



Jane M. Ford. *Patriarchy and Incest from Shakespeare to Joyce*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. xiii + 202 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1595-8.

Reviewed by Gloria C. Erlich (Princeton Research Forum and National Coalition of Independent Scholars)

Published on H-Scholar (November, 1998)



Father/Daughter Incest

In this book, Jane M. Ford, in independent scholar, builds on Otto Rank's 1912 encyclopedic study, "The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation" (*Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992*). Rank's massive work establishes the pervasiveness of incest motifs in world religion and literature, and their centrality to the creative process. The term "incest" is used by both Rank and Ford to include either enacted sexual activity or desire between immediate relatives or various kinds of surrogates. Rank's book studied father/daughter incest, mother/son, and sibling incest, and also incestuous behavior among step-relatives, and other surrogates for immediate family members. Principally, he covered German Literature, but relied heavily on Greek drama, the Beatrice Cenci story, and Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Ford's extension of Rank's inquiry opens with two very interesting chapters, an Introduction on the theory, history, and sociology of incest, and a survey indicating some of the many literary variations on this theme. She then proceeds to her main task, which is to study father/daughter incest in the works of William Shakespeare, and four nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers: Charles Dickens, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and James Joyce, focusing on the father/daughter/suitor triangle.

Using Shakespeare's plays as a touchstone (as did Rank), Ford traces three dominant patterns in this triangle: 1) the father eliminates the suitor and retains pos-

session of his daughter; 2) he relinquishes the daughter as a result of coercion; or 3) he resolves the incest threat by selecting a husband for his daughter. Utilizing a classical Freudian view of the Oedipus complex and assuming what is very difficult to prove, that the fictive representations of incestuous desire in some way or to some degree mirror those of the author, Ford looks for correlations of these plot patterns with stages of the authors' lives and careers.

In making biographical assumptions, she is more cautious than was Otto Rank, but still does not lay sturdy foundations for some of her biographical claims. She writes: "The life of Charles Dickens offers an unusual number of examples of the search for that first love-object that is paralleled in so many of his works (p. 55)," but most of her evidence comes not from the life, but from the works. Perhaps she is relying on the reader's biographical knowledge, but merely alluding to Dickens' resentment toward his mother for wanting to return him to the blacking factory and his subsequent unsatisfactory relationships with women as evidence of incestuous pre-occupation do not suffice. Similarly, we are given summaries of many of Joseph Conrad's stories that deal with father/daughter relationships, but are not told enough about his childhood to infer that unresolved incestuous longings were his central psychological problem.

Otto Rank measured literary works by the degree to which they demonstrate repression of the primitive urge to kill the father and possess the mother, a process that

increases with the artist's progress through life and is reflected in the sequence of his work. Ford modifies that criterion into a less chronological, more cyclical model. In her analysis of early, middle and late works of each author, she does, however, find that "the artist, either concurrently with his writing or in the recent past functioned as a suitor himself, thus identifying with the suitor in the narrative. In a middle work, especially when the father of daughters, he can identify with the possessive father, a 'stage of fear of retribution.' In a late work, he would be expected to evolve into a mature father capable of renunciation (p. 34)."

Both Rank and Ford believe that artistic creation derives from neurotic suffering, and is compulsive in nature. Because Oedipal conflict is only temporarily eased or resolved by creative acts, the artist tends to repeat variations on this theme, ideally with increasing repression or distancing as he matures. Thus Shakespeare can move from the multiple instances of overt incest in his *Pericles* through the Oedipal displacements of *Hamlet* and into the mature renunciation of paternal claims on a daughter in *The Tempest*, in which Prospero arranges a suitable marriage for his daughter Miranda.

Probably the most arresting and original chapters in this book are those in which Ford argues for the presence of enacted incest in Henry James's *Golden Bowl* and James Youce's *Ulysses*. Before making her startling claim that Maggie Verver became pregnant with her father's child, Ford runs through a good many of James's plots based on the father/daughter/suitor triangle. The prevalence of this motif is all the more surprising because, unlike the other authors, James had neither wife nor daughter, making any biographical connection rather tenuous. Nevertheless, "the James corpus, like those of both Shakespeare and Dickens, entails some of the almost infinite plot possibilities in the father/daughter/suitor configuration....[*What Maisie Knew*] is perhaps one of the literature's best examples of the distancing of the Oedipal triangle onto surrogates (p. 81)."

In *The Golden Bowl* few readers would miss the incestuous closeness of the father/daughter relationship or the incestuous implications of the Prince's adultery with Charlotte, his mother-in-law, but this reader, at least, was startled by the claim of enacted incest between Adam Verver and Maggie: "This suggests that Adam, bent on 'perfection at any price,' had decided to perpetuate his line through his daughter—a common prerogative for royalty in various eras, with the marriage arranged as a screen for the incest (p. 92)." By a close reading of the

text, Ford finds many supporting details for this supposition, including the Prince's descent from the infamous Borgia line. Among the four leading characters, incest and adultery are intertwined in complex ways. The knots are eventually severed by Maggie's enforced separation of the two households, a solution that Ford regards as the attainment of maturity: "The daughter both procures her own suitor and orchestrates the final renunciation by the father (p. 99)." To the best of my knowledge, the idea that at the end of the book Maggie is pregnant by her own father is unprecedented in James criticism. To accept or reject Ford's claim would require a rereading of the novel in the light of Ford's work, but at this time I am more inclined to see the Maggie/Adam relationship as one of incestuous feelings rather than incestuous acts.

On the other hand, I find her argument for incestuous activity between Leopold Bloom and his pubescent daughter Milly far more compelling. The textual support for such a reading seems much more recognizable, far less strained than that of enacted incest in *The Golden Bowl*. Indeed, her observations on the circular incestuous patterns in *Finnegan's Wake* are among the most impressive in the book.

"Incest and Death", the last chapter, raises the question whether the authors' "particular relationship with their parents have a direct effect on their compulsion to repeat many times over the triangular conflict in evidence in their works (p. 163)," a question that moves the incest preoccupation backward toward childhood rather than forward toward paternity. This vision of the author as the middle term between childhood incestuous longings and parental desire to hold on to a daughter is worthy of investigation, but is necessarily left unresolved in so brief a book. This chapter also compares the final, often fragmentary, works of Ford's chosen authors to see whether they come close to *The Tempest*'s resolution, in which a father relinquishes his daughter by finding a husband for her, after which the isolated family returns to society. Ford wisely sees this solution as political as well as personal, in that violation of the incest taboo is a prelude to social chaos.

The general reader will find considerable interest in Ford's introductory chapters, in which she provides many fascinating facts about incest in general. She reports of the kinds of heterosexual parent-child incest, that between father and daughter is the most prevalent, probably because of the father's authoritarian position with respect to the daughter. Sex or desire between brother and sister is generally believed to be "the least

reprehensible form of incest (p. 3),” and the one most frequently treated in literature. Ford summarizes current thinking on the origins of the incest taboo, showing that, although very widespread, it is not universal. Brother/sister marriage was practiced not only in the royal families of ancient Egypt, but in parts of Africa, and in some cultures, on special occasions, to foster prosperity, good hunting, or success in war (p. 6). Particularly interesting is the fact that, in contrast to the Sophoclean drama on which Freud based his Oedipal theory, the Homeric version features an Oedipus who was not punished or blinded but became an honored king. There

was an even earlier version in which Oedipus raped his mother immediately following his murder of the father (p. 10).

For the literary scholar, this brief book organizes and clarifies the patterns of father/daughter incest in both life and literature; in addition, it offers some highly original readings of important works of the imagination.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-scholar>

Citation: Gloria C. Erlich. Review of Ford, Jane M., *Patriarchy and Incest from Shakespeare to Joyce*. H-Scholar, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2457>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.