

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 9 (1996)

Artikel: "Few love to hear the sins they love to act:" : father-daughter incest in three versions of Apollonius of Tyre
Autor: Rupp, Katrin
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99933>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“Few love to hear the sins they love to act:”
Father-Daughter Incest in Three Versions
of *Apollonius of Tyre*

Katrin Rupp

Shocking as it is, the father-daughter incest occurs at the opening of all versions of the Apollonius story. It seems to be an integral part of the whole, even though the persons involved do not appear any more as the story continues.¹ That the narrative should start in a closed and basic cell of society, the family, is certainly not a coincidence. The order of the family is initially distorted, which poses a challenge to classical notions of it. The incest also questions anthropological concepts, since it is lived and confessed through a riddle, rather than being tabooed. In my discussion of three English versions of the tale² I shall therefore concentrate on the riddle as it is posed by the incestuous father to the suitors of his daughter. I shall argue that the riddle is a device to break up the tangled situation of incest. This allows for the story to continue with its possibilities of a doubling of the incestuous father and a repetition of the incest. The hero confronted with these possibilities, Apollonius, will have to struggle against them.

King Antiochus of Antiochia has a daughter of incredible beauty, who remains unnamed. When she has come of marriageable age, the king tries to find a suitable husband for her. In the Old English version the word for “marriageable” is *giftelic*³ (literally: gift-like, likely to be a gift), implying the daughter’s inherent potential to be given as a gift in marriage. In return for his gift, the king gains material and military power. The obviously

¹ “It is striking that every extended narrative version of the story includes the opening episode of Antiochus and his daughter, however briefly. It would have been quite easy to think of an alternative motive for Apollonius’ flight” (Archibald 98).

² The anonymous Old English *Apollonius of Tyre*, John Gower’s “Apollonius of Tyre” in the eighth book of *Confessio Amantis* and William Shakespeare’s *Pericles*.

³ No corresponding term in Gower or Shakespeare.

positive aspects of the exchange collide with his fear of loss and his wish to gain a different kind of power in the form of the sexual possession of the daughter, which is a right reserved for the son-in-law. The daughter's potential husband becomes a rival of whom the father/king is envious. For when Antiochus is looking for a man to give his daughter to at highest profit, he changes his mind and appropriates her (sexually) for himself. By committing incest with his daughter, he loses all the benefits he could have gained by giving his daughter to a suitable man, since the condition of a daughter's exchangeability is her virginity. The exchange value of the daughter is therefore lost.

King Antiochus's behaviour contradicts Lévi-Strauss' assumption in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the incest taboo, a product of which is the exogamous exchange, works for any social structure.⁴ A psychological explanation for such a contradiction might be the father's wish to keep power over his daughter. Moreover, there is his envy of the man who comes to take away the daughter to make her his sexual possession and have her produce a new family, a family which will not bear the father's name. Even if the incest is not always carried out literally, there are many literary examples of incestuous paternal desire. Linda Boose points out that

the daughter's struggle with her father is one of separation, not displacement. Its psychological dynamics thus locate the conflict inside inner family space. Father-daughter stories are full of literal houses, castles, or gardens in which fathers such as Danae's or Rapunzel's, or Brabantio or Shylock, lock up their daughters in the futile attempt to prevent some rival male from stealing them. (33)

Antiochus's daughter is indeed kept within the confines of the palace. But she significantly differs from other enclosed daughters in that she is not exchangeable any more. Moreover, she now has to comply with a new social role different from the one defined by blood relations. Since Antiochus's wife died (at exactly the point when their daughter had come of marriageable age), the position of wife and queen has been vacant. In the privacy of her chamber this position is occupied by the daughter, for incest physically makes her into her father's wife. In public the king continues to be without a wife and queen, but with a daughter he seemingly wants to marry off.

⁴ "The incest prohibition is not a prohibition like the others. It is *the* prohibition in the most general form, the one perhaps to which all others [...] are related as particular cases. The incest prohibition is universal like language" (493).

The enclosure quite obviously protects and hides the father's sinful designs. It also serves to enhance the daughter's attractiveness, since it appeals to the suitors' ingenuity to try and find a way that leads to her. In addition to the literal barrier, there is a linguistic one. In order to gain access to the princess, the suitors have to solve a riddle posed to them by the king. The Old English version of the riddle runs as follows:

Scylde ic polige, moddrenum flæsce ic bruce. [. . .] Ic sece minne fæder,
 mynre modor wer, minnes wifes dohtor and ic ne finde. (IV, 11-15)⁵

The first word *scylde*, meaning "crime," but also "debt," already indicates that the solution to the riddle is not a normal deed or action. What follows is not "I committed," but "I suffer from." This sounds like a confession of a crime. Who confesses which crime? There is an ambiguous hovering between daughter and father as possible speakers. The daughter cannot find her father because he has become her husband (not only is the subject of *ic ne finde* ambiguous, but the phrase has no object either, precisely because more than one is fit, as I shall show). When she enjoys maternal flesh, the daughter implies that she uses her father's body, the rightful possession of her mother, for her sexual pleasure. Nowhere, however, is the daughter said to enjoy the incest with her father, on the contrary, she is forced to give in. She figures the desire of the other, her father.

If the king is the speaker of the riddle, which is the only possibility in the second half of the riddle (after *wer*), then what does he mean when he says he is enjoying maternal flesh? The following line, though seemingly more intricate still, helps to clarify and answer the question. The king explicitly seeks his father, who is further specified as his mother's husband. He thus becomes the son in the Freudian Oedipal triangle. Boose points out that "by playing the son, the father impels his daughter into the role of mother; and where a daughter stands for the mother, there is no superior father to make the son give up his (surrogate) mother" (41).⁶ In other words, where the

⁵ In the part I omitted the translator includes the Latin text and then gives it *on englisc*. This makes the riddle a double one. The Latin is to be translated into Old English before the riddle can be "translated," i.e. solved. And for 20th century readers it might be useful to also have a translation in modern English (here and elsewhere the translation is mine):

From a crime I am suffering, I am enjoying maternal flesh. [. . .] I seek my father, my mother's companion, my wife's daughter and I cannot find [her/him/them].

⁶ Boose's remark grounds on Freud's observations on the Oedipus complex. The boy/man looks for a (surrogate) mother in his wife and the girl/woman is not satisfied until she "has succeeded in making her husband her child as well as in acting as a mother to him" (Freud 168). David Willbern, who examines father and daughter in Freudian theory, concludes that

daughter stands for the mother, the father is also the son. Because he desires and actually enjoys maternal flesh, i.e. has intercourse with his (surrogate) mother, the son seeks (*ic sece*), or rather fears, his punishing, castrating father, but he cannot find him. Interestingly enough, the only superior father figure is the pagan god himself, who will indeed punish both king and daughter by sending a lethal and phallic thunderbolt.⁷

Familial terminology goes even more awry when the king says: "I seek the daughter of my wife, but I cannot find her" (second possibility to place a pronoun here). He cannot find his daughter because she has become his (inofficial) wife. When a father like Antiochus cannot find his daughter nor his father (he cannot find *them* – the third possible pronoun), we get a double removal from the original Oedipal situation. It is the parent who desires his child and whose Oedipus complex has never been resolved.

The solution to the riddle, then, is the regal incest. With a daughter who is no longer *intacta* and therefore not exchangeable any more, the king has to fear the potential sons-in-law as they might find out about his negligence in protecting the filial virginity and discover him to be the violator of the hymen. Thus, all suitors are beheaded, irrespective of a right or wrong answer to the riddle.⁸ The chopped-off heads are put on stakes at the city gates as a warning. They also symbolize castration.

The corresponding form of the riddle in Gower is even more cryptic:

With felonie I am upbore,
I ete and have it noght forbore
Mi modres fleish, whos housebonde
Mi fader forto seche I fonde,
which is the Sone ek of my wif.
Hierof I am inquisitif. (VIII, 405-410)⁹

"through the traditional Oedipal arrangements that marriage provides, a daughter may ultimately come to represent her husband's mother" (80).

⁷ Lost in the Old English version. But we learn at the end that Apollonius inherits Antiochus's lands after the king's death. All Latin versions, however, "attribute Antiochus's death to divine retribution in the form of a thunderbolt, the favourite weapon of Zeus" (Archibald 39). Gower's version reads: "Antiochus, as men mai wite, / With thondre and lythnyng is forsmite; / His doghter hath the same chaunce" (999-1001). In *Pericles* there is no mention of the causes for the king's and his daughter's death (cf. III, 25).

⁸ As a rule, decapitation follows a wrong answer, marriage to the daughter a correct one.

⁹ I am bearing up with a serious crime / I keep on eating / My mother's flesh, whose husband, / My father, I am trying to seek out, / Who is also the son of my wife. / This is what I am looking for.

Again, we can assume both daughter and father as possible speakers as far as *fonde. Mi fader* (line 408) is either the king if the daughter is speaking, or the king's father if Antiochus is speaking. The following line makes it clear that the speaker of the riddle can only be the king. As in the Old English version, he fears his own punishing father because he has intercourse with his mother (instead of *ic bruce* we get the even more explicit *I ete*). But the mother is in fact the surrogate parent the king finds in his daughter because the father is also the son. "Son" is introduced as a new familial term (line 409), which makes the Oedipal triangle complete and more overt than in the Old English version. *Mi* is the pronoun the daughter uses for the king her father, of course, but it is also the one the king uses for his own father. Moreover, with *mi fader* the king also refers to himself, since he is *the Sone ek of my wif*. Through intercourse, the maternal daughter becomes his wife as in the Old English version. Logically, the problem of the *mi* pronoun cannot be solved here, but Gower probably did not worry about it.

A most interesting shift takes place in Shakespeare's *Pericles*. The riddle is given to Pericles (= Apollonius) in written form by the king, but its speaker is now the daughter:¹⁰

I am no viper, yet I feed
 On mother's flesh which did me breed.
 I sought a husband, in which labour
 I found that kindness in a father.
 He's father, son, and husband mild;
 I mother, wife, and yet his child:
 How they may be, and yet in two,
 As you will live, resolve it you. (I.1.65-72)

This version of the riddle also offers the possibility of thinking of two speakers in the first two lines. Ruth Nevo points out:

That Pericles himself is the reader of the riddle, hence our conduit to it, is important in this respect, especially in the theater. There is a certain double-take, therefore, in the deciphering of the riddle. The daughter feeds upon her mother's rightful possession – her own father; but Antiochus too can be said

¹⁰ Goolden notes that "the original [i.e. Latin] has Antiochus exclusively as the speaker, the Anglo-Saxon has both Antiochus and his daughter, *Pericles* has exclusively the daughter" (1955: 247, note 3). With my reading of the riddle Goolden's observations are considerably modified. Moreover, his attempt to explain the riddle by using in-law relationships does not, in my opinion, stand proof throughout.

to feed upon mother's flesh – the issue of the mother who is (or was) his own wife. (39-40)

The third line (67) clearly marks the daughter as speaker. However, the power of speech she is given is very liminal, since it is controlled by her father when he hands the written text to Pericles. With the first "mother" (line 66) the daughter refers to her own progenitor, the late queen, whereas with the second (line 70) she points to herself. Very clearly does she mention father, son and husband to which correspond child, mother, wife and thus sums up what the two previous versions of the riddle have not always said all too explicitly.

In all versions Apollonius (or Pericles) finds the solution to the riddle when he realizes that the first person speaker of the riddle actually corresponds to the first person who poses the riddle and is not the fictional prosopoeic subject of the riddle convention. In other words, the speaker of the riddle is the speaker of the solution. In a second step Apollonius has to find out how the familial terms relate to one another. They are not used according to convention either.

As far as terminology in the riddles is concerned, we get a complete family: father, mother, son and/or daughter. The daughter's husband in Shakespeare's version even hints at an exogamous marriage. But this family in fact includes two persons only. The generational order has gone awry with the result that lineage is no longer linear, but circular. Incest resists exogamy, there is no (ex)change, which ultimately implies infertility and death.

Death and infertility are symbolised by the daughter's tomb-like enclosure to which only the king has got access. Or, as Patricia Joplin has pointed out: "The father king regulates both the literal and metaphorical 'gates' to the city's power: the actual gates in the city's wall or the hymen as the gateway to his daughter's body." And in the same context she says of the virgin: "Because her sexual body is the ground of the culture's system of differences, the woman's hymen is also the ground of contention. The virgin's hymen must not be ruptured except in some manner that reflects and ensures the health of the existing political hierarchy" (38). However, by committing incest with his daughter, the king threatens the existing political hierarchy and undermines traditional notions of the family that seem to be a prerequisite of the former.

Why should the patriarch (father/king) put his private and his "public" family, his kingdom, into such danger? The incest scene occurs at the beginning of all three versions of the story and covers only a small part of

the whole. Yet it is crucial to what follows. The king's riddle blocks off all suitors to the princess and thus to the throne, so that the story could end here. But, surprising as it seems, Apollonius of Tyre is the only suitor who is granted some time of reflection over his answer. To my mind and as I shall argue later, this is because Apollonius functions as a double of Antiochus.

Any riddle is a means of exercising power, for the riddler's knowledge is greater than that of the addressee. But since the withheld answer is included in the riddle, there is a possibility of solving it. There is a momentary shift of power from riddler to addressee when Apollonius guesses the answer to the riddle. The danger of being beheaded should be over now, but Apollonius realizes that this is not so, because the king does not want the incest to be disclosed nor to lose his power over his daughter. As Apollonius is granted some time of reflection over his (correct) answer, he manages to escape over the sea where he will eventually be shipwrecked, having been persecuted by one single deputy of Antiochus's court. After his rescue he learns that Antiochus and his daughter are dead and that he is the heir to the throne. None of the versions gives an explanation for the reason of the inheritance.¹¹ Is it possible that Apollonius is Antiochus's son? He is after all twice addressed as *Sone* by Antiochus in Gower's version. Yet this need not necessarily indicate any kinship, it could be a formal address of an older man to a younger one. If he was the son, however, this would mean that Apollonius has got an incest problem here, if not later, because he is wooing his own sister. But why should the son not be acknowledged and given the throne officially? Do we really have to go as far as Reinhold Merkelbach, who claims that Apollonius is the son Antiochus had with his daughter?¹² This would mean that incest has after all been unhealthily fertile. In any case, Apollonius seems to be the one son figure who deserves some respite and special treatment from the king.

Apollonius is after all the protagonist of the story, a story that is "magically" made up for him, as Anne Wilson claims: "There is only one point of view, that of 'the hero' (who may be seen as a storyteller creating, or a participant re-creating, the plot): he is performing a series of mental rituals, and is identified, in particular, with the chief character, Apollonius"

¹¹ Archibald (67-68) points to this problem and adds that only very few of all the extant versions attempt to give an answer, which in most cases is not very illuminating anyway.

¹² "Apollonius war der Sohn des Königs Antiochus und seiner Tochter. Er wuchs am Hof des Königs auf, ohne seinen Vater zu kennen. Als er seine Mutter nach dem Vater fragte, antwortete sie ihm mit einem Rätsel" (161-62). Note that in his reconstruction of the original source Merkelbach attributes the riddle to the daughter.

(37). From a structural point of view he figures as a kind of double of Antiochus: he too will be a king and a father and have a daughter with whom he is tempted to commit incest. Yet he needs to overcome temptation and thus secure moral, social and political values. In other words, he carries the burden of making amends for Antiochus's deeds and of serving as a good example of a patriarch (father/king) ruling his family and state productively. As Wilson's reading of the story suggests, women are only a means of purifying the male hero (and the state) from any flaws, they do not have a life of their own.

The woman's body thus functions as a boundary marking the limits of transgression. Marriage is the legitimate form of modifying the limits whereas rape and incest are illegitimate. Because the female body is an object of exchange, it not only serves as a contract between the male exchange partners, but it is sexually, socially and politically desirable, which marks its potential to attract violence. It is no coincidence that chastity or virginity go together with outstanding beauty. Her attractiveness defines the woman, and therefore "her existence threatens men's *disciplina*" (Joshel 120). King Antiochus sacrificed his discipline to lust, which resulted in violence, and has to pay a high price for it: the loss of his kingdom, his life and afterlife in the form of a dynasty. Men like Antiochus, who have not resolved their Oedipus complex and therefore do not fully partake in masculinity (hence *disciplina*), are likely to succumb to social taboos like incest, adultery and rape. Apollonius, faced with such a fatal crime at the beginning of the story, has to set out and do better than the king. On his shoulders lies the responsibility for social, political and sexual order as conceived of by the patriarchal system. Such order can only be achieved if the basic cell of society, the family, works accordingly. As this story implies, the syntagmatic structure of the family should not be projected unto the paradigmatic axis, that is, it should not be verticalised. In other words, fathers and daughters must preserve their proper linguistic denotation and social function.

Works Cited

- Archibald, Elizabeth Frances. *Apollonius of Tyre. Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1991.
- Boose, Lynda E. "The Father's House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture's Daughter-Father Relationship." *Daughters and Fathers*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 19-74.
- Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. Vol. 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Goolden, Peter. "Antiochus's Riddle in Gower and Shakespeare." *The Review of English Studies* 6 (1955): 245-251.
- , ed. *The Old English 'Apollonius of Tyre.'* London: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Russel A. Peck. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980.
- Joplin, Patricia Klindienst. "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours." *Stanford Literature Review* 1 (1984): 25-53.
- Joshel, Sandra R. "The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia." *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*. Ed. Amy Richlin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 112-30.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James H. Bell, John R. von Sturmer and Rodney Needham. Boston: Beacon, 1969.
- Merkelbach, Reinhold. *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*. München und Berlin: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962.
- Nevo, Ruth. *Shakespeare's Other Language*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Shakespeare, William. *Pericles*. Ed. F. D. Hoeniger. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Methuen, 1963.
- Willbern, David. "Filia Oedipi: Father and Daughter in Freudian Theory." *Daughters and Fathers*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 75-96.
- Wilson, Anne. *The Magical Quest. The Use of Magic in Arthurian Romance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.