

# Cerimon as a Heterodox Early Modern Physician in *Pericles*

Hanako Endo

## Introduction

The performance history of *Pericles* tells that *Pericles* has been regarded as “one of Shakespeare’s popular plays” (Gosset 2) owing to its successfulness on the stage throughout the centuries including during the time of Shakespeare. The total number of publishing from the first Quarto of 1609 to the sixth Quarto of 1635 shows how popular the play was as they were not normally printed up to this number. However, in contrast to its popularity in performance and its large number of publishing, most Quartos are in their bad conditions, so-called “bad Quartos”, which frequently cause directors trouble.

Because of this reason, despite the popularity in performance, *Pericles* has never been evaluated positively among Shakespeare’s researchers in terms of textual studies. The biggest issue which has made scholars confused was the omission from the first Folio (1623), the first Shakespeare’s complete works, which caused uncertainty of the play’s authorship. Therefore, the matter of its authorship has often been discussed for centuries. Some critics, such as Barker and Jackson insist that *Pericles* is a collaboration work because of the differences in the quality of the writing style between the first two acts and the last three acts. On the other hand, Knight claims that the whole play is “unquestionably dominated by a single mind; that mind is very clearly Shakespeare’s” (75). Despite controversy, it seems that the conclusion is that *Pericles* is a collaboration work between Shakespeare and George Wilkins.

The date of the work had also widely been considered. There were some opinions that the play was written in the early stage among Shakespeare’s

works. However, it is fully agreed nowadays that the play was written between 1607 and 1608, grouped as one of the late plays described also as miracle plays or tragicomedy plays or romances along with *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. The theme of regeneration or a touching reunion is noticeable in these plays.

In *Pericles*, it is Cerimon who leads the play into a miraculous ending by reviving Thaisa who is thought to be dead and thrown into the sea by Pericles. In the play, Cerimon is nothing but a lord according to the character lists in the most editions of *Pericles*; however, in the performances especially after the late twentieth century, his role is frequently varied. Each production shifts his part into a real physician, a witch, a magician, an alchemist or a god/goddess (holy existence). These roles described in each production are totally different from the original figure of Cerimon.

In addition to Cerimon's various roles, if medical aspects mentioned by Cerimon are considered, he can be interpreted as a heterodox early modern physician. This essay will firstly focus on Cerimon's different roles in some productions to develop his character as a medical person, and then analyse general character criticism of Cerimon. Thirdly, the method of treatment of Cerimon and his "secret art" will be discussed. Furthermore, the place of Ephesus will be taken into account as the place which made it possible for Cerimon to practice his "secret art."

### **1. Cerimon in the performance**

There are a few productions which described Cerimon as a lord, which is his original character. In the 1991 New York Shakespeare Festival production<sup>1</sup> and the BBC<sup>2</sup> film of *Pericles*, Cerimon was performed by a male performer as a noble lord having a broad knowledge of medicine. Being described as a lord in Ephesus, Cerimon is acted as a normal man with a charitable attitude and medical knowledge through helping the poor and Thaisa. These productions follow the character lists and do not intend to make Cerimon an unusual character, but rather, represent him as gentle and charitable.

Although the way of depicting Cerimon is different in each production,

when Cerimon's medical terms and the revival of Thaisa are exaggerated, Cerimon turns into a professional physician rather than a lord. Through the interpretation and a small shift, Cerimon as a physician can nowadays be found frequently all over the world and is very common. One of the remarkable performances might be the 2003 production of Stratford Festival in Canada<sup>3</sup>, which interpreted Cerimon as a Balinese healer whose treatment was a cultural mixture of Asian and Western.

Moreover, a remarkable female Cerimon appeared in the 1989 RSC production at the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon. The role played by Helen Blatch was that of not only a physician, but also a philanthropist, a herbalist and a priestess of Diana. In addition to the change of the role, gender was changed, as Cerimon was imbued with more complexities (Warren 46). Smallwood mentions that "to make Cerimon a woman destroys, of course, the play's symmetry of man here reviving woman, where woman (Marina) will later revive man (Pericles), but this presentation of power within gentleness, strength within femininity, was profoundly impressive" (498). After this production, remarkably, a female Cerimon has become as popular as a male one.

As Cerimon has frequently been acted by female performers in the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century since Helen Blatch, Cerimon's image as a female healer or even a supernatural existence such as a witch is likely to be fixed. The pamphlet of the RSC production at the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2006<sup>5</sup>, for example, introduces the Cerimon's scene as follows: "Thaisa's coffin has come to land at Ephesus and is carried to the healer Cerimon who, though her skills, is able to revive Thaisa" (25). Without mentioning Cerimon's original character, acted by Linda Bassett, Cerimon turns into a HEALER and HER skill revived Thaisa.

Besides, because of the supernatural treatment for Thaisa, Cerimon could be interpreted as an occult practitioner or a magician on the stage. The synopsis of the performance of *Pericles* of Colorado Shakespeare Festival in 1993 says that "Lord Cerimon revives her (Thaisa) with his magical powers" (Colorado Shakespeare Festival 1993). This suggests that Cerimon's ability to treat Thaisa is not because he is a physician but because he can spontaneously

heal her with magical ability.

Although the original character of Cerimon has frequently been interpreted differently, his/her role in productions is radically to revive Thaisa with his/her medical skill. Whatever the interpretation is, Cerimon is a character who has knowledge of medicine which is beyond the skill of normal physicians. This fact makes Cerimon as a supernatural being in recent productions but it can also be suggested that Cerimon can be interpreted as an untypical physician.

## 2. Character criticism of Cerimon

In spite of the fact that various interpretations of Cerimon have been used in each performance through the ages, character criticism of Cerimon has not frequently been written. In the books on Shakespeare and medicine or articles on *Pericles*, critics tend to give only partial attention to Cerimon and medicine. When this aspect of his character is considered, Cerimon is often analysed as a medical character, or compared with other Shakespearean physicians such as Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*, or sometimes Prospero in *The Tempest*.

Cerimon is regarded as one of several physicians in Shakespeare's plays. Edgar does not mention all medical people in Shakespeare's plays — he states that surgeons or apothecaries cannot be found, and Cerimon, Cornelius, Caius and Butts are the only doctors who have names and the remaining three (one in *King Lear* and two in *Macbeth*) are just a "doctor" or a "physician" (89); however, what Edgar emphasises is that "the only physician in Shakespeare's works whom we may term really noble is Cerimon in *Pericles*" (98). Cerimon is counted as a best physician among Shakespeare's characters.

Traister compares Cerimon with other Shakespearean medical people and demonstrates that more than a half of them appear in or after 1603; though none of them apart from Helena and Cerimon is represented as a competent physician, and some of them just give patients some advices or suggestions (43). The reason for the successfulness of Cerimon according to Traister is that Cerimon's medical skill is not as limited as other physicians in Shakespeare's plays and "Cerimon's creed and credentials, his scorn of wealth

and his altruism, are all essential” (49). Also, pointing out the importance of Cerimon in medicine in general and Thaisa’s malady, Peterson treats Cerimon as a doctor of hysteria, regarding that proposed cause of Thaisa’s unconsciousness is hysteria (18).

From the view of biographical criticism, a medical connection between the play and Shakespeare’s personal life is also suggested. Kail points out that because the time when *Pericles* was written and Shakespeare’s daughter and John Hall were married were close; the model for Cerimon who is a “good social status of the medical man” is Doctor Hall. Describing Cerimon as a skilful physician according to Kail was “Shakespeare’s tribute to the medical professional” (28).

### 3. Social background of Cerimon’s medicine

Generally, Cerimon is discussed as an important physician among Shakespeare’s plays, however, the relationship between his medical treatment and English Renaissance medicine has not frequently been analysed. As for the description by Gower, in one of two main source books of *Pericles*, *Confessio Amantis*, Cerimon is introduced as follows:

A worthie clerke and surgien,  
 And eke a great phisicien,  
 Of all the londe the wisest one,  
 Whiche hight maister Cerimone.  
 There were of his disciples some. (1171-5)

Although Fox claims that Gower did not have much knowledge of medicine (156) and it is true that Cerimone’s medical knowledge is not introduced, precise details of his treatment is described in *Confessio Amantis*.

Thei leid hir on a couche softe,  
 And with a shete warmed ofte  
 Hir cold breste began to heate,

This maister hath hir every joynte  
 With certain oyle and balsam anynte,  
 And put a licour in hir mouthe,  
 Whiche is to fewe clerkes couthe. (1201-7)

The point here is that the role of Cerimon in Gower's work is a surgeon and a physician; therefore, it was Shakespeare who changed Cerimon's role to a lord in Ephesus, who holds onto the attitude of a gentleman, contributing to aid sick and poor people. It is perhaps, that by making him a lord, a member of the elite, Shakespeare is giving his character greater credibility and stature. In this way, Shakespeare may be legitimising his role as a medical 'professional'.

Cerimon mentions his medical theory in the play as follows:

'Tis known, I ever  
 Have studied physic, through which secret art,  
 By turning o'er authorities, I have  
 Together with my practice, made familiar  
 To me and to my aid the blest infusions  
 That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones,  
 And so can speak of the disturbances  
 That nature works, and of her cures, which doth give me  
 A more content and cause of true delight  
 Than to be thirsty after tott'ring honour,  
 Or tie my pleasure up in silken bags  
 To please the fool and death. (12.28-39)<sup>6</sup>

With reference to general medical education in the early modern period, especially at the College of Physicians, the main programme of the course was to learn ancient medical theories established by Hippocrates and Galen. It is certain that "authority" Cerimon mentions refers to the theory from ancient Greece and Rome, especially Hippocrates and Galen, which was widely read and studied among most licensed physicians in the period. It can be highly considered that Cerimon studied those "authorities" like other early modern

physicians.

It is therefore true that some critics insist on Cerimon as an authorised physician. Hoeniger states that “although part of an improbable tale, Cerimon’s methods are typical of a responsible Jacobean doctor” and that “the authorities he consults presumably include Galen, Hippocrates, and more modern works, among them herbals and other recipe books” (66). Hoeniger moreover gives an example of a great surgeon from Ephesus who is similar to Cerimon being “the Hippocratic ideal in medicine” (66).

However, what needs to be emphasised is that Cerimon says that his medicine is based on “secret art”. Warren mentions “secret” as “not available to public knowledge” (160). “Secret art” may refer to something forbidden to study or unacceptable for licensed Galen based physicians. In fact, judging from cultural background of the period, it can be accepted that it was the time when Elizabethan England was seeing the cultural and social change towards learning.

Edgar states that the country was advancing and growing ceaselessly and also was at a time of the rise of the middle class having a strong desire to learn new things. This situation gave tremendous stimulus to reading and the printing of books along with a large increase in booksellers and publishers so that publishing became an important industry by 1557. It was incorporated into a Stationer’s Company with the privilege of printing and selling books (Edgar 142).

This movement certainly affected medical learning as well. Although medical education at the College of Physicians still restricted to the authoritative ancient theories in the early modern period, various kinds of medical books could be found in bookshops in London, of which categories included herbal medicine, chemical medicine, and even anatomy. It was possible for the general public to obtain these books and to learn new medical theory.

#### 4. Cerimon as a Paracelsian Physician

The fact that Cerimon is a typical Elizabethan physician based on the theory of ancient Greek is only attributed to “authorities”; however, Traister mentions that Cerimon is interested in not only Galenic (“vegetives”) but also Paracelsian (“metals and stones”) remedies along with the fact that Cerimon is “self-taught” through his study from books and experience. In fact, Cerimon continues his speech, implying Paracelsian medicine. Despite the fact that few critics pay attention to Cerimon as a Paracelsian physician, it can be revealed that Cerimon’s medical theory is Paracelsian medicine rather than Galenic medicine.

Firstly, Cerimon’s concept of “with my practice” refers to the belief of Paracelsus although Warren interprets “practice” as “putting the ‘authorities’ to practice test” (160). Paracelsus said “doctors should learn through experience, at the bedside of their patients, rather than spending their time in libraries” (Dawson 16).

Secondly, in spite of the fact that Moyes interprets “the blest infusions” as “the active substances in plants rather than to pharmaceutical infusions made from them” (47). Also, Bucknill states that the use of the word “infusion” is so ambiguous that Shakespeare may have made a mistake in the use of the word, emphasising Cerimon is “both dogmatist and empiric” (275-6). However, the conviction of Paracelsus is directly connected to what Cerimon is familiar with for cure: “the blest infusion / That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones” (12.32-3)— Paracelsus believed that “God had created human beings and other creatures, using natural substances such as salt and other minerals, and that God had provided all the cures for illnesses in natural substances such as herbs, vegetables and minerals” (Dawson 16).

Furthermore, Cerimon’s speech, “the disturbances / That nature works” (12.34-5) was widely recognised among Paracelsian physicians. They knew how effective and how harmful chemicals were when overdosed or used incorrectly. One of the typical examples of medicine used in the Shakespeare’s time is mercury which was believed to be effective for the treatment of syphilis but overdosing chiefly caused salivation, diarrhoea, or ulceration of



the gums as complications (Sloan 63).

The word “appliances” also implies Cerimon as a skilful (Paracelsian) physician. Traister states that although there are some “empirics” in Shakespeare’s plays, there are three successful practitioners: Cerimon, a doctor in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and Helena in *All’s Well that Ends Well*. The word used in common by these three practitioners is “appliance” when speaking of medical intervention (48). Cerimon says:

I have heard  
Of an Egyptian that had nine hours lain dead  
Who was be good appliances recovered. (12.82-4)

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “appliances” is used only by Shakespeare before the mid-nineteenth century and has nothing to do with medical contexts. Shakespeare made use of “appliance” with competent physicians. However the fact is that none of physicians in these three plays is a licensed physician, which means that they have never studied at the College of Physicians, they are regarded as the best physicians in the plays of Shakespeare (Traister 48).

In fact, there was an infamous physician who introduced chemical medicine. Kassell writes throughout his work about the physician, Simon Forman (1552-1611), who also introduced distilled strong waters made from beer, herbs, and chemical ingredients. He was an astrologer and not a licensed physician but gave medical advice to a huge number of patients. This suggests that medical practice with the Paracelsian theory could lead physicians into good physicians in drama but also into notorious practitioners in the Elizabethan society. Under these circumstances, it is highly acceptable that skilful Cerimon is introduced not as a “physician” but as a “lord” of Ephesus because introducing Cerimon as a Paracelsian physician cannot make him a typical rightful Jacobean physician. It can therefore be said that Cerimon’s character as a “lord” and “Secret art” infer Paracelsian medicine.

## 5. Ephesus as the place to support Cerimon's "secret art"

It is true that introducing Cerimon as a lord hides the fact that he is a Paracelsian physician; however, another thing what makes it possible for Cerimon as a Paracelsian physician is the place, Ephesus. One of the reasons is that Ephesus was considered among the Elizabethans to be the place for "the arts, including the art of medicine" (Hoeniger 67). It therefore can be acceptable to regard Cerimon as one of such medical people in Ephesus.

Ephesus was also famous for its mart and trade for Elizabethan people because Ephesus and London had a close connection through that merchandise. As is also seen in *The Comedy of Errors*, Ephesian mart offered consumers a variety of exotic commodities (Harris 32-5). The major feature is that they dealt with spices such as capsicum, ginger, cinnamon, pepper, turmeric, and vanilla. Some of which are said that they could be used for medicine and their effectiveness was amply proved.

Although the distinctive features of Ephesus are not referred in *Pericles*, it was a familiar place for Elizabethans for its exotic products and medical people. In short, the setting of Ephesus contributes to Cerimon being a Paracelsian physician. As I quoted Hoeniger's example of an Ephesian doctor, it can be considered that Cerimon is one of the great medical people in Ephesus. Medical art, mart, and the exoticness of the land largely support Cerimon as a good (Paracelsian) physician.

## Conclusion

It can strongly be suggested that the impressive medical practice of Cerimon is based on Paracelsus which was not basically accepted in both medical education and the society in the Shakespeare's time. However, looking at the cultural background and the geographical condition, Cerimon as Paracelsian physician can highly be acceptable on the stage in the early modern period. Supported by the place, Ephesus, Cerimon's role in the play, which is to revive Thaisa and to lead the dramatic ending of the adventure of Pericles, is attained.

It seems that there is a big gap between interpreted Cerimon on the stage and critically analysed Cerimon. However, the fact that Cerimon as a Paracelsian physician which is developed in this essay is attributed to various interpretations of Cerimon in the recent productions, including female supernatural existence. Although Cerimon as a Paracelsian physician does not seem to have been performed, recent productions of Cerimon with curious interpretations is quite sensible in a way that Cerimon is not an authorised physician in the early modern period.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Michael Greif. Perf. Campbell Scott. Public/Newman Theatre, New York. 5 Nov. – 22 Dec. 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> *Pericles*. Dir. David Jones. Perf. Mike Gwilym, Amanda Redman. BBC, 1984.
- <sup>3</sup> *Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Leon Rubin. Perf. Jonathan Goad. Festival Theater, Stratford (Ontario). 31 May – 31 Oct. 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> *Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. David Thacker. Perf. Nigel Terry. The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon. 12 Sep. 1989 – 27 Jan. 1990.
- <sup>5</sup> *Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Dominic Cooke. Perf. Lucian Msamati, Kate Fleetwood. The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon. 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> The quotations in this essay are all from the Warren's edition of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*.

#### Works Cited

- Barker, G. A. "Themes and Variations in *Pericles*." *Shakespeare's Later Comedies*. Ed. D. J. Palmer. Middlesex: Penguin, 1971.
- Bucknill, John Charles. *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare*. London: Longman, 1860. Colorado Shakespeare Festival. 13 Aug. <2008http://www.coloradoshakes.org/plays/play.php?Year=1993&Play=35>
- Dawson, Ian. *Renaissance Medicine*. London: Hodder Children's, 2005.
- Edgar, Irving, I. *Shakespeare, Medicine and Psychiatry*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1970.
- Gossett, Suzanne. Introduction. *Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Ed. Suzanne Gosset. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Thomson, 2004.
- Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Bullough, Geoffrey. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. 6. New York: Routledge, 1966.
- Harris, Jonathan Gil. *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.

- Hart, F. Elizabeth. "Rough Music in Pericles, 3. 2." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.3 (2000): 313-31.
- Hoener, David F. *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*. Cranbury: Associated UP, 1992.
- Jackson, MacD. P. *Defining Shakespeare: Pericles as Test Case*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Kail, Aubrey C. *The Medical Mind of Shakespeare*. Balgowlah: Williams, 1986.
- Kassell, Lauren. *Medicine & Magic in Elizabethan London*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Knight, G. Wilson. *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays*. London: Methuen, 1948.
- Moyes, John. *Medicine And Kindred Arts In The Plays Of Shakespeare*. Glasgow: James, 1896.
- Pericles*. By William Shakespeare. Dir. David Thacker. Royal Shakespeare Company. The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon, 12 Sep. 1989 – 27 Jan. 1990.
- "Pericles." Colorado Shakespeare Festival 1958-2008. 2008. 13 Aug. 2008  
<<http://www.coloradoshakes.org>>
- Peterson, Kaara L. "Performing Arts: Hysterical Disease, Exorcism, and Shakespeare's Theatre." *Disease, Diagnose, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*. Eds. Moss, Stephanie and Kaara L. Peterson. Hants: Ashgate, 2004.
- Shakespeare, William and George Wilkins. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Ed. Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Sloan, A. W. *English Medicine in the Seventeenth Century*. Durham: Durham Academic P, 1996.
- Smallwood, Robert. "Review: Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon, 1989 (Part II)." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (winter 1990): 491-99.
- Traister, Barbara Howard. "'Note Her a Little Father': Doctors and Healers in the Drama of Shakespeare." Eds. Moss, Stephanie and Kaara L. Peterson. *Disease, Diagnose, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*. Hants: Ashgate, 2004.
- Warren, Roger. Introduction. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. By William Shakespeare and George Wilkins. Ed. Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- "What Happened in Boston, Willie." *Theater Mirror Reviews*. Rev. Carl A. Rossi. 2003. The Theater Mirror, New England's LIVE Theater Guide. 4 May 2007  
<<http://www.theatermirror.com/partcr.htm>>