

Virtue of Agency or Agency of Virtue: Political Fantasy in the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*

In the High Middle Ages, the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri* (“Story of King Apollonius of Tyre”) served as an exceptionally popular moral exemplum, warning as it did against the dangers of vice in rulers. The prosimetric tale combines elements of the Greco-Roman novel with varied satirical traditions, and its oldest surviving version was produced between the 9th and 10th centuries CE. Written in Latin, though set in the Greek-speaking East of the Mediterranean, it begins with one King Antiochus’ lustful desire for his daughter. From there, it broadens into a larger ethical debate, centered on the young ruler Apollonius of Tyre, who was a suitor for the young woman’s hand. What, we are asked to wonder, constitutes a virtuous ruler? Notably, the different layers of this discussion are obscured because the structure of the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri* incorporates what Mikhail Bakhtin termed “narrative freedom(s).” These narrative freedoms, or—as some have preferred— “holes in the narrative,” might suggest poor storytelling, since they restrict access to the intervention that the text is trying to make.

In this paper, I propose that the *Historia* should be read through a lens capable of accounting for logical “obstacles.” I posit that the story’s apparent contradictions serve to create scenarios that permit the text to formulate extraordinary situations that problematize and resolve the matter of virtue. The *Historia* suggests a solution for a timeless moral quandary by offering a political fantasy of sorts, one that asks not only what is required of the ruler, but also what is expected of the ruled in determining vice and virtue. This is evident in the figure of Hellenicus, a fellow Tyrian. His first appears to warn King Apollonius that his life is in danger: “*Et accedens ad eum Hellenicus ait: ‘Ave, rex Apolloni!’ At ille salutatus fecit quod potentes facere consueverunt: sprevit hominem plebeium. Tunc senex indignatus iterato salutavit eum et ait: ‘Ave, inquam,*

Apolloni, resaluta et noli despicere paupertatem nostram, honestis moribus decoratam.''' This comment, ludic in tone, suggests a critique of the elite's neglect for anyone who is outside of it. However, Hellenicus insists and demands that Apollonius acknowledge his presence, because, as he says, despite being poor, his is a poverty adorned by an honorable manner/behavior (*moribus decoratam*). This paper argues that the short exchange between these two characters signals a shift in paradigm for thinking about virtue and nobility. Thus, instead of inquiring only what constitutes a virtuous *ruler*, the text demands: what constitutes a virtuous *subject*? The political fantasy proposed also considers the lower classes as subjects concerned with upholding a standard of virtue, and as agents interested in and capable of purging moral turpitude from their communities.

Several episodes support this claim. To adduce one further example, there is a point where Apollonius, after being reunited with his long-lost daughter Tarsia, learns of crimes that had been committed against her. This moves him to demand retribution through legal procedure. On the one hand, it is King Apollonius who stages the trial scene against the *leno* (for trying to sell his daughter as a prostitute) serving as both judge and accuser. On the other hand, the citizens of Mytilene are the ones who condemn and execute the accused for his crimes. Interestingly, this scene involves a moment of "narrative freedom," since we abruptly learn that what moves the citizens to act is Apollonius' threat to raze the city to the ground with his fleet, which already was surrounding the city, and of which no mention had been made previously. Much like destiny/fate in other sources, this freedom with the plot works as a narrative device that allows the text to make its intervention.

In pursuing this argument, I seek to widen the critical debate surrounding the *Historia*, which has concerned itself mainly with whether the original version of the text was written in

Latin during the 2nd century CE (Klebs 1899; Schmeling 1998) or Greek during the second or third centuries, and translated into Latin in the 6th century CE (Maza 1985; Kortekaas 2004, 2007). I intend to move the conversation away from the quest for an original to focus on a literary study of the text itself. Its concern with proper governance and self-governance has, of course, been commonly acknowledged, but the scholarly treatment of these preoccupations has been too reductive. For the most part, the *Historia* is treated as a simplistic story that addresses these topics in a superficial manner, especially as compared to later vernacular versions such as Gower's version in the *Confessio Amantis* or Shakespeare's *Pericles, King of Tyre*. My own intervention aims to explicate how the *Historia* indeed formulates an intricately elaborate position regarding the matter of virtue.