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Incest in Popular Ballads [book chapter]*

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A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF THE HUMAN BODY

IN THE AGE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

Edited by Carole Reeves



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CHAPTER TEN

Self and Society

Attitudes toward Incest in Popular Ballads

RUTH PERRY

Ballads are a great unsung body of texts that hover on the margins of eighteenth-century literary history without quite being acknowledged by modern scholars of the period. But 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. Joseph Addison famously wrote about ballads in three *Spectator* papers of 1711,¹ praising the beauties of “The Ballad of Chevy Chase” and “Babes in the Wood.” He said: “an ordinary Song or Ballad that is the Delight of the common People, cannot fail to please all such Readers as are not unqualified for the Entertainment by their Affectation or Ignorance.”² He cautioned his audience not to let the ballad’s simplicity of style prejudice them against its “true poetical Spirit,” or its passionate and beautiful sentiments. He cites the example of the “late Lord Dorset,” a man with “the greatest Wit tempered with the greatest Candour . . . one of the finest Criticks as well as the best Poets of his Age” who “had a numerous Collection of old *English* Ballads, and took a particular Pleasure in Reading of them.”³

Ballads were many people’s first literary experience in eighteenth-century England and Scotland, whether these were 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 Mattei⁴ is dissonance to what I felt when our old

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.¹⁰

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."¹¹ The repetitions serve not only the memory of the singer but permit the listener to think about what has gone before, to let his or 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 necessary distance so that the powerful and tragic events of ballads can 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 swathes 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 impersonally 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 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. 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—which 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 sheath and knife, 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) but 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

18. 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. See Mary Ellen Brown, *William Motherwell's Cultural Politics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 161–70.
19. “Babylon” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 14), “Sheath and Knife” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 16), “The Bonny Hind” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 50), “Lizie Wan” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 51), “The King’s Dochter Lady Jean” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 52), “Brown Robyn’s Confession” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 57). There is another brother–sister incest ballad from Ireland sung by Peta Webb called “The Rich Man’s Daughter,” which is not a Child ballad but follows this pattern. The brother kills the sister when she is about to give birth to their child.
20. Sara Cleveland sings “Queen Jane” on her CD *Folk Legacy*, 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 Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad*, 113.
21. “Sheath and Knife” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 16), “Lizie Wan” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 51), and “Brown Robyn’s Confession” (Child, *Ballads*, no. 57). For a more elaborate treatment of this theme in folksong see G. Brewster, “The Incest Theme in Folksong,” *FF Communication* 80 (1972): 3–36.
22. Including the version sung by Sara Cleveland, “Queen Jane.”
23. Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 121.
24. Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003).
25. *Ibid.*, 29.
26. 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.” Mitchell, *Siblings*, 225.
27. 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 Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748–1818* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially chapter 8, “The Importance of Aunts.”
28. Again, see Perry, *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.

59. James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*, ed. David Vincent (London: Europa, [1855] 1978), 73.

Chapter 10

1. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, May 21, 1711, 1–2; Addison, *The Spectator*, June 7, 1711, 1–2.
2. Addison, *The Spectator*, May 21, 1711, 1–2.
3. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, May 25, 1711, 1–2.
4. Maria Colomba Mattei Trombetta di Roma, called le Romaninia or La Colonna or Signora Mattei. Her career began in Naples in 1743, and she sang in numerous Italian cities before reaching London in 1754–1755. She returned to London and finished her career there, in 1758–1762. See Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Longhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, vol. 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973–1993), 137–38. Thanks to Lowell Lindgren for this reference.
5. Oliver Goldsmith, “Happiness,” *The Bee*, October 13, 1759, 1.
6. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), 43.
7. Claude M. Simpson, *The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), xi.
8. Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1 (Northfield, MN: Loomis House Press, [1882–1898] 2001), 259.
9. Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, with an introductory essay and notes by Andrew Lang, vol. 1 (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1893), chapter 9.
10. Child, *Ballads*, no. 16.
11. These elements of oral composition are listed by (among others) David Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad* (Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 12.
12. *Ibid.*, 148.
13. 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.
14. A version of “Leesome 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.
15. Helena Mennie Shire, ed., *Poems from Panmure House* (Cambridge, UK: Ninth of May Press, 1960), 13–19. Shire observes that at the 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: *Ibid.*, 22–23.
16. Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). Thanks to Alan Levitan for this reference.
17. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 48.



FIGURE 10.3: A brother and sister play with a baby. The relationship between the trio is left ambiguous. Engraving by R. C. Bell after W. Mulready. Iconographic Collections, Wellcome Library, London.

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 that they permeated all levels of society. The ballad form itself also testifies to the wellsprings of human creativity that wrest beauty out of tragedy and that can make art with just the human voice and mind.

Juliet Mitchell, analyzing brother–sister incest in our own society, notes that the mother is usually absent in the clinical configuration of sibling incest.²⁴ Writing psychoanalytically about sibling incest, she describes the “narcissistic love-of-the-other-as-the-self” that 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, as 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, no one to make sure that mothers and sisters do not become confused.²⁵ The confusion that results when sibling incest ends in pregnancy is that a man becomes a father/brother and a woman becomes a sister/mother. 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,²⁶ a truth that still resonates for contemporary audiences of this ballad. “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).²⁷ 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 earlier. 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 that engages in transgressive sex, the still-born 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.²⁸ 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 perverse 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

one's siblings were as significant intergenerationally as the direct line through one's own progeny.²³ Then, too, brothers and sisters were often each others' earliest sustained cross-sex relationship and childhood companions.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the primacy of this brother-sister relationship changed for a number of reasons, among them the development of capitalism, the drive to accumulate property, and changes in inheritance law. Less and less were sisters considered equal members with their brothers of their clans or kin groups, and less and less were they thought to be female versions of their brothers but increasingly instead "chickens raised for other men's tables," as James Harlowe so eloquently puts it in Richardson's novel *Clarissa*. 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. 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. By the eighteenth century, brothers are represented in ballads as dangerous to the interests of their sisters, whether because of biology, character, or evolving male privilege, 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 signaled 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 sisters' sexual favors, whether for themselves or by choosing their sisters' lovers. Incest has become dangerous for a woman in this later world, because her pregnancy reveals it, rather than being tragic for both lovers. 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"; she has a lot more to say in the earlier version. The Romantic period—the early nineteenth century—is of course the period associated with brother-sister incest, the refusal to accommodate to an other but the insistent narcissistic mirroring of the self instead, 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 looking further afield for a loved object.

suddenly neither the sun nor moon nor stars is visible. The sailors are sure that someone on board among them is evil and they 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 Tochter Jean,"²² and "Babylon," the brother, who has been abroad for many years and 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 is thought that incest is also 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 is what incites the struggle between them that leads to the fratricidal murder of one brother by the other.

Nor is outright incest the only form of fraternal conflict related to 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 their wishes, they kill her or they kill 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 badly, 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.

CHANGING BROTHER-SISTER RELATIONS

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 kin. Through their common mother, they are uniquely related to a set of maternal relatives as well as 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 relatives are not considered kin to the father's relatives. Siblings are thus 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

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.¹⁷ 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, 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 when Mrs. King learned it, while Agnes Lyle learned “Leesome Brand” as a separate ballad.¹⁸

There are quite a few other ballads about incest collected in eighteenth-century Scotland, and all of them (there are six in Child’s canon) are about brother–sister incest.¹⁹ Not a 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 intergenerational father–daughter and uncle–niece incest, although none of it seems to have been memorialized in ballads. The exclusive reference to brother–sister incest in Scottish and Irish ballads 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. 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 centuries. One can only speculate about what they might reveal about kinship, siblings, self, or society at this particular historical juncture. In four of the seven brother–sister incest ballads listed in note 19, the incest is committed knowingly;²¹ in “Sheath and Knife,” “Lizie 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 erring brother goes to sea when

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 disjointed, symbolic episodes. From the moment the brother worries about the world finding out about them until the rose 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 are irreplaceably lost ends the ballad; this haunting image still resonates when the song is over. The 1630 variant, by contrast, ends with the familiar trope of the rose 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 for it with her life.

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 by then all sense of the particularity of the woman has disappeared, for she says almost nothing. Insofar as anyone is affected by the drama, the only self that matters in the late eighteenth-century version is the brother's self.

INTERPRETING ATTITUDES TO INCEST

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

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 mortally wounds himself 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 for the ballad "Sheath and Knife" 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



FIGURE 10.2: A wet-nurse receives a high-born child. Etching by Robert de Launay after Etienne Aubry, ca. 1740. Iconographic Collections, Wellcome Library, London.

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 had 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, 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 dis-severed 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 he is perhaps hunting as in “Leesome Brand”

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.¹⁵

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: "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.¹⁶ It evokes both a simple sunset and the crucifixion, the loss of light from the world. The fourth line of every stanza of Robert 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 that rarely have Christian sentiments. "Sib" is a capacious word in Middle English, denoting many different kinds of blood kinship as well as nonbiological 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 equalitarian 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 (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."

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 tharby

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 dreu 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.

“Alas brother wald ye doe so
 the sun gois to etc.
 I rather nou death undergoe
 alas give we had newer bein sib

the mornne is my fathir’s 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 gown 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 toi my kni
 the sun etc.
 my lesse will brak and go in thrie
 god give etc.

and it wil go from on to uthir
 the sun etc.
 until it come to Jhon by 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.



FIGURE 10.1: A knight and his lover flee from death. Engraving by Edward Harding after Diana Beauclerk, 1796. Miss Beauclerk was alleged to have had an incestuous relationship with her brother, Lord Bolingbroke. Iconographic Collections, Wellcome Library, London.

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 *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’s 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 other
 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.

is an entirely separate ballad from "Sheath and Knife" in the Child canon.¹⁴ In the version of "Leesome Brand," collected by Peter Buchan in his *Ancient Ballads and Songs of North of Scotland* (1828) as it was included in Child's 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 ladye 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 whatever 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" (Roselilly 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 she 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.

of their congress, and they both seem to understand 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 would have been 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 weed 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.¹² In Scottish ballads, people always lie down in the broom, away from prying eyes.¹³ 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.

“THE SHEATH AND THE KNIFE OR LEESOME BRAND”

More recently, evidence has surfaced of a much earlier version of this ballad that 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 includes some of the features of Child no. 15, “Leesome Brand,” which