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French fourteenth-century miniature, showing Abelard conversing with Heloise. (*The Romance of the Rose*; Chantilly Museum, Condé.)

Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not.
Let the galled jade winch; our withers are unwrung.

HAM 3.2.233-34

WHAT'S WRONG with incest that its taboo should be, or should have been made, a quintessential characteristic of human beings or of human beings in society? A traditional answer would be that were incest allowed, disaster would ensue. Folktales, for example, claim that the earth would shake or darkness fall. Psychologists say that kin roles would become so confused no one would know who he or she "was." Political theorists argue that incest would upset authority and property relations within society. From a biological point of view, it has been argued that genetically those who breed in will die out.¹ And so on. Whatever the reasons with which one might justify or refute these positions, their threats of calamity are probably less explanations of the incest taboo than expressions of it. For even if some people knew some disaster story to be true, that would not account for the taboo among *all* people.

What, then, might explain the apparent universality of the taboo? Some modern thinkers say that humans have an instinctive aversion to sexual relations with people by whom or with whom they have been raised from childhood, or that the proximity found in the family itself makes for aversion.² Others (notably Freud) have argued that as individuals people *do* want to have incestuous sexual relations, but that civilization depends upon repressing that desire; thus familiarity leads, not to sexual contempt, but to incestuous desire and neurotic fear. From yet a third position, the incest taboo is interpreted as a social adaptation to past biological or sociological reality. Calculating from lifespan and breeding needs (the age at maturity and the time needed to suckle infants), one anthropologist has argued, for example, that among the original hominids incest was rare, if not impossible.³ More to our present purpose, another anthropologist, remarking that human beings mature sexually before they are ready to leave home, claims that an incest taboo was necessary to minimize sources of rivalry and aggression within the stable family groups in which humans live.⁴

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By seeing the incest taboo, however universal, as merely the outcome of historical factors, the last set of positions opens another question. Might the incest taboo have run its sociological course? Is it a holdover from our early history that we could get over—possibly for good rather than ill—if we could accurately distinguish and perhaps eradicate the political and social institutions that made it necessary?⁵ The contemporary threat of the annihilation of all humankind by war (whose fundamental motivations, some say, include the repression the incest taboo may encourage and the aggression it seems powerless to prevent) is urgent enough to make us question, no matter what, our social and political structures. Is it possible that the disasters incest threatens are less than the disaster that if we do not love one another equally, we will die out?

Odd as it may sound to speculate about the withering of the incest taboo, the thought is not new. In fact, it centrally informs the major religious and philosophical traditions of the West, which have sought, by practicing Universal Siblinghood, to transcend altogether the distinction between kin and nonkin, thus between chastity and incest.

Kinship by Biological Consanguinity and by Sociological Fiction

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother.

Gen. 2:24

The commonplace Western view is that kinship by consanguinity is primary, or real kinship. Anthropologists and sociologists usually have lumped together all other kinds as pseudo-kinship (or kinship by extension),⁶ which they then divide into subcategories such as figurative, fictive, artificial, and ritual.⁷ However, the fundamental distinction between “real” kinship and “pseudo”-kinship—or between literal and figural structure—is the topic of a still-unresolved debate about whether kinship is essentially a matter of biology (whose terms include “genitor” and “genetrix”) or sociology (whose terms include “father” and “mother”).⁸

The Bastard and the Changeling. We like to think that consanguinity is easy to determine, yet nothing is harder than to make verifiable public assignments of biological parenthood. The possibility of being a bastard casts doubt on one’s assigned father; the possibility of being a changeling casts doubt on both father and mother. Bastards and changelings indicate the indeterminability of biological parenthood; they suggest its fictional aspects, even in a society such as ours, which

believes that it really knows the facts of life and that the real facts of life are biological.⁹

"The end of Marriage," writes Burnet, "is the ascertaining of the Issue." To provide legitimate offspring who are "certain and better known," argues Alfonso el Sabio, is the purpose of marriage.¹⁰ But can an individual man or his community ever be certain that he is the father of a particular child? Posthumus' enraged cry "We are all bastards" (*CYM* 2.5.2) or Leontes' assertion, fearing himself a cuckold, that "Many thousand on's / Have the disease and feel't not" (*WT* 1.2.205–6) may seem excessive or even neurotic. But society in general must be concerned about bastards because if kinship is basically consanguineous then compliance with the incest taboo depends upon knowledge of consanguinity. In many societies women are thus closely guarded by one or another mechanical, social, or internalized mechanism for ensuring chastity—by a chastity belt, for example, a well-patrolled harem, or some religious taboo against adultery.¹¹

The emphasis placed on male procreation by the Christian religious and legal traditions may be a response to this fearful uncertainty about paternity. As James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus puts it:

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna, which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe, the church is founded, like the world, macro- and microcosm, upon the void. . . . Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son?¹²

A similar uneasiness about paternity informs the Greek tradition. The debate involving politics (Orestes) and family (Clytemnestra) in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for example, is ended by the argument of the virgin goddess Athena (born from the head of Zeus), who proclaims that, since "no mother gave me birth," only the male of the human species is the begetter.¹³ Her argument, backed by Aristotle's view that in human reproduction "the male provides the form and the principle of the movement; the female provides the body, in other words the material,"¹⁴ would no doubt have convinced the doubting Hamlet that he stood in a definitively closer relationship to his father than ever Priam's son stood to Hecuba (*HAM* 2.2.543–44).

To call any particular child some man's son or daughter—or any particular man someone's father—is a fiction insofar as all paternity is inevitably indeterminable. The Common Law in Rome and Germany held that a child whose natural father was not his social father had no

father at all, that he was “the son of no one” (*filius nullius*), much as the Christian tradition regards Jesus seen as a mere man;¹⁵ and the German Civil Code provides that “an illegitimate child and its father are not deemed to be related.”¹⁶ In contrast is the old British practice of legally deeming a bastard to be the child of the master of the household in which it is born: “Who that bulleth my cow,” says the English proverb, “the calf is mine.”¹⁷ The fiction of assigning paternity where the natural and social fathers are believed to be one (so that the child is legitimate) and the fictions of denying or arbitrarily assigning paternity where they are believed to be two (so that the child is illegitimate) are thus interrelated: the ultimate indeterminability of biological paternity makes us all equal, as interchangeably legitimate children, children of no one, and illegitimate children. And yet the societal need to determine paternity, which Malinowski calls the sociological rule of rules, requires us social beings either to maintain distinctions by accepting the fiction of biological paternity as the literal truth of things (as we do in this culture) or by establishing persons to be *thought* of “as of a father” (HAM 1.2.108)—as figural or sociological fathers.¹⁸

To introduce the indeterminability of parentage in terms of bastardy may seem to privilege wrongheadedly the male view, for the individual husband’s concern that his wife’s child is not his own (or the child’s concern that his legal father is not his biological one) and the corresponding societal concern that the paternity of each child be established derive from the biological fact that in sexual reproduction the man’s role begins and ends with intercourse, but the woman’s role continues from conception through pregnancy and birth. But absolutely verifiable biological maternity is essentially as much a social fiction as is absolutely verifiable biological paternity.¹⁹

Just as uncertainty about the father begins after intercourse, so uncertainty about the mother begins with birth. Women, “thinking too precisely on th’event” (HAM 4.4.41), may come to fear that their children are changelings just as men may come to fear that their children are bastards.²⁰ Insofar as changeling affects both fathers and mothers (or patrilineal and matrilineal societies), it is the archetypal sign of the indeterminability of parenthood.²¹

Although “changeling” can mean any “person or thing (surreptitiously) put in exchange for another”²² (like the “changeling never known” Hamlet substitutes for the letter of his uncle-father Claudio, HAM 5.2.53, or the adult changelings Mariana, Barnadine, and Ragozine in *Measure for Measure*), its principal meaning involves infants. All infants are said to pass for like, much as they are all said to resemble

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their parents; infants thus suggest teleologically the substantial sameness of all grown-ups. The archetypal changeling is “a child secretly substituted for another in infancy”²³ in such a way that the biological father, mother, and child do not know of the taliational substitution. (*Measure for Measure* again provides an example of sorts, when grown-up Claudio is miraculously delivered, or changed, as his own infant son—“As like almost to Claudio as himself,” 5.1.487.)

A changeling, then, is a child whose blood kin, in the eyes of *every-one*, are not its blood kin, and vice versa. In this limited sense a changeling differs from a kidnapped child, a child purposefully left to die, or a child accidentally lost.²⁴ A kidnapping like that in *Cymbeline*, for example, may eventually result in a sister’s falling in love with a grown-up man she does not recognize to be her brother; however, some people know of the kidnapping, and they have reasonable (if reasonably small) grounds to be wary of any amatory attachment that the grown-up sister or brother might develop.²⁵ (Similarly, in a case of child-theft like the one in the Judgment of Solomon, the two women who claim maternity are, presumably, aware of the actual kinship of the child, and the tale hangs by the questionable figure that the woman who loves the child is the consanguineous genetrix [1 Kings 3: 16–28].) The exposure and finding of a baby girl in *The Winter’s Tale* eventually results in her falling in love with the unrecognized kin of someone more or less akin to her; however, some know about the exposure and finding, and hence about the mystery of her parentage and its attendant dangers.* In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, Jocasta likewise had grounds to be more wary of her attachment to Oedipus, since she had no proof of her son’s death, and Oedipus’ adoptive parents, Polybus and Merope, should have warned him that he was a foundling. Finally, such loss of a daughter as occurs in *Pericles of Tyre* may eventually result in unrecognized incest. In *Pericles* 1.1 it almost does; however, the father and daughter both know enough of the history of their separation to be wary.

Archetypal changelings differ in degree, if not in kind, from all these kidnapped, exposed, or lost children because no one knows that anything or anyone is out of place. The one possible exception, the thief, is often not human, as in King Henry IV’s ambiguous wish that his riotous son and the honor-drunk son of his enemy Henry Percy had been secretly changed in infancy: “O that it could be proved /

* In the love between Perdita, the foundling daughter of King Leontes, and Florizel, the son of Leontes’ nearest friend, Shakespeare conflates the theme of the foundling with that of the changeling (WT 3.3.117 and 4.4.687–89).

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That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged / In cradle clothes our children where they lay” (1H4 1.1.86–88; compare the thief in MND 2.1.120–37). But if it is impossible to know for sure that anyone is out of place, how could such a changing be “proved”? Nowadays we make footprints from babies’ feet in order to eliminate substitutions in the hospital, but for the foundling Oedipus—whose foundling status, if not actual parentage, was relatively easy to determine—even the most remarkable form of pedal identification apparently did not ensure that Jocasta would recognize him grown up.

One might object that what really matters is not that biological parentage be established but that parents and society believe it has been. (This objection assumes that no social disaster would ensue if there were bastards, changelings, or incest, so long as no one knew. In contemporary society, in fact, we discount disaster stories as myths and say any genetic mutations that might result from unwitting incestuous encounters are unlikely in a society as populous as ours. We thus deny adopted children the right to know who their biological parents are.) Yet the position that pseudo-kinship is real kinship insofar as it is believed to be real, although it reduces to sheer mystification the tension between the fictional aspect of blood kinship and any literal substrate, sidesteps the awesome question to which our literatures and religions draw our attention and from which, perhaps, they have sprung. “Who, really, are my parents?” That is both Oedipus’s query and Jesus’s.

The possibility of supposititious substitutions in the bedroom and the cradle thus affects us all, both men and women—in patriarchal or matriarchal, patrilineal or matrilineal, societies.²⁶ What way, but by privileging one or another kind of pseudo-kinship, is there to eliminate changeling and bastardy—which represent the general ambiguity and indeterminability of all kinship relations that make incest an unseen and ever-present threat? What way is there to ensure that we know our kin but to put down biology (call it reality) and set up sociology (call it fiction) as our standard?

Kinds of Sociological Kin. Most sociological kinships are identical to biological ones in that they, too, divide the human world into two groups of people—those who are kin and those who are not—and group kinfolk together on the basis of some common measure or something consubstantial. “Children are everywhere thought to be of the same substance as their parents,” says one anthropologist, “because they are produced by them: ‘like breeds like’ in every system of thought.”²⁷ “Like father, like son” is the talitional key to kinship that Aristotle proposes in the *Politics*,²⁸ and it is the focus of Leontes’ first

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questions about whether the biological children of his wife are also his own (WT 1.2.122 and 1.2.128–35, cf. 2.3.97–107). Yet the substance, or quality, that makes people akin varies from culture to culture and is ambiguous even within a culture. Which is more fundamental, for example, my likeness to my supposed genitor or my likeness to God, who created me in his image? Which substance is most fundamental: the genes I share with my genitor, the love between my adoptive parent and myself, the milk I sucked from my mother, the blood I commingled with my blood brother, the food I shared at a communal feast, or the dust from which all things (including myself) are made?

In our political and epistemological traditions, most sociological kinships involve a distinction between kin and nonkin, and many involve an incest taboo much like that for biological kinship. Milk kinship (relating persons nursed at the same breast), nominal kinship (relating people who share the same name, that is, people who are called kin, however the name may have been acquired), legal adoption, step-relationship, kinship by marriage, and kinship by spiritual alliance, all can involve an incest taboo.²⁹ The kinship that obtains among godparents and godchildren (the gossipred) similarly outlaws as “spiritual incest”* either intra- or intergenerational sexual intercourse.³⁰

Unlike consanguinity, the standards of sociological kinship can often be known with absolute certainty by virtue of a public ceremony or similarly visible fact. In this sense, at least, the sociological kinships are superior to biological kinship. Indeed, in some societies sociological kinship provides a diriment, or nullifying, impediment to marriage although consanguineous kinship does not. (The Eskimos, for example, virtually ignore the “facts of life” and heed only kinship by residence.)³¹ In our own social tradition, sexual intercourse with pseudo-kin has often been regarded as a more serious violation of the incest taboo than sexual intercourse with biological kin; the Western Church, for example, paid special attention to gossipred.

Moreover, certain kinship institutions in the West—including some blood brotherhoods, friendship societies, religious orders, and political associations—have challenged the essential division of human beings into kin and nonkin that informs the kinds of kinship we have mentioned.³² Blood brotherhoods, for example, attempt to replace ordinary biological and sociological kinds of kinship with a structure

*In its specific theological and legal sense, “spiritual incest” refers either to sexual intercourse involving such gossipred kin as godsons and goddaughters or to sexual intercourse involving such universal kin as Brothers and Sisters. The use here of “spiritual incest” to refer to sexual relations between godsibs is the first of three technical meanings I shall employ.

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that is both potentially transgenerational and universalist. They already suggest those extraordinary forms of kinship, at once peripheral and central to society, in which every human being is sibling to every other one. The principal example of such forms, although there are others, is the kinship organization hypothesized and to some extent practiced by traditional Christianity and specifically by the celibate Catholic orders.

Siblings In and Out of Incest: A Literary Topology

One way or another, the idea of Universal Siblinghood has influenced the Western tradition for millennia, at least since the time of Pythagoras,³³ calling into question our relegation of incest to the perverse periphery or holy center of human life. The association of monachist institutions with the fear and practice of physical incest is, indeed, a crucial topos in Christian literature. In joining an order, an individual gives up earthly kin relations (in which some people are family and others are not family) and takes on heavenly kin relations (in which all people are explicitly Siblings and God is at once parent, spouse, sibling, and child).³⁴ This give-and-take of kinship can be seen in two opposed but closely interrelated literary plots. In the first, a lay person, for whom some people are kin and some are not, tries to escape from the desire to commit sibling incest or the guilt of having done so by entering a nunnery or monastery. Here all people are equally kin or not kin and making love to one's sibling is no worse or better than making love to any other person in the Universal Siblinghood.³⁵ By entering the nunnery or monastery a protagonist thus ascends from earthly incest into Universal Siblinghood in the order. In the second plot, a monk or nun leaves the convent and commits physical incest with a biological sibling, thus descending from Siblinghood in the convent into physical incest outside it. Taken together, the typologies of ascending from earthly incest and descending into it help to define the ideological significance of and the social need for such apparently fictive places or topoi as heaven on earth, the Garden of Eden, and the family as the young child is sometimes supposed to see it, places where the ordinary concerns of sexually mature human beings in society seem to have all but disappeared.

Since the eighteenth century, at least, "spiritual kinship" has connoted romantic soul-mating, but in the technical sense I use here the term concerns the relationship between a nun or a monk and any other person in the world, which establishes a kinship in God and outlaws as "spiritual incest" sexual intercourse between them. According

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to major Church authorities, for anyone to sleep with or marry a person consecrated to God was incestuous.³⁶ The creed of Christianity maintains, moreover, that all human beings are siblings, or at least that everyone human is essentially convertible to the same siblinghood. "All ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:8). By universalizing kinship in this way the doctrine of spiritual kinship puts into question, not merely the status of consanguinity as the standard for kinship, but also the distinction between kin and nonkin and thus between incest and chastity on which all the other structures of kinship rely and, some say, on which society itself is founded.

Descent from Chastity to Incest. In the West, most theoretical and fictional works about incest have focused on the recognition of consanguinity rather than put into question the literalist standard of consanguinity, the absolute knowability of consanguineous parents, or the distinction between kin and nonkin. (We never doubt that Oedipus is Jocasta's son, do we?)

Since this focus on consanguinity appears to allay our own concerns about kinship, it is socially reassuring. Recognition of consanguineous kin thus plays an articulating and major role in both tragedies and comedies.³⁷ The plots of relevant tragedies commonly involve a protagonist who mates with someone he wrongly believes not to be kin; then the actual kinship is revealed. The tragic recognition scene shows that an act thought to be chaste was incestuous. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is the principal ancient example; modern examples are likely to involve sibling incest: German "tragedies of fate,"³⁸ Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Horace Walpole's *Mysterious Mother*,³⁹ Dineson's *Caryatids*, Voltaire's *Zaïre*, and Diderot's *Natural Son*. The plots of relevant comedies generally involve a protagonist who wishes to mate with someone he wrongly believes to be kin, and the comic recognition scene shows that an act thought to be incestuous is chaste. Examples of comic concern with sibling incest include Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, Goethe's *Siblings*, and Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King*.⁴⁰

Such tragedies and comedies present kinship as knowable, although initially it may be unknown.⁴¹ Yet Western literature has also hinted at the absolute indeterminability of human parenthood—at the fact that none of us can really know who his parents are—in at least two notable figures. The first is the "orphan" hero, who leaves what he takes to be his family home (sometimes because of doubts about his parentage) and in consequence makes love with unrecognized kin. Oedipus, the adopted child of Polybus and Merope, originally left Corinth, for example, because "a drunken man, accused me in his drink / of being bastard."⁴² The second figure is the "parentless child," who, fearing

that any sexual intercourse might be incestuous, leaves not only his family home but all human families to become a child to some god or goddess and a Sibling to all human beings. When this "child of adoption" to god or goddess descends from heavenly Siblinghood to the world of earthly ties, however, his fears or desires are fulfilled in enactment, for in this typology he unknowingly falls in love with, or makes love to, a person of his earthly family.

Thus, in many literary works, whenever a nun or monk has sexual intercourse outside the convent, it turns out that the lovers are consanguineous brother and sister. Their act of sexual intercourse is not only spiritual or figural incest, insofar as everyone (including a sibling) is a Sibling to a nun or monk, but also literal incest. By such incest, these works indicate one generic end, or intent, of a religious order insofar as the order emulates a kinship group: to incorporate and transcend incest. In the convent, intercourse with a sibling is no better—or worse—than with any other human being; and the multiple kin relations expressed or implied in terms for monks' and nuns' ties to God, Christ, and each other would be incestuous in an ordinary family.

Many of the saintly founders of the Catholic orders were actual, loving brothers and sisters who became Siblings and thereby embraced "spiritual incest," meaning the relationships that obtain among the members of the Holy Family of God, where the Parent is also Child, Spouse, and Sibling. The multiple kinship relations Jesus himself had to members of his earthly family are stressed by such theologians as the Franciscans and such secular writers as Marguerite of Navarre; they emphasize that Jesus is at once Parent, Spouse, Sibling, and Child of Mary and that, even when he denies his earthly family, he retains his position as Father, or Son, of himself (and, by analogy, Father of all humankind).⁴³ Such emphasis on incest in the Holy Family may have parallels in the New Testament authors' choices of which details of Jesus' genealogy and birth to report: the human genealogy of Jesus includes the incestuous sons of Tamar and her father-in-law Judah, and magi—priests said to be born of incestuous unions among a people (the Persians) supposed to practice incest without guilt—greeted the newborn God Jesus with gifts.⁴⁴

The relationship between Jocasta and grown-up Oedipus is thus sublated in Christianity in a gamut of spiritual kinship relations within the Holy Family.* In the prelude to the final beatific vision in Dante's

*The Christian topos that Jesus stands in a quadrifold kinship relation to everyone is an idealist transcendence of a common situation in Greek epic and tragedy. In the *Iliad*, Andromache speaks thus to her doomed husband: "Hector, you are my father and my

Divine Comedy, Saint Bernard calls the Virgin Mary “the daughter of her own son”⁴⁵—a holy mystery, since the incest involved is either chaste or somehow beyond the distinction between chastity and its opposite. The saintliness of some Christian saints is associated with overcoming incestuous desires or incestuous acts—as for Saints Albanus, Julian, and Gregory.⁴⁶

Modern works have also linked incest and sainthood. In *The Cenci*, Stendhal claims that being the child of an incestuous union can lead to becoming a saint.⁴⁷ And in Lope de Vega’s *The Outrageous Saint*, a brother’s rape of his sister is identified with the Roman soldier’s spearing Christ; the brother is redeemed by identifying with the figure of Christ, who appears and explicitly points out the connection: “See my chest, stuck with a spear, / And yours which only broods on ways of dishonoring your sister.”⁴⁸

The popular association of incest and the Catholic orders—such that whenever in story a monk or nun finds a mate outside the convent, the mate is sure to be a sibling—can be seen in many literary examples. A brief rehearsal of some of their plots, in this and the following section, can suggest how this extreme, yet representative, incest story informs our tradition and how literary plotting expresses the meaning, or telos, of biological and spiritual sexuality.

In Friedrich von Schiller’s *Bride of Messina*, Beatrice, who has spent most of her life in a nunnery and does not know her blood kin, leaves the cloister for just a few hours to attend the funeral of the Duke of Messina. “I ventured from the convent fold / Into the alien crowds.” She falls in love at first sight with Don Manuel, the son of the Duke of Messina. The chorus at first believes that Don Manuel’s violation of sexual propriety has been merely spiritual incest in the technical sense of intercourse between religious and lay persons: “A theft of things divine you perpetrated, / The bride of heaven by your sin you desecrated, / For dread and sacred is the cloister’s vow.”⁴⁹ It turns out, however, that Beatrice is the daughter of the Duke, so that the near-sister is also her lover’s sister and the spiritual incest is also literal.⁵⁰

lady mother, you are my brother and you are my husband” (Book 6, lines 429–30). In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Electra speaks similarly to Orestes: “To call you father is constraint of fact, / and all the love I could have borne my mother turns / your way, while she is loathed as she deserves; my love / for a pitilessly slaughtered sister turns to you. / And now you were my steadfast brother after all” (*Libation Bearers*, lines 239–43). The Christian culmination of this tradition sanctifies such manifold kinship relations by raising them from earth to heaven. Nietzsche thus writes that “Sophocles with his Oedipus strikes up the prelude to a victory hymn for the *saint!*” (8, trans. Lebeck, *Birth*). (For full bibliographical citations of works cited in the footnotes, see the Bibliography, pp. 247–79.)

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In another example, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, a foundling orphan Brother discovers that the woman he has raped is his sister, a reluctant novice in the Sisterhood of St. Clare.⁵¹ Similarly, François de Rosset's "Incestuous Love of a Brother and Sister" tells of a brother who holds an ecclesiastical benefice at the time he and his sister consummate their affair. In Balzac's *Vicar of Ardenne* (*Le Vicaire des Ardenne*)—a roman of his youth signed with the pseudonym Horace de Saint Aubin—Melanie, who thinks herself the sister of Joseph, is willing to yield to her brother's incestuous advances in the name of happiness. Joseph becomes a priest, however, to escape his urges. When he learns that Melanie is his cousin, not his sister, they marry, even though she still does not know their true consanguineous relation. Thus, although she wrongly believes she is committing literal incest, he actually commits spiritual incest. In Roger Martin du Gard's *Thibault*, Jacques writes a novel—*The Little Sister*—in which the hero rejects normal family and civil ties and seems to consummate an incestuous affair with his sister after she has left the Sisterhood where she was an inmate.⁵² And in Lope de Vega's *The Cowherd of Morana*, a jealous brother imprisons his sister in a convent after he has discovered her love affair with someone else. She escapes, however, and disguises herself as a cowherd. The brother and the cowherd accidentally cross paths, and they fall in love. Before their love can be consummated, however, they recognize each other.⁵³

Ascent from Incest to Chastity. The polar opposite to the movement from nonkinship (or universal kinship) into kinship is the movement from kinship into nonkinship. Here siblings who want to commit incest or actually have committed incest join a convent and become Siblings. In the convent, incest with one's sibling is not better—or worse—than intercourse with any other human being: desired or enacted incest here is not only transcended but also incorporated.

In folk literature, sibling incest is often averted thus.⁵⁴ The principal literary example is Chateaubriand's novella *René*.⁵⁵ In *René*, Amelia, when she decides to enter a Sisterhood, expresses the hopes that her brother René will find a wife in whom "you will believe that you have found again your sister" and that "the same tomb might unite us again one day."⁵⁶ René, who realizes neither that he is in love with his sister nor that she is in love with him, suspects that she wishes to take vows in order to escape "a passion for a man that she dare not avow." He cannot bring himself to acknowledge that he is himself the man Amelia loves until a moment of peculiarly Christian tragedy: the instant between his sister's death to the world (the first part of the cere-

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mony for becoming a nun is a service for the dead) and her rebirth as a Sister by spiritual marriage (the second part is a marriage service to Christ).⁵⁷ At that instant the brother overhears his sister begging God to forgive her “criminal passion.”⁵⁸

At this intersection of repressed sibling love and expressed Sibling love—between spiritual death and spiritual marriage—René gives romantic expression to his love for his sister:

As these words whispered by Amelia escaped from the coffin, the awful truth dawned on me; my reason wandered. I let myself fall on the shroud of death, pressed my sister in my arms, and cried out: “Chaste spouse of Jesus Christ, receive my last embraces through the iciness of trespass and the profoundness of eternity that separates you already from your brother.”⁵⁹

Like Hamlet’s outburst during *The Mousetrap*—“You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife” (HAM 3.2.253–54)—René’s exclamation puts a halt to the ceremony. Soon afterwards, Sister Amelia tells him that “for the most violent love, religion substitutes a sort of burning chastity in which the lover and the loved are one,” develops a burning fever, and dies.⁶⁰

Other literary works in which a woman or man enters a convent for fear of, or in repentance for, an incestuous love affair include Pierre de Longchamps’s *Memoirs of a Nun*, Elemir Bourges’s *Twilight of the Gods*, Georges Rodenbach’s *The Carillonneur*, Johann Gottlob Pfeil’s *The Savage Man*, and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*.⁶¹ Related plots include the history of Heloise and Abelard, in which spiritual incest (physical intercourse between religious and lay people) leads to the castration of Brother Abelard and the Sistering, or enclaustration, of Heloise; and a tale in the *Heptameron* of Marguerite of Navarre in which a man and woman in feudal service to the same Lord and Lady are so desperate at being barred from marrying each other that he joins the Franciscans and she joins its sister order, the Clares—the two lovers thus becoming one flesh in Christ.⁶² The topos, adapted to Protestantism, even informs the first American novel, William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy; or the Triumph of Nature*; in it Harrington says of his sister Harriet, to whom he is drawn by the “link of nature”: “In Heaven—there alone is happiness—there shall I meet her—there our love will not be a crime.”⁶³ The relationship between brothers and sisters inside and outside the Catholic orders calls to mind a secular attempt to deal with the societal dilemma of incest through the political goal of universal fraternity in liberty and equality.

The Romantic Siblinghood of Humankind

From the late eighteenth century on, Romanticism attempted to redefine the older Christian notion of universal brotherhood. The most important of its redefinitions was not the “cult of fraternal love” between individual brothers and sisters (whose theoretical treatises include Lord Byron’s depiction of contemporary sibling love and Karl Marx’s depiction of primitive sibling love),⁶⁴ the focus on elective affinities (the relation of things to each other not in the blood so much as in the spirit,” said to take precedence over societal rules involving marriage, adultery, and incest)⁶⁵ or the old notion that we are all consanguineous insofar as “it’s said that we all come from the same stock.”⁶⁶ It was the hypothesis of a universal relationship making us brothers and sisters all, which would erase and rise above such categories as particular brother and sister, particularized affinities, and common biological descent. Such fraternity was an issue throughout the eighteenth century; for example, the secular idealists and egalitarian democrats of the French Revolution made universal brotherhood crucial to their version of democracy.⁶⁷ Their objective was to take us from Fatherland or Motherland to a secular Promised Land.

Modern social theorists have argued from connections between genealogy and classification, or between kin and kind, that all group bonds are related to bonds of kinship. In “kind” and its cognates resides the classificatory metaphor that underlies all political theory: thus Wilson McWilliams, discussing American notions of democratic fraternity, writes that “when human relations have meaning to men, we judge them to be at least akin to kinship,”⁶⁸ seeing kinship ties as original to the associations presupposed by friendship or politics. The Romantic era seemed haunted by a disturbing and logically inescapable conclusion that sexual relations between people whose human relations are at least akin to kinship are themselves at least akin to incest, that is, they constitute “a kind of incest” (MM 3.1.138). If we are all kind of akin, then our sexual relations are all kind of incestuous.

The ideal of universal fraternity—which seems at first to be not only a politically reassuring notion (insofar as it seems democratic) but also a psychologically and socially reassuring one (insofar as its realization appears to require no change in sexual arrangements)—thus raises the specter of incest. One reaction to the fear of this incest was the Catholic orders’ asocial doctrine of spiritual incest in celibacy. Another reaction was the call to practice universally physical incest.

From the Greek Plato to the American John Humphrey Noyes, thinkers have argued that incest—whether welcomed or feared—is

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the essential basis and political end of an abolition of heredity or hierarchy such as that advocated by democratic republicanism. The Marquis de Sade, for example, developing a hint in Plato's *Republic* that the people must all believe they are akin if there is to be a republic,⁶⁹ suggests in his political tractate "French People, Yet Another Effort Is Needed If You Want To Be Republicans" that incest would be a positive benefit to the republic of the "liberty, equality, fraternity" that Frenchmen said they wanted to establish: "Incest extends the ties of family and consequently encourages the citizens' love of country."⁷⁰ Sade turns on its head the Augustinian argument that exogamy is good because it extends the bounds of property and love.⁷¹ "I dare to claim," he writes, "that, in a word, incest must be the law of any government of which fraternity is the base."⁷² Other French ideologists, beginning with Montesquieu, had come to see that their version of the doctrine of universal brotherhood entailed a kind of incest and thus had hypothesized a guiltless incestuous sexual intercourse beyond the antiegalitarian distinction of (good) chastity from (bad) unchastity.⁷³

Yet the revolutionary government, and many revolutionary thinkers, attacked the spiritual and celibate form of incest found ready to hand in the Catholic orders, finding transcendent spiritual incest by participation in the Holy Family repressive and teleologically genocidal. They charged that even sincere monks and nuns were unable to sublimate their desires (and thus desired to enact physically their spiritual incest); argued that most religious celibates were, in any case, insincere;⁷⁴ and confiscated the property of the Orders and executed their members. Francis Poulenc reminds us of the result in his opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, in which a sister becomes a Sister to die for Christ.⁷⁵

Physical consummation of incest within Universal Siblinghood was incorporated into plans for some late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century egalitarian communities, notably the community envisioned by Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge for the banks of the Susquehanna at about the turn of the century, and it was actually incorporated into plans for John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community, founded in 1848. Southey's and Coleridge's community, planned in the wake of the French Revolution (they visited France in the 1790's), was to be based on aspheritism (the abolition of private property) and pantisocracy (universal equality in rank and social position).⁷⁶ In devising their American utopia, Southey and Coleridge tentatively hypothesized a community where sleeping with a sister would be neither worse nor better than sleeping with any other woman, so that all intercourse would be at once chaste and unchaste.

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Coleridge, for example, argues that sibling love initiates all genuine society. From “pure” sibling love, says Coleridge, develops first conjugal love and then love of other human beings: “By the long habitual practice of the sisterly affection preceding the conjugal, this latter is thereby rendered more pure, more even, and of greater constancy. To all this is to be added the beautiful Graduation of attachment, from Sister, Wife, Child, Uncle, Cousin, one of our blood, and so on to mere Neighbour—to Townsman—to our Countrymen.”⁷⁷ Coleridge extends sibling love to love of one’s countrymen (one’s tribal or national “brothers”), but he does not extend love of one’s own sibling to include love of *all* human beings, that is, to a consistently equal and universal Siblinghood in which all people are alternately (1) neither siblings nor aliens, and (2) both siblings and aliens. Coleridge knows that such Universal Siblinghood is a logical precondition for his community, but he withdraws from supporting it because he sees that the realization of Universal Siblinghood must result either in incest or in celibacy. He therefore dropped the utopian ideals and excepted the sister from the group of all human beings.⁷⁸

Coleridge felt the contradiction between sibling and Sibling love as well as did the extravagantly rebellious Percy Bysshe Shelley, who tried to fulfill in poetry the old dream of incestuous pantisocracy and himself probably violated the ordinary incest taboo.⁷⁹ What Coleridge wanted to know, however, was not how the taboo could be violated but whether it could be *eliminated* altogether—that is, whether the incest taboo could be both erased and raised to the point where all women are sisters and all men are brothers, and all sex equally incestuous and chaste. He writes:

Among common minds, aye, among any *but* very uncommon minds, who enquires whether any one can do that which no one does do—. Add to this all the moral Loveliness of the Disposition of the two affections [sisterly and conjugal], which the better part of our nature feels—tho’ only a few speculative men develop that feeling, and make it put forth in its distinct form, in the understanding.—A melancholy Task remains—namely to show, how all this beautiful Fabric begins to moulder, in corrupt or bewildered (*verwilderte*) Nature—the streets of Paris and the Tents of the copper Indians, or Otaheitan.—Of this elsewhere, when we must. It is a hateful Task.⁸⁰

To avoid the need to define the withering of the incest taboo, Coleridge developed a theory of “spiritual incest”—of how a brother might love a sister both chastely *and* sexually. Proposing a thesis of what John Dryden, in another context, had called “Incest in our very souls,”⁸¹ Coleridge writes that he

