Sibling Relations and the Transformations of European Kinship, 1300–1900

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Christopher H. Johnson
and
David Warren Sabean

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Chapter 7

Brother Trouble

*Murder and Incest in Scottish Ballads*

Ruth Perry

Ballads—those beautiful sung narratives that flourished in the British Isles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—can reveal to the cultural historian something about the social attitudes and psychological cast of the people who sang, listened, and daydreamed to them. But the critic who wants to read them as historical evidence must handle their texts carefully, because they are received literature, not usually written by the people who sang them, and each set of words is just one version among many variants that have evolved over time in the hands of different performers. What a single version that happened to be collected at a particular time and place might reveal about that singer, or that culture, is difficult to say with absolute certainty. On the other hand, ballads were a significant part of the popular culture in early modern England and Scotland. People committed them to memory and sang them over and over in their cottages and communities, bought them by the thousands in broadsides and chapbooks, and wherever they were literate, jotted them down in commonplace books.

This chapter briefly sketches this centrality of ballads in Anglo-Scottish culture in the early modern period and tracks the changes over time in two related Scottish ballads dealing with brother-sister incest. Although we cannot claim as definitive the particular variants examined for this change, a literary analysis of the differences between two ballads col-
lected two centuries apart corroborates some of what we know about changes in the family from other sources. A comparison of these two ballads shows a marked change in the quality of brother-sister relationships in the course of 150 years, resulting in a diminution of the sister’s agency in the later period as well as a starker, more tragic outcome to their story of illicit incest.

Ballads were a crucial cultural phenomenon in eighteenth-century society, a common experience of rich and poor, so embedded in the soundscape as not to be remarked, any more than the air people breathed. Ballads were many people’s first literary experience in eighteenth-century England and Scotland, whether simple broadsides from which they learned to read or the earliest sung stories that moved them to tears or ignited their imaginations. Oliver Goldsmith loved ballads, and several find their way into *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). He wrote in his essay “Happiness” (1759), “The music of Mattei [the Neapolitan singer La Colonna] is dissonance to what I felt when our old dairymaid sung me into tears with ‘Johnny Armstrong’s Last Good Night’, or the cruelty of ‘Barbara Allen’.”

Ballads were more present in eighteenth-century Great Britain than literary critics and historians tend to remember. We are so used to making our way in the world with our eyes that we forget what Walter Ong calls the “lifeworld of the oral/aural past”—an environment, in the city at least, of street cries and rhymes, bells ringing and chants, work songs and lullabies, an environment in which rags were sought and strawberries sold to the accompaniment of words and musical phrases so familiar that the hearer did not have to be able to understand the words to recognize which peddler was abroad exercising his or her lungs. Ballads were sung in taverns and camps, in dimly lit laborer’s cottages as well as in the blazing halls of the wealthy; they were memorized and transmitted orally by ordinary people and professional singers and actors alike. They were printed on broadsides and in chapbooks and garlands and often circulated from print to oral transmission and back again. A ballad might be learned by ear and then written down to save or to remember; or it might be learned from a broadside, remembered, and then passed along orally.

From the earliest dawn of printing, broadsides were the comic books and the poster art of the poor: single sheets decorated with woodcuts on which were printed the texts of ballads with the title of the familiar tune to which those words could be sung. Between the middle of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, more than 3,000 broadsides were officially entered in the Stationer’s Register, although it is likely that five times as many were printed and sold in that
period. The walls of taverns and cottages were pasted up with as many as twenty, thirty, or more of these productions for decoration and quick reference as *aides memoires*. However ballads were composed, however far back they go historically speaking, our earliest printed record of them has often been in the form of a broadside.

Scholars have disputed the origins of English ballads. Biblical themes, romance themes, and carols furnish the materials for the oldest of them. Some scholars believe that ballads were the work of professional minstrels, skilled musicians and poets who entertained in the great baronial halls of the Middle Ages. Others claim that they were the art of the common people, polished by countless renditions and the exacting responses of their unlettered audiences. But all agree that when they began to be collected by the literati in the late eighteenth century, they were no longer a proliferating genre but variously in decline.

Nevertheless, ballads continued to be sung and chanted in homes, fields, and the streets through the nineteenth century and to be bought and sold at fairs and in the cities of England and Scotland. Peddlers carried them the length and breadth of these countries in their packs, along with cloth, thread, needles, thimbles and other household goods. Ballads were the literary art of the common people and, more than novels, the popular culture of all classes. To examine a ballad that was circulating in eighteenth-century Scotland as cultural evidence of attitudes toward sex, self, and society is therefore not an empty exercise. What complicates the use of ballads as cultural evidence is that there is never one single definitive text but many variants, so that one has to refer to themes, episodes, formulas, and storylines rather than precise sequences of words.

The ballad I want to examine here is “Sheath and Knife,” known to Robert Burns (at least a few verses of it) and its melody notated by him in the *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803), which he compiled with James Johnson. It was subsequently collected by William Motherwell from the recitation of Mrs. King of Kilbarchan parish on 9 February 1825 and appears in his *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (1827). Sir Walter Scott also remembered this ballad from his childhood: “I have heard the ‘Broom blooms bonnie’ sung by our poor old nursery-maid as often as I have teeth in my head, but after cudgelling my memory I can make no more than the following stanzas.” Scott puts a ballad in the mouth of his character Effie Deans in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). She sings a stanza that appears to be a composite of several songs, with the two refrain lines: “The broom grows bonny, the broom grows fair” and “And we daurna gang down to the broom nae mair.” She is just coming back from seeing her lover when she sings it, defying her sister’s inquiries. For
her, it marks an end of innocence and the beginning of suffering. Ironically, the illegitimate child that Effie bears from this affair returns at the end of the novel—like the repressed impulse he represents—to kill his father, imbricating sex and blood and murder like the ballad that this refrain alludes to.

Here, then, is the text as Motherwell collected it.

_Sheath and Knife (Child 16)_

It is talked the world all over
The brume blooms bonnie and says it is fair
That the king's dochter gaes wi child to her brither.
And we'll never gang doun to the brume onie mair.

He's taen his sister doun to her father's deer park,
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
Wi his yew-tree bow and arrow fast slung to his back
And we'll never, etc.

'Now when that ye hear me gie a loud cry
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
Shoot frae thy bow an arrow and there let me lye.
And we'll never, etc.

'And when that ye see that I am lying dead
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
Then ye'll put me in a grave, wi a turf at my head
And we'll never, etc.

Now when he heard her gie a loud cry
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
His silver arrow frae his bow he suddenly let fly
Now they'll never, etc.

He has made a grave that was lang and was deep,
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
And he has buried his sister, wi her babe at her feet.
And they'll never, etc.

And when he came to his father's court hall,
And the brume blooms bonnie, etc.
There was music and minstrels and dancing and all
But they'll never, etc.

'O Willie, O Willie, what makes thee in pain,
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
'I have lost a sheath and knife that I'll never see again.'
For we'll never, etc.

'There is ships o your father's sailing on the seas
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
That will bring as good a sheath and knife unto thee.'
And we'll never, etc.

'There is ships o my father's sailing on the sea
The brume blooms bonnie, etc.
But sic a sheath and a knife they can never bring to me.'
Now we'll never, etc.

Like most other Scottish or English ballads, this one has all the hallmarks of oral composition: repetitive textual, metrical, and melodic structures; patterned arrangements of narrative; recurrent formulaic phrases and epithets (a grave that is "long and deep"; a "yew-tree bow"); conceptual parallelism and incremental repetition (in one verse she tells him to put her in a grave; in the next verse he digs a grave and buries her in it); and formalized refrain lines: "the brume blooms bonnie" and "we'll never go down to the brume onie mair." The repetitions not only serve the memory of the singer, but they permit the listener to think about what has gone before, to let his/her attention lapse for a moment, to sink into fantasy, to paint some pictures in the mind. They pace the story.

The action usually unfolds in event and speech—sometimes dialogue—without narrative comment and begins somewhere in the middle. Historical time is irrelevant; what happens in ballads is timeless or out of time. "It is talked the world all over." Ballad tone is neither sentimental nor moralizing but stark and ritualistic; there is little or no subjective consciousness behind it. This creates the distance necessary for the powerful and tragic events of ballads to be safely shared by narrator and audience. The rhythm of the episodic structure of ballads has been described as "leaping and lingering"—that is, as leaping instantaneously, with no attempt at realism, over great swaths of time and space and then lingering in a single moment, letting its complications sink in. In this episodic structure, focusing on vivid scenes that appear and disappear according to some familiar logic of the mind, ballads are like nothing so much as dreams.

In "Sheath and Knife" we move effortlessly from one scene to another—the deer park, the grave, walking in the broom, the court hall filled with merriment; even the enigmatic but suggestive reference to the sheath and knife springs forth as from intuition rather than reasoned thought. The action feels symbolic rather than literal, represented im-
personally from the outside rather than narrated subjectively; the starkness of the narration together with the horror of the situation is what moves us. We do not know how the sister feels, but she seems to be cooperating in her own death when she tells her brother to shoot an arrow from his bow when he hears her give a loud cry, which is apparently the cry of childbirth.

On the other hand, the brother has staged this tragedy. "He has taen his sister down to her father's deer park. ... With his yew-tree bow and arrow slung fast to his back." Yew trees are associated with death and sorrow in the folklore of Great Britain, and with graveyards, where they are often planted. Moreover, he has brought with him a silver arrow, a special, precious arrow, the instrument of execution for a woman who is a king's daughter—and his only sister. It may also be that the silver acts as a charm against evil or retribution. When he returns to his father's court hall, he finds himself in the midst of festivities. The music and dancing are evocative of sexuality and bodily pleasure—music always signifies passion and the lapsing of reason. The pleasure around him sets off his sadness in contrastive relief; he seems all the more alone because everyone around him is gay. And when he invokes the phallic imagery of a knife inside a sheath, we know that he is speaking of his sister both as his lost sexual partner, unique among women and specially suited to him—nowhere in the whole world where those ships of his father's are sailing will there be another like her—and also as the carrier, the sheath, of his child.

This brother and sister are two parts of one whole; they could not be closer. Their bodies belong together as intimately as a fetal child within its mother's womb. They are made for each other in the way they are presented in the ballad, siblings with the same father, interchangeable and identical so far as the description goes, except that one is male and one is female. Their sexual interests are mirrored in each other; they begin and end in one another. Male and female, they are not opposed or different but positioned as two interlocking parts. The problem is that as a woman, the sister's body shows the evidence of their congress, and they both seem to understand with an unspoken accord that she must be made to disappear. The reasons are not specified, but one knows that the world, which is already gossiping about them, will not tolerate this incestuous, too-close union any more. The offspring of their illicit union cannot be allowed to see the light of day.

There is no reference to consequences—no sense of what will happen when the "king's dochter" is found missing—only the brother's deep sense of bereavement after the killing, as if half of him has been shot away, removed, irretrievably lost, and he will never be the same. The
brother expresses no guilt—which is, after all, an emotion about the self. The pain of loss he feels and expresses with this haunting metaphor is all the more terrible and unrelieved for his lack of guilt. The chorus lines, too, underscore the sense of ritual and irretrievable loss. An eighteenth-century audience in a social situation, having heard this song many times, might have joined in on these lines, participating in the story and giving vent to their feelings. In a village this song might have been the property of a local singer, and when people gathered to work or to talk in the evening, the person who knew "Sheath and Knife" might have been prodded to sing it and these chorus lines caroled back by those listening.

"The broom blooms bonnie and they say it is fair" obviously puns on the word "fair"—the blooming broom is so beautiful and life is so unjust and so tragic. The broom, a yellow-flowering shrub that grows in the margins of cultivation, like the "greenwood," marks a liminal place outside the established limits of society, outside the law, in the bushes, so to speak, where illicit sex always takes place. In Scots ballads, people always lie down in the broom, away from prying eyes. And not only is broom beautiful, bonnie, but its blooming is of short duration. The poignant "And we'll never go down to the broom any more" signals the end of innocence for us as well as for the principals in the story—and also the end of sexual pleasure and of companionable strolling for the brother and sister.

This is how the ballad was known at the end of the eighteenth century, and how Francis James Child copied it from Motherwell and Scott, the great collectors of the Romantic period. More recently, evidence has surfaced of a much earlier version of this ballad, which poses some puzzling questions. This much earlier version of "Sheath and Knife" was written down in the commonplace book of Robert Edwards, along with other poems and musical examples. Robert Edwards, born in 1617, was a minister of Murroes parish near Dundee, in eastern Scotland. His commonplace book dates to about 1630. He titles this entry "The Sheath and the Knife or Leesome Brand"—Leesome Brand being someone's name—and his text is a variant that includes some of the features of Child 15, "Leesome Brand," which is an entirely separate ballad from "Sheath and Knife" in the Child canon. In "Leesome Brand," in the version collected by Peter Buchan and published in his Ancient Ballads and Songs of North of Scotland—the version Child included in his collection—the speaker's son, a ten-year-old boy named Leesome Brand, comes to an "unco" land and falls in love with a gay lady at court who is roughly his age.

This lad ye was scarce eleven years old,
When on her love she was right bauld;
She was scarce up to my right knee,
When oft in bed wi men I'm tauld.

When "nine months have come and gone" this lady turns "pale and wane" and says to Leesome Brand, "In this place I can nae mair stay." She sends him to her father's stable for horses for them both and to her mother's coffers for her tocher or dowry. It is she who has parents at court—not he—and she who provides the means for their escape. He follows her instructions and they mount and ride; but after a while his "true love then began to fail" and she tells him that she feels as if her back is breaking. She wishes she had a midwife, but he tells her that they are far from any midwife. He offers to do for her what a man can do, but she rejects his offers of assistance and sends him away to hunt while she gives birth. She dies in childbirth and so does her baby. After he finds her lying there dead, he returns to his own home to his mother (his father in other versions), who questions him about his sadness. He replies that he has lost a golden knife and a gilded sheath. When his mother asks if there are not goldsmiths "here in Fife" who can make another knife and another sheath, he replies "I've lost my ladye I lov'd sae dear, / Likeways the son she did me bear."

According to Child, versions of "Leesome Brand" have been found throughout Scandinavia (there are versions in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, and Icelandic), and there are also variants in German, French, and Dutch. The Danish ballad "Redselille og Medelvold" (Rose-lilly and Ole) is a variant of "Leesome Brand" about unlucky lovers who are not siblings. It begins when a mother discovers that her daughter's breasts run with milk and extorts from the girl a confession that she has been beguiled by a man. The mother then threatens various punishments for both of them. The girl tells her lover, and they take two horses and ride away together. After they have ridden awhile, the girl finds that her time has come, and her lover lifts her off her horse and spreads his cloak for her. He offers to bandage his eyes and render such service as a man may, but she does not want him to know the pangs a woman suffers and sends him off to hunt. He comes back to find her dead with two sons dead too; he buries them all and then falls on his sword.

What is interesting about the ballad "Sheath and Knife or Leesome Brand" found in Robert Edwards's 1630 commonplace book—a variant not known by Child when he compiled his groundbreaking *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*—is that it combines elements from both "Sheath and Knife" and "Leesome Brand" to create an incest ballad with very different affective qualities than either of the two contributory ballads as they were collected separately two centuries later. What follows
is a transcription of the variant in Robert Edwards' 1630 manuscript book.

_The Sheath and the Knife or Leesome Brand_

Ther was a sister and a brother
the sun gois to under the wood
who most intirelie lovid othir
god give we had nevir beine sib.

Sayes "sister I wald lay the by
the sun gois to etc.
and thou wald not my deuds cry"
god give we, etc.

"Alas brother wald ye doe so
the sun gois to etc.
I rathir nou death undergo
alas give we had newer bein sib

the mornne is my fathirs feast
the sun etc.
Weil in my clothis I most be least
god give we had newir bein sib.

When they conwining al at ons
to royal feasting in the hal
it me behovith them amongs
ge dekit in a goun of pa;

and when I lout me to my to
the sun etc.
my lesse wil brak and go in tuo
god give etc.
and when I lout me to my kni
the sun etc.
my lesse will brak and go in thrice
god give etc.

and it wil go from on to uthir
the sun etc.
until it come to Jhon my brother
lord give etc.

and Jhon my brothir is most il
the sun etc.
he wil hus both burne on a hil.
lord god we had etc.

I sal go to my fathirs stable
the sun etc.
and tak a stid both wight and able
lord give etc.

and we sal ryd til tym we spend
the sun etc.
until we see our trystis end." lord give etc.

She had not riden a myle but ane
the sun etc.
when she gan quaking gran and gran
lord give etc.

"Is ther water in your shoes
or comes the wind into your glowes

Or think ye me to simple a knight
to ryd or go with you alnyght?"

"and when ye heire me loud loud cry
ye bend your bow and ran theary

and when ye se my ly ful stil
so souing your horne come me til.

I wald give al my fathirs land
for on woman at my command."

when that he cam soon hir besead
[the bab was borne the lady dead.]

Ther he has tain his yong yong sonne
and borne to a milk womane.

he drew his suord him wonding sore
from this tyme to wrid newir more.

"mother" quoth he "can so mak my bed
can se mak it long and nothing bread.

mother alas I tint my knife
I lovid better then my lyffe.
mother I have als tint my shead
I lovid better then them bead.

ther is no cutlar in this land
can make a kniffe so at my command."

he turned his faced to the wa
gave up the goast and gaid his way.

the on was layid in Marie Kirk
othir in Marie Queire
out throch the on there greu a birke
and out throch hir a breir.
ye may knou surlie by their signes
They wer tuo lowirs neire.13

The most stunning difference between the Robert Edwards's 1630 "Sheath and Knife" and the one sung by Mrs. King of Kilbarchan in 1825 is that the infant lives and is given up to "a milk woman"—a wet nurse. Thus the incestuous relationship is not simply damned in this variant: something living and hopeful comes from it. Furthermore, the refrain lines of the Edwards variant, while very different from the refrain lines Mrs. King sang in 1825, are also meaningful. The repeated second line, "The sun gois to under the wood," evokes the hour of sunset, the hour that daylight ceases and darkness covers all, like the hour before death. This refrain line is very old; it appears in a four-line anonymous, medieval lyric of the thirteenth century:14 "Nou goth sonne under wode"—the "sonne" being Christ, the son of God, as well as the sun, and "wode" being the wood of the cross as well as a stand of trees. It evokes both a simple sunset and the crucifixion, the loss of light from the world. The fourth line of every stanza of Roberts Edwards's "Sheath and Knife," also repeated throughout the ballad, is "God give we had nevir bein sib." "God give" means "God grant," an invocation unusual in ballads, which rarely have Christian sentiments. "Sib" is a capacious word in Middle English, denoting many different kinds of blood kinship as well as non-biological relatedness. It connotes very special closeness and intimacy. Best friends might be "sib." But siblings are the most "sib" of all because of their special relationship in the English kinship system—a point to which I will return.

Another major difference between the Motherwell variant collected from Mrs. King in 1825 and this older version of the ballad found in Robert Edwards's commonplace book is that the brother-sister relationship represented is much more egalitarian in the older 1630 version.
“Ther was a sister and a brother / the sun gois to under the wood / who most intirelie lovid [each] other / god give we had nevir beine sib.” Rather than “He takes his sister down to her father’s deer park,” as in the eighteenth-century variant, in the 1630 version we are told that “they most intirely” loved one another. He then says “sister I wald lay the by [sister I would lay thee by] ... and thou wold not my deuds cry”—that is, sister I would hide thee so that you, i.e. your pregnancy, would not proclaim my deeds to the world. And she replies: “Alas, brother wald ye doe so / The sun gois to under the wood / I rathir nou death undergoe / God give we had nevir been sib.” Then she says it is her father’s feast day and she must be laced in her clothes and join the guests. When she bends over, her laces will break, presumably because of her pregnant girth. She says that she will go to her father’s stable and get a horse for them to ride away on.

They have not ridden but a mile when her waters break and he asks if he is too simple, or lowly, to ride or stay with her all night. She tells him that when he hears her loud cry to bend his bow and run to the sound; and when he sees her lying still to sound his horn—or, rather, to make his horn sigh—and to come to her. She says “I wald give al my fathirs land / for on woman at my command,” a poignant reminder that their sexual relations have dissiwered her from her natural gender group. One assumes that he does as she tells him, but

When that he cam soon hir besead,  
The sun gois to under the wood  
The bab was borne the lady dead  
God give we had nevir been sib.

So in this earlier version he does not kill her—does not use his yew-tree bow to shoot a silver arrow at her—but is perhaps hunting, as in “Lee some Brand,” when she delivers her baby and dies in the attempt. Then comes the verse about the living offspring:

Ther he has tain his yong yong sonne  
The sun gois to under the wood  
And borne to a milk womane  
God give we had nevir beine sib.

After that he draws his sword and wounds himself sore and asks his mother to make his bed for him.

Mother alas I tint my knife  
The sun gois to under the wood
I lovid better than my lyffe.
God give we had nevir beine sib.

Mothir I have als tint my shead
The sun goes to under the wood
I lovid better than them bead.
God give we had nevir beine sib.

Then he turns his face to the wall and gives up the ghost. The ballad ends with the familiar formula about true lovers: one was laid in the church and the other in the choir, and out of one grows a birch and out of the other a briar.

Ye may knou surlie by thir signes
The sun goes to under the wood
They wer tuo lowirs neire.
God give we have nevir beine sib.

This is an interesting early variant of the “Sheath and Knife” ballad circulating at the end of the eighteenth century. Although the biological weight of the liaison falls on the woman, and although the brother speaks of wanting to keep “his” deeds from being known in the world, we are told in the first verse that these two love each other entirely and equally. Rather than the brother simply taking his sister to the woods and killing and burying her, these two try to run away together. Moreover, when she is gone he wounds himself with his sword and dies, rather than just standing around in his father’s hall with music and minstrels, muttering enigmatically about losing a sheath and knife. Most significantly, in this version their child is alive with a wet nurse at the end, not dead and buried with the mother. It is an altogether more positive vision of their connection both in terms of their love, their death, and the lament in which they wish that they were not sib, which means more than wishing they were not siblings. It also means “I wish we were not related” or “I wish we were not so close or intimate.”

This earlier version has a more fluid, continuous narrative line rather than being made up of disjoint, symbolic episodes. From the moment the brother worries about the world finding out about them until the birch and the briar grow from their graves, the sequence is clear. In the eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century variant of “Sheath and Knife” the story ends elliptically with the brother’s sadness in the midst of court revelry, and the sexual connection of the brother and sister is foregrounded with the enigmatic phrase “sheath and knife,” repeated three times. This figure for a set of genitals that go together—but whose
perfect fit is irreplaceably lost—ends the ballad; this haunting image still resonates when the song is over. The 1630 variant, by contrast, finishes with the familiar trope of the birch and briar, telling us that these familiar symbolic plants marked two “lovers neire.” That appears to be more significant than the brother’s lament that “no cutlar in this land/can make a kniffe so at my command,” a complaint that also confounds the sexual figuration, since it is his sister who has died and their child who is living. In the 1630 variant, the incestuous sex matters less than their tragic relationship; they are star-crossed lovers who happen to be brother and sister rather than a brother and his sister, the king’s daughter, who has been having illicit sex with her brother and must pay with her life for it.

In the eighteenth-century version collected in the nineteenth century, the woman is much more passive and she alone must die—the weight of the sexual transgression falls on her. The sister in the seventeenth-century version has a great deal more agency: she is the one who goes to the stable and gets a horse for them to ride; she tells her lover what to do; and when she dies with tragic inevitability her brother no longer wants to live but takes his own life. The drama is told entirely from the outside: what happens, what he says, what she says. That impassivity still marks the later eighteenth-century version, but all sense of the particularity of the woman has disappeared, for she says almost nothing. She is there as the cause of the brother’s distress, but one knows nothing about her. Insofar as anyone is affected by this drama, the only self that matters in the late eighteenth-century version is the brother’s self.

What are we to make of the change in the ballad “Sheath and Knife” over the course of two centuries? Does it mean anything at all? Can we interpret the changes in it as signifying changes in society? These are only variants, after all, and there is no way of knowing if there were others circulating that make this way of reading them moot. Extrapolating from a single variant found in a 1630 commonplace book must be tentative and provisional. Nevertheless, the cultural critic cannot resist asking whether these differences signify changes in attitudes toward incest, or sex, or brother-sister relations. In interpreting texts from an oral tradition, it is worth remembering Walter Ong’s dictum that “oral traditions reflect a society’s present cultural values” rather than preserving its past. “The integrity of the past [is] subordinate to the integrity of the present” in any oral tradition, he writes. In other words, oral transmission tends to update texts; what is no longer relevant drops out of an oral repertoire. So the change in this ballad, the breaking apart of “Sheath and Knife” and “Leesome Brand” into two separate ballads in the course of a century and a half, probably does tell us something about a shift in
cultural attitudes between 1630, when Robert Edwards compiled his manuscript book, and the later eighteenth century, when Walter Scott's nursemaid sang “Sheath and Knife” to him and more or less when Mrs. King learned it, while Agnes Lyle learned “Leesome Brand” as a separate ballad.\(^{16}\)

Quite a few other ballads about incest were collected in eighteenth-century Scotland, and all of them—and there are six in Child's canon—are about brother-sister incest.\(^{17}\) Not one of them is about intergenerational incest between fathers and daughters or uncles and nieces. Nor is that because brother-sister incest was the only kind of incest that occurred in the British Isles. Court records—in England at least—provide plenty of evidence of the garden-variety intergenerational father-daughter and uncle-niece incest, although none of it seems to have been memorialized in ballads. There were, in addition, several notorious cases of sibling incest in eighteenth-century England where the principals flouted convention and lived together, generating plenty of horrified gossip.\(^{18}\)

It is unlikely that the exclusive reference to brother-sister incest in Scottish and Irish ballads reflects the reality of sexual practice in the period. It may reflect, instead, the lines of transmission for this form of literature, and the fact that women tended to be the carriers of the old ballads; women may have found it too upsetting to sing about intergenerational incest.\(^{19}\) Even ballads about the less threatening and more egalitarian form of brother-sister incest were undoubtedly painful to remember and to sing. Indeed, when one of these incest ballads was collected from Irish traveling people in the twentieth century, the collector noted that it was considered an “unlucky” or “forbidden” song. And Sara Cleveland, an American singer who learned one of these brother-sister incest ballads from her mother, reported that her mother rarely sang it and then only when alone or working around the house.\(^{20}\) So it is possible that the exclusive focus on brother-sister incest in orally transmitted ballads is an artifact of the gendered patterns of transmission of these ballads.

But it is also possible that these incest ballads all focus on a similar form of sibling incest because they all come out of one cultural moment, traceable to roughly the same period and location—northern Scotland in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. One can only speculate about what they might reveal about kinship, siblings, self, or society at this particular historical juncture.

In four of seven brother-sister incest ballads (listed in n. 17), the incest is committed knowingly,\(^{21}\) and in “Sheath and Knife,” “Lizzie Wan,” and “The Rich Man’s Daughter,” the brother kills the sister when he discovers that she is pregnant. In “Brown Robyn’s Confession,” the err-
ing brother goes to sea and then suddenly neither the sun nor moon nor stars are visible. The other sailors are sure that someone on board among them is evil and decide to cast lots to determine who is bringing them bad luck and needs to be cast out. When the lot falls to Brown Robyn, he confesses to incest with his mother and his sister, and he bids his fellow sailors bind him to a plank and throw him overboard, which they do.

In the other three incest ballads, "The Bonny Hind," "The King's Dochter Jean," and "Babylon," the brother—who, having been abroad for many years, does not recognize his sister and is himself unrecognizable—assaults and rapes her, not knowing that he is her brother. When he learns what he has done, he kills himself or she kills herself. It has also been suggested that incest is at the root of the murderous rage between brothers in "Two Brothers" and in "Edward." The incestuous desire of one brother for their sister—a little bush that might have been a tree—and the protective resistance of the other brother are what ignites the struggle between them that leads to the fratricidal murder of one brother by the other.

Nor is outright incest the only form of "brother trouble" associated with sexual conduct in ballads collected in the eighteenth-century British Isles. Brothers in ballads often seek to control their sisters' sexuality by determining who they can and cannot marry. And when a sister is not obedient to her brother's wishes, he kills her or kills her lover. In "Bonnie Susie Cleveland," the brother lights the fire under the pyre to which his sister is tied. In "Andrew Lammie," the girl's mother and father beat her full sore, but it is her brother who breaks her back for loving Andrew Lammie. In the "Cruel Brother," the brother kills his sister with a little penknife because although her lover has asked permission of all her kin to marry her—her mother, her father, and her sisters—he neglects to ask her brother's permission. In "Dowie Dens of Yarrow" and in "Clerk Saunders," the brothers kill their sister's lover because he comes from the wrong class.

Sibling solidarity is a hallmark of the British kinship system, in which lineage is traced through both the mother and the father. Siblings are the closest of all kin in a bilateral, cognatic system because only siblings have identical consanguineal kin. Through their common mother, they are uniquely related to a set of maternal relatives in addition to their paternal relatives. Furthermore, siblings are the only link between these sets of maternal and paternal relatives because although marriage binds their parents together, it creates no recognized connection between the blood relations of the two spouses: the mother's sisters are not related to the father's brothers, but both are related to the children of the union.
Siblings thus create a significant link in the chain of kinship. One linguistic trace of the significance of siblings in the British kinship system is the fact that the terms for nieces and nephews—the children of one's siblings—often meant “grandchild” as well. In other words, the children of one's siblings were like one's own grandchildren, as significant to oneself intergenerationally as the direct line through one's own progeny.24 Socially and psychologically, brothers and sisters were often each others’ earliest sustained cross-sex relationship and childhood companions as well.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the primacy of this brothersister relation changed in relation to a number of factors—among them the development of capitalism, the drive to accumulate property, and changes in inheritance law.25 Less and less were sisters considered equal members with their brothers of their clans or kin groups, less and less were they thought to be female versions of their brothers, but increasingly “chickens raised for other men’s tables” as James Harlowlso eloquently puts it in Richardson’s novel, Clarissa (1748). The social expectation that sisters would be protected and cherished by their brothers, and the expectation that brothers would be responsible for their sisters, diminished in the course of the eighteenth century.26 These ballads about brothers who kill their sisters, who rape them violently, or who kill their lovers—that is, who appropriate, direct, or terminate their sexuality—all register the sense that brothers own their sisters. Their cruelty is magnified by the betrayal of the closeness expected between a brother and a sister, a betrayal of the protection a brother once owed his sister, and a betrayal of the sibling love that once distinguished the British kinship system.27 By the eighteenth century brothers are represented in ballads as dangerous to the interests of their sisters, whether because of biology (female pregnancy revealing sexual relations in “Sheath and Knife”), character (the aggressive stance of the brother in “Babylon” and “The Bonny Hind”), or evolving male privilege (“The Cruel Brother”)—or some combination of all three.

When “Sheath and Knife or Leesome Brand” was divided into two separate ballads—one in which two lovers come to grief and one in which a brother kills his sister because she carries his child and he wants to hide the evidence of his incest—it signals a new economy in the relations between brothers and sisters. Brothers seem to have significantly more power than their sisters; they keep a tight rein on their sister’s sexual favors—whether for themselves or by choosing their sisters’ lovers. Rather than being tragic for both lovers, incest has become dangerous for a woman in this later world because her pregnancy reveals it. The story has changed from being a story of star-crossed lovers to a story
in which the woman must be sacrificed. Incestuous sex has become so shameful that it must be hidden at all costs. The ballad focuses on the brother’s acts and feelings and we hardly hear from the sister in the later variant “Sheath and Knife”; in the earlier version, however, she has a lot more to say.

The Romantic period, the early nineteenth century, is of course the period associated with brother-sister incest, conceived as refusing to accommodate to a genuinely alternative other, instead preferring an insistent narcissistic mirroring in a loved second self. The sheath-and-knife trope for brother-sister incest in ballads collected at the turn of the century might also be seen as a figure for the intense, solipsistic enthusiasm for the self in its context—an emphasis that privileges the alter ego of the sibling rather than seeking farther afield for a love object.

Juliet Mitchell, analyzing brother-sister incest in our own society, notes that the mother is usually absent in the clinical configuration of sibling incest. 28 Writing psychoanalytically about sibling incest, she describes the “narcissistic love-of-the-other-as-the-self,” which can explode into murderous hatred because of the threat of self-annihilation if there is no mother present to supervise her children and to keep familial relationships in order. According to Mitchell, brothers and sisters drawn to one another both love one another as versions of themselves, alter egos, and at the same time hate each other for supplanting each other in their families. When the mother is absent, there is no one to reinforce the differentiation between mothers and sisters, making sure that mothers and sisters do not become confused. 29 The confusion that results when incest issues in pregnancy is that a man becomes a father/brother and a woman becomes a mother/sister.

According to Mitchell, love and hate, sexual attraction and murderous rivalry coexist in modern-day sibling relationships. “Siblings provide a way of learning to love and hate the same person,” she says, 30 this is one of the truths that still resonates for contemporary audiences of this ballad. The later version of “Sheath and Knife” is too abbreviated to identify any elements of hate or rivalry in it—but there is also no mention of the true love that so dominates the 1630 version of the ballad. However, the mother is certainly missing (as she is from much of the fiction of the end of the eighteenth century). 31 Although there is a father with a court and ships sailing on the seas, there is no mother in the ballad. The brother-sister mirroring is figured in the repeated image of the sheath and knife as well as the dangerousness of their closeness. Sex and death are inextricably entwined in this ballad in the killing of the sister the moment after she gives birth, and in the burial of the infant with the sister/mother.
I have been arguing that "Sheath and Knife," a ballad that Sir Walter Scott heard as a young boy and that William Motherwell collected from an "old singing woman" in 1825, carries cultural attitudes of the eighteenth century toward the self, sexuality, and the family—and that these cultural attitudes come into sharper focus when compared with a variant of the ballad in circulation two centuries before. The way the brother controls his sister's fate, her relative silence, his isolation and self-regarding misery, the way the death punishment is dealt to the woman of the couple who engage in transgressive sex, the stillborn infant, the absence of the mother in this tragedy—all of these elements bespeak a configuration of kinship and sexuality familiar to us from other sources. The ballad illustrates women's sexual victimization, a focus on male subjectivity—even a kind of pre-Romantic narcissism—the absence of adult women, and bodies that are not polymorphously pleasurable but that are formally male and female, designed functionally to fit together like a sheath and knife, by a kind of divine workmanship. The loss of one half renders the other incomplete. But the perfect fit—and indeed sexuality itself—is unholy in the ballad, because the incest tinges it with horror and it is not romanticized with love. That these meanings were available in ballads sung by ordinary people in the period suggests that they were not confined to the novel-reading literate classes but permeated all levels of society. The ballad form itself is a testimony to the human capacity to wrest beauty out of tragedy—and to create art with nothing more than the human voice and mind.

Notes

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2. Published 13 October 1759 in The Bee.


5. Albert B. Friedman supposes that many of them might have been in existence as early as 1100, but points out that Child's oldest example ["Judas," Child #23] dates
from the late thirteenth century and that there are only half a dozen ballads in Child's collection from manuscripts older than 1500. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival* (Chicago, 1961), 15.


7. Francis James Child's monumental collection of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* was published in ten volumes between 1882 and 1898. He included 305 ballads in his collection, and they are still referred to by the numbers he gave them.

8. These elements of oral composition are listed by (among others) David Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad* (Burlington, VT, 2002), 12.


10. A further association between broom and sexuality is suggested by the folk marriage custom of jumping over a broom—an implement originally made of broom, whence its name.

11. A version of "Lesseme Brand" was collected by Motherwell from Agnes Lyle of Kilbarchan parish at about the same time as he collected "Sheath and Knife" from Mrs. King of the same parish. It is very similar to "Sheath and Knife," except that the lovers are not said to be brother and sister and they have with them a child—his "auld son"—whom he carries in his "coat lap." This child, too, is killed when he shoots his arrow.


13. Helena Mennie Shire, "Introduction," in *Poems from Panmure House*, ed. Helena Mennie Shire (Cambridge, 1960), 13–19. Shire observes on 22–23 that at the same time this ballad was circulating, Ford's play "Tis Pity She's a Whore" was on the stage. The similarities of incident and atmosphere between that play and the ballad lead her to conjecture that "Ford may have had a version of this ballad running in his head" when he wrote the play.

14. See The *Norton Anthology of Literature*. Thanks to Alan Levitan for this reference.


16. Motherwell collected these ballads in 1825, but by then both these women were elderly—he called them "old singing women"—and had learned their repertoires many years earlier. All of these ballads were collected in Scotland. See Mary Ellen Brown, *William Motherwell's Cultural Politics* (Lexington, KY, 2001), Appendix 1, 161–170.

17. "Babylon" (Child 14), "Sheath and Knife" (Child 16), "The Bonny Hind" (Child 50), "Lizzie Wan" (Child 51), "The King's Dochter Lady Jean" (Child 52), "Brown Robyn's Confession" (Child 57). There is another brother-sister incest ballad from Ireland sung by Peta Webb called "The Rich Man's Daughter" that is not a Child ballad but follows this pattern. The brother kills the sister when she is about to give birth to their child.

18. Frances Burney's oldest brother, James, eloped with his half sister Sarah Harriet in 1798 and lived with her for the next five years. For this and other known cases of incest in eighteenth-century England, see my *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748–1818* (Cambridge, 2004), 381–387, here 383–384. Horace Walpole reported that William Pitt's sister Elizabeth, who had numerous and public liaisons, including one with Lord Talbot, was launched on her scandalous career by an affair with her brother Tom. The *Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, compiled by Edwin M. Martz with Ruth K. McClure and William T. LaMay (New Haven, 1983), vol. 20, 411. Lord Bolingbroke is also supposed to
have an incestuous affair with his sister, Miss Beauclerk, in 1788 or 1789. See William F. LeFanu, ed., *Betsy Sheridan's Journal* (New Brunswick, 1960), 176–177. I am indebted to Betty Rizzo for these last two references.


20. Sara Cleveland sings "Queen Jane" on her Folk Legacy CD, the only published American version of "The King's Dochter Lady Jean." This feeling about the song is reported by Kenneth Goldstein in his notes to the CD and reported by David Atkinson in *The English Traditional Ballad*, 113.

21. "Sheath and Knife" (Child 16), "Lizzie Wan" (Child 51), and "Brown Robyn's Confession" (Child 57). For a more elaborate treatment of this theme in folksong, see P. G. Brewster, "The Incest Theme in Folksong," *FF Communication* 80, no. 212 (1972): 3–36.

22. Including the version sung by Sara Cleveland, "Queen Jane."  
23. It has also been suggested that if her brother kills her before she consummates her marriage and conceives an heir, he will not have to share their inheritance with her.


25. I do not have space in this essay to expand on this shorthand. But for a fuller treatment of the reasons for this changed relationship see my *Novel Relations*, especially chapter 4, "Brotherly Love in Life and Literature."


27. See, for example, the examples of supportive seventeenth-century brother-sister relationships given in *Novel Relations*, 158–159.


29. Ibid., 29.

30. Ibid., 225. In a successful resolution of this tension, continues Mitchell, a person learns to transform narcissistic love into "object-love and murderousness into objective hatred for what is wrong or evil in the self and other."

31. The absence of the mother in the later version of this ballad is another sign of its eighteenth-century provenance, as those familiar with the literature of this period will recognize. Mothers begin to disappear from English novels by the second half of the eighteenth century. See my *Novel Relations*, especially chapter 8, "The Importance of Aunts."

32. Again, see my *Novel Relations*. But there is plenty of other work on gender relations and sexuality in the eighteenth-century British Isles that could account for these particulars.