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The Theme of the Cruel Brother

Although an abundance of distinguished literary scholarship has appeared during the last hundred years in analysis of the Child ballads, it is the general consensus today that traditional balladry defies artistic measurement by the standards of academic literature. That is not to say, however, that while the ballad is an art form of its own merit, that it does not share in some of the aesthetic qualities that give the elite masterpiece its powerful, timeless appeal. Great literature, in essence, is a recreation of life in that its theme is man's quest to find his rightful place in the natural order of the universe. Man, then, is a creature of conflict -- whether he be heroic Ulysses waging a social war, or Hamlet agonizing over a moral conflict within the microcosm of the family. Oedipus, too, through his incestuous marriage to Jocasta is doomed in a domestic crisis, as is Medea, who also violates the natural order by destroying her own children. Needless to say, the Child ballads also recreate life with a universal appeal that transcends generations of human conflict.

In the balladry domestic discord comes into view with the crime of father against daughter, mother against son. In "The Cruel Mother" (Child 20), for example, not unlike Medea the woman kills her newborn infants, but is later warned of her inevitable fate by the spirit of one of the children: "O cursed mother, hell is deep, / And there thou'll enter step by step."¹ There

is rivalry between brothers that is reminiscent of Cain and Abel and jealousy among sisters that makes Cinderella's siblings seem kind. Nonetheless, while numerous themes of family conflict appear in the Child ballads, the brother-sister relationship comes into focus with the recurring motif of the cruel brother.

The role of the brother as the natural guardian of his sister is traditional throughout Western literary history. In the Child ballads, however, the theme of the good brother as the chivalrous hero is surprisingly frequent. In several versions of "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight" (Child 4), for example, instead of outwitting her attacker, the maiden with equal adoration calls upon God, the Virgin, and her brother in her moment of distress (I p. 36). In another variation the lady is saved by her three brothers who take immediate vengeance upon the false knight (I p. 36). Perhaps most evident in a Swiss variation of "Lady Isabel" is the traditional role of the brother as the protective dispenser of strength and valor, as he dutifully repays any violation of his sister's honor:

'My brother is a hunting man,
And all the small game shoot he can;
He had a sword with edges two,
And ran the heart of the false knight through.'

(I p. 34)

In contrast, however, while in the "good brother" ballads the resolution of the story is usually happy, the cruel brother narratives often end in a tragic struggle with evil, that comes

into play through excessive passion and culminates in murder.

In "The Bride's Testament" (Child 11) a young maiden is chosen in preference to her sisters to be the wife of a gallant knight. Just as she is about to depart with her bridegroom, however, while the rest of the family is bidding her affectionate farewell, she is fatally attacked by her brother: "He has taen a knife baith lang and sharp, / and stabbd that bonny bride to the heart" (I p. 145). Although the reason for the crime may at first seem vague, the brother's motivation appears to lie in a violation of the traditional brother-sister relationship. Even though the knight painstakingly requests the permission of each family member to marry the girl, he invariably fails in every version to ask the brother's leave:

He's got consent frae her parents dear,
And likewise frae her sisters fair.
He's got consent frae her kin each one,
But forgot to spiek to her brother John.
(I p. 145)

In an Irish variation the lady's conventional position as sister is even more apparent as she explicitly asks: "Did ye ask my brother John? / For without his will I dare not move on" (I p. 150). Nevertheless, there is nothing in the ballad to indicate that if he had been consulted, the brother would have denied consent for the marriage to take place. What is evident, however, is that the traditional request in itself is of momentous impor-

tance in that it symbolizes the natural order of the sibling relationship. Thus, the brother takes to heart what he considers to be a serious defilement of custom, and in a moment of angry passion attempts to rectify the situation in an act of murder. The sister, however, does not die immediately, and in a voice of stark, isolated melancholy she renames each family member to her husband in a lengthy testament, alluding again to the fact that her brother's wishes had been overlooked. She remembers her family with kindness, but in her dying breath, brings the scene of discord full circle as she speaks of her cruel brother in a prophecy of revenge: "What will you leave your brother John?" / "The gallows-tree to hang him on" (I p. 145). Nevertheless, the theme of the cruel brother is not only limited to ballads about social custom, but also appears in other narratives that shed a different light on passion.

Although there are numerous Child ballads that tell of disharmony in the family as the result of incest between brother and sister, two in particular repeat the cruel brother motif. In "Lizie Wan" (Child 51), which appears in two versions, the narrative of sexual perversion begins in the last act as the sister sits weeping because she is pregnant with her brother's child. In the first variation the cruel brother murders his sister in a futile attempt to hide from his parents his willful violation of moral law:

And he has drawn his gude braid sword,
That hung down by his knee.

And he has cutted off Lizie Wan's head,
 And her fair body in three. (I p. 448)

In the second version, however, his violent aggression is more of an attempt at perverted justice to avenge the fact that she has confessed the details of the illicit affair to the family:

'Weel ye hae tauld father, and
 ye hae tauld mither,
 And he hae tauld sister a' .three;'
 Syne he pulled out his wee penknife,
 And cut her fair bodie in three.
 (I p. 449)

Nevertheless, in both variations the cruel brother destroys his sister in a mutilating act of dissection which results in a loathsome mass of blood, eventually leading to the family's discovery of his depravity. Thus, illicit sexual indulgence is linked with brutality through the age old belief that only death itself can eradicate the corrupting power of sexual passion.

The cruel brother motif is again repeated through incestuous seduction and violent death in "The King's Dochter Lady Jean" (Child 52). The ballad is about a young woman who is accosted in the woods by a man who turns out to be her brother. The attacker, however, feels no remorse in simply taking advantage of a young maiden, but when he realizes that she is his sister, the moral violation of the sibling relationship again comes into focus:

'If you're the king's youngest daughter,
It's I'm his auldest son,
And heavy heavy is the deed, sister,
That you and I have done.' (I p. 451)

Thus, in the end, the cruel brother is again moved to act against an evil of which reason has no defense; as he attempts to destroy immoral contamination with irrational passion:

He had a penknife in his hand,
Hang low down by his gair,
And between the long rib and the short one,
He woundit her deep and sair.
(I p. 452)

The cruel brother theme recurs in several other Child ballads, though not always culminating in murder, just the same, in some way violating the natural family tie. In "Lady Maisry" (Child 113), for example, a pregnant young maiden is accused by her brother of being a whore. Some of the versions imply only the cruelty of the accusation and the brother's lack of gallantry in defending her position. Others, however, again employ murderous passion, and, thus, the sister is burned at the stake:

Her father is gone to the fire,
Her brother to the whin,
To kindle up a bold bonfire,
To burn her body in.²

"The Maid Freed from the Gallows" contains a similar story of discord between siblings, as the sister, who is about to be executed, desperately hopes that her brother will arrive in time to redeem her life. Nevertheless, he is again the cruel brother who ignores her pleas and with relish anticipates her death:

'None of my gold now shall you have,
Nor likewise of my fee;
For I am come to see you hanged,
And hanged you shall be.' (II p. 350)

Finally, it is interesting to notice that even in the Child ballads that employ the brother-sister relationship only in minor detail, the cruel brother theme continues to linger in the shadows. For example, in "Lord Randell" (Child 12) a young man returns home to die after being poisoned by his lover. While his mother is making his bed, however, he speaks to her a lengthy testament that reveals his attitude toward each family member. In several variations he is the good brother who lovingly leaves his sister gold and silver. Nevertheless, in one version a fleeting glimpse of the cruel brother is again apparent:

'What leave ye to your sister . . .
my son?
What leave ye to your sister
my pretty one?'

'The world's wide; she may go beg;
Mother make my bed soon,

For I'm sick to the heart, and
I fain wald lie down.' (I p. 160)

In the end, it is evident that in the Child ballads a well-known, basic theme of life is expressed with uncanny clarity. Through the recurring motif of the cruel brother, man constructs for himself a moral world that puts him to test. Thus, with each conflict, he learns the limits of prohibition and discovers that the most difficult battle is with the self -- that man is his own worst enemy. The balladry presents a paradoxical world of reality and unreality that is both crystal-clear and yet elusive -- a place where man is capable of entering into universal relationships of timeless validity. Therefore, though it is tempting to liken it to the greatest Greek tragedy or the finest lyric, the ballad is truly an archetypal form of art that of its own essence recreates life.

Notes

¹The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, ed. Francis James Child, I (1882; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), p. 221. All further references to this volume are made in the text.

²Child, ed., II (1884; rpt. 1966), p. 216. All further references to this volume are made in the text.

Bibliography

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