

# Introduction



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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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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?<sup>5</sup> 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),<sup>6</sup> which they then divide into subcategories such as figurative, fictive, artificial, and ritual.<sup>7</sup> 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”).<sup>8</sup>

*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.<sup>9</sup>

"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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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?<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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,"<sup>14</sup> 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

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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;<sup>15</sup> and the German Civil Code provides that “an illegitimate child and its father are not deemed to be related.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> Insofar as changeling affects both fathers and mothers (or patrilineal and matrilineal societies), it is the archetypal sign of the indeterminability of parenthood.<sup>21</sup>

Although “changeling” can mean any “person or thing (surreptitiously) put in exchange for another”<sup>22</sup> (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”<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> (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).



































