works were like a biography, and so gave greater insight as to who the Bard was (Williams, 2010, p. 502). Would *Pericles* show a side of Shakespeare that could damage his figure-head status? The lower-quality rhyme schemes unique to *Pericles* could affect the worthiness of studying Shakespeare in the mind of Victorian critics.

Legal protections on theatre and Shakespeare's plays in the 18th and 19th centuries also led to *Pericles*'s decline. The Licensing Act of 1737 restricted unauthorized productions of Shakespeare plays, forcing smaller theatres to disguise Shakespearean productions by using fake titles (Schoch, 2005, p. 108). The result of these laws was a financial monopoly by the few elite theatres in England. When Parliament attempted to reform this law in 1832, the arguments against change were based on a sense of legitimacy. Charles Kemble argued that smaller theatres' productions of Shakespeare would be inferior to those of larger companies (Schoch, p. 107). This suggests that Shakespeare was an icon to be protected, as Kemble thought that inferior productions from smaller theatres should not be deemed legally acceptable. The Earl of Glengall defended these protections on Shakespeare, as "it would be impossible to give proper scenic effect to Shakespeare in a small theater" (Schoch, p. 115). Those in favour of keeping licensing restrictions felt any performance that could not capture Shakespeare in full glory would be damaging to his legacy to the point of being illegal. *Pericles*, having been cast aside as illegitimate by Pope, would not have been a play choice for a legitimate theatre before 1832. Laws that determined the legitimacy of Shakespeare indirectly contributed to the play's absence from the stage for almost a century, until 1854. The laws established in 1737 that intended to protect Shakespeare's works led to the withering of *Pericles*. Yet laws and morals could not fully fade the work.

While I've scrutinized decisions taken by 17th- and 18th-century editors over their concern for Shakespeare's legacy and for their own profits, plays must be reimagined and cared for in every era to survive the erosion of time. In my view, editors not only have the responsibility of keeping these flowers of art alive, but also have the burden of removing the invasive species that can threaten the ecosystem as a whole. Even if an editor made their decisions for economic reasons, would they not have had even a little compassion for the product? Heminge and Condell may have brought on Blount for marketing purposes, but I do not believe that invalidates the compassion they had for Shakespeare and the care that they showed for his oeuvre. One could even interpret Heminge and Condell's desire to succeed as a tribute to Shakespeare; the duo could reach an audience of book readers that was not possible in Shakespeare's lifetime, even if it meant discarding *Pericles*. Condell and Heminge's

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

editorial actions succeeded in keeping Shakespeare's art alive through the transition from the stage to the printed word. A parallel could be made to syndicated television shows, which see select controversial episodes removed in transition to streaming platforms. While one could view the decision as a sole concern for reputation and profitability, show creators have to remove the warts in their creations to survive past the traditional television era; editors had to decide if *Pericles* was a blemish that could ruin their product, but also affect the ability for Shakespeare to survive another generation. *Pericles* did contain warts and deformities, yet the beauty of art should not be about perfection. Knowing that artistic blunders are possible from even the greatest of writers should enhance our appreciation of their accomplishments. It is possible that publishers thought *Pericles* could erase Shakespeare himself; that the stain of one play would destroy the rest of Shakespeare's accomplishments. Good intentions have the power to preserve history, but can eradicate the past we promised to conserve.

REFERENCES

- Carlyle, T. (1840). *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. J. M. Dent.
- Connor, F. X. (2012). Shakespeare's theatrical folio. *Philological Quarterly*, 91(2), 221–245.
- Edmond, M. (2009). Heminges, John. In *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12890>
- Graves, T. S. (1916). On the date and significance of *Pericles*. *Modern Philology*, 13(9), 545–556. <https://doi.org/10.1086/387022>
- Giddens, E. (2009). *Pericles: The afterlife*. In C. M. S. Alexander (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Shakespeare's last plays* (pp. 173–184). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521881784.010>
- Harriman-Smith, J. (2014). The anti-performance prejudice of Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors. *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research*, 29(2), 47–61.
- Jackson, M . P. (1993). Rhyming in *Pericles*: More evidence of dual authorship. *Studies in Bibliography*, 46, 239–249. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40371978>
- Jonson, B. (1631). The iust indignation the Author tooke at the vulgar censure of his Play, by some malicious spectators, begat this following Ode to himselfe. In *The new inne. Or, the light heart. A comoe dy* (last section; unnumbered pages). T. Harper for T. Alchorne.
- Jowett, J. (2007) *Shakespeare and text*. Oxford University Press.
- Kirwan, P. (2012). The Shakespeare apocrypha and canonical expansion in the marketplace. *Philological Quarterly*, 91(2), 247–275.

How to Erase Shakespeare: The History of *Pericles*

- Lyons, T. (2012). Serials, spinoffs, and histories: Selling “Shakespeare” in collection before the folio. *Philological Quarterly*, 91(2), 185–220.
- Maisano, S. (2007). Shakespeare’s Dead Sea Scroll: On the apocryphal appearance of *Pericles*. In D. A. Brooks (Ed.), *The Shakespeare apocrypha* (pp. 171–198). Edwin Mellen Press.
- Massai, S. (2013). Edward Blount, the Herberts, and the first folio. In M. Straznicky (Ed.), *Shakespeare’s stationers* (pp. 132–146). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Murphy, A. (2003). *Shakespeare in print: A history and chronology of Shakespeare publishing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Novak, M. E. (2014). The politics of Shakespeare criticism in the Restoration and early eighteenth century. *ELH*, 81(1), 115–142. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24475589>
- Parr, A. (2004). Wilkins, George. In *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29418>
- Pope, A. (1725). Preface. In Shakespeare, W. *The Works of Shakespear in Six Volumes* (Vol. 1, pp. i–xxiv). Jacob Tonson.
- Schoch, R. W. (2005). Reforming Shakespeare. *Renaissance Drama*, 34, 105–119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41917400>
- Taylor, G. (2004). Blount [Blunt], Edward. In *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2686>
- Williams, R. (2010). “Pyramids of Egypt”: Shakespeare’s sonnets and a Victorian turn to obscurity. *Victorian Poetry*, 48(4), 489–508. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41105673>