

"SMART FISHERMEN TAKE CARE
OF THEIR RODS"^o

An Analysis of Kinship in "The Misfortunes of Fyfe"
Ivan Karp

The inspiration for this analysis derives from three sources. The first is Bouissac's skillful demonstration of the existence of a metaphor derived from a distinction between Nature and Culture to be found in the imagery of the limerick "The Misfortunes of Fyfe." The second is an intriguing essay by Barnes (1973), "Genetrix: Genitor: Nature: Culture?" in which he argues that a major puzzle with which kinship systems deal is the connection between paternity and gestation. This is in contrast to the relationship between maternity and gestation, which is "natural" in the sense that the connection is discoverable through data that come from immediate sense impressions, much as the connection between heat and fire is one that arises from immediate experiences. The third source of inspiration is Schneider's (1968) account of American Kinship, in which it is shown that the American Kinship system is organized in terms of a distinction between relationships of law and relationships of natural substance. It was on the basis of this ethnography and theory that I was able to discern a kinship code in the sexual imagery and narrative progression of the limerick.

Bouissac has already demonstrated that the sexual imagery in the limerick is derived from two opposed domains. The male sexual organ is characterized by objects derived from the domain of culture, such as knife, gimlet, pencil, cork, pin, and so on. On the other hand, Fyfe's wife's sexual organ is characterized solely in terms of natural imagery. Her vagina is tight as a clam, a nest of honey, like a mole's hole, or a dense growth of hair.

A few further comments need to be made about this nature-culture opposition before I move on to kin and familial relations. First, I think that it is significant that the two major protagonists are named and unnamed. Fyfe has a named identity; while his wife, as is befitting a natural creature, as opposed to a cultural being, remains unnamed except for her identity as the wife of Fyfe. There are two factors involved here. Traditionally, women have had no identity of their own in the

^o Bumper sticker on a car in Tulip Tree House Parking Lot, Indiana University.

wider society. They were jural minors under the authority of their fathers and husbands. Certainly in our Judeo-Christian heritage, marriage was a transfer of rights over a woman from her father to her husband. She remained a jural minor in the eyes of the law. One of the major social developments of the modern industrial era has been the gradual emergence of women as legal persons. Hence the characterization of Fyfe's wife as a socially differentiated being only with respect to her husband reflects a long-standing tradition that has come increasingly into conflict with changing social conditions. This conflict is one that is acute in familial situations, particularly in the conflict between the image and obligations of woman as wife and mother and as jural and economic actor in her own right. A restatement of the differences between men and women that stresses traditional roles and identity attributes is singularly appropriate for limericks, whose normal context is exclusively male domains such as high school toilets and locker rooms.

The other aspect of the Nature-Culture imagery that deserves comment lies in the type of object that typifies the sexual parts of the male and female actors. The objects that provide the images for Fyfe and his friends' penises are not only cultural objects in the sense that they are manufactured. They are also cultural objects in a stricter sense. As pins, pencils, corks, gimlets, and weapons, men's penises are all instruments; that is, objects used to achieve some goal. They stand in stark contrast to the imagery for women's vaginas. A nest of honey, a mole's hole, a clam, and a wound are all found objects, which may or may not please the finder. The paradox, of course, is that the vagina, the found sexual object of the limerick, is the instrument of birth. It is precisely this paradox that forms the center of the narrative progression of the limerick and the thinking about kinship in it.

In the first stanza of "Fyfe," a kinship relation based on law is established. Fyfe marries his wife. Schneider has pointed out that marriage is symbolized by sexual intercourse and involves a legally regulated sexual relationship. Sexual intercourse, however, is a natural phenomenon, especially when undertaken for its own sake and not for procreation. This is particularly well illustrated by stanzas 14 and 15, where Fyfe goes walking in the woods in the spring and finds couples copulating. Presumably these acts of intercourse take place outside the marriage relationship. These naturally occurring acts are consummated much more easily than the sexual difficulties Fyfe is experiencing in marriage.

Fyfe's difficulties lead him to try to have his wife penetrated by a

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series of cultural objects in stanzas 9 through 14. All to no avail. Culture is defeated by Nature. In stanzas 14 and 15, the copulation in the woods episode, Fyfe's cultural frustration in the face of nature is highlighted. In stanzas 16 through 23, Fyfe's wife gets herself penetrated and artificially inseminated by a pin or needle and a syringe. We might interpret this as the triumph of Culture over Nature. The act of penetration is accomplished not by a penis, which is after all a natural object even if it is metaphorically classified as a cultural thing. It is accomplished instead by a pin and a syringe. Here we have an actual instrument being used to achieve what penises could not. A real cultural object, a syringe, effects what a penis described metaphorically as cultural object could not. In this sense, what man has wrought appears to be more successful than what nature has given men.

This triumph of Culture over Nature is short-lived, however. The final stanzas, 24 through 28, entail the reversal of the cultural triumph of the preceding eight stanzas. In these stanzas Fyfe appears at first to be able to penetrate his wife as a result of her artificial insemination. In stanza 25, he begins to enter. However, he encounters another source of resistance. The baby in his wife's womb, of whose existence he was unaware, is about to be born. His penis is forced out as a result of the birth of the baby, and he ejaculates and "a few minutes later" expires. In stanza 28 we are given his tombstone epitaph, "Shed a tear for poor Fyfe,/ His imperforate wife/ Did him in with the aid of their son."

Fyfe and his wife constitute a legal pair, a husband and a wife. Fyfe is destroyed by a natural pair, a mother and her son. Hence the relationship of law (and culture) that is marriage is overcome by a natural relationship between mother and son that is established by the act of birth. Note that it is the very act of birth itself that destroys Fyfe. The narrative progression of this limerick goes from the establishment of a cultural relationship of kinship, marriage, to its destruction by a natural kinship relationship, birth and the mother-child bond. The triumph of culture through marriage or artificial insemination is short-lived in the face of the facts of nature that culture cannot overcome. The conflict between natural kinship, based on shared common substance through birth and the immediately observable facts of gestation, and cultural kinship as a system of the distribution of legal rights is not resolved but simply restated at a non-empirical level. This conclusion is not entirely without its own paradox. Fyfe's epitaph says that he was done in "with the aid of *their* son [emphasis mine]." Nowhere in the limerick is there

any indication that the semen used by Fyfe's wife in her act of artificial insemination was Fyfe's. In fact it is hardly credible that the semen could have been his since he was still unaware of the child in his wife's womb. Fyfe's son is his only in a legal sense. A marriage establishes legal paternity over a child no matter who the physiological father is. The limerick ends with an assertion of a right derived from a legal relationship in conjunction with a right derived from a relationship of shared natural substance. Perhaps this indicates an interdependence of cultural and natural kinship. From Fyfe's perspective, however, it is a very costly sort of interdependence.

REFERENCES

- Barnes, J. A. 1973. "Genetrix: Genitor: Nature: Culture?" In *The Character of Kinship*, J. Goody, ed. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, D. M. 1968. *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

THE MISFORTUNES OF FYFE

1. There was a young fellow named Fyfe
Who married the pride of his life,
But imagine his pain
When he struggled in vain,
And just couldn't get into his wife.
2. Now the trouble was not with our hero,
Who, though no match for Epstein or Nero,
Had a good little dong
That was five inches long,
And as stiff as a parsnip at zero.
3. But his efforts to poke her, assiduous,
Met a dense growth of hair most prodigious.
Well, he thought he might dint her
By waiting till winter,
But he found that she wasn't deciduous.
4. Now here was this fellow named Fyfe,
Unable to diddle his wife—
Which fact, sad but true,
Left him nothing to do
But bugger the girl all his life.

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5. For diversion this might have been funny,
And of course it *did* save him some money,
But it angered our Fyfey
To think that his wifey
Was hoarding her deep nest of honey.
6. He went whoring to find satisfaction,
But with whores, though accomplished in action,
He never could capture
That fine fucking rapture,
For the thought of his wife was distraction.
7. So here was our fellow named Fyfe
With a truly impervious wife.
She was not worth a damn,
Being close as a clam—
Why, he couldn't get in with a knifel
8. The problem that harassed his soul
Was: what kept him out of her hole?
Was her hymen too tough?
Was she stuffed up with fluff?
Was her coosie the home of a mole?
9. This was just what poor Fyfe couldn't tell,
For her prow was as sound as a bell.
He'd have needed a gimlet
To get into her quimlet,
And it made the poor guy mad as hell.
10. He applied to that fellow from Strensall
For help from his long, pointed pencil,
But Strensy's tool now
Was as blunt as the prow
Of a tug—he'd have needed a stencil.
11. Fyfe searched for the chap from New York
Who had punctured the hymen like cork,
But *he* was quite coy
For he now loved a boy,
And refused to help Fyfe with the stork.
12. Fyfe asked Durand how much he'd charge
(The fellow whose cock could contract or enlarge)
To drill his way in
With his prick like a pin,
And there make it slowly enlarge.

13. But Durand—though he'd fuck with no urgin'—
Warned, "Apart from the risk that she'll burgeon,
Your pride must be low
If you'll meekly forego
A crack at a genuine virgin."
14. In the spring in the woods Fyfe did wander late,
And saw couples preparing to copulate,
But he could not abide
The gay sight, and he cried
At the thought that the pigfuckers penetrate!
15. One couple he foolishly leapt on,
To examine the wound and the weapon.
One was rigid, one deep—
The snug fit made him weep,
And in shame and contrition he crept on.
16. In the meantime, Fyfe's wife, who had wed
With *some* thought to the pleasures of bed,
Was becoming depressed,
In fact damn near obsessed
By her terribly tough maidenhead.
17. She remarked, "When all joking is done,
What I honestly want is a son.
I would like impregnation
If not copulation—
But to wed and have neither's no fun."
18. She grew worried and nervous and thin,
Till Fyfe said, "You would jump at a pin!"
And these words, though unkind,
Put the thought in her mind
That a pin-point *perhaps* might get in.
19. Thus she thought of synthetic conception,
Which at first seemed like basest deception,
But her cunt was so sore
From Fyfe's trying to bore,
That she gave the thought better reception.
20. And indeed, though it's sad to relate it,
Her first fuck was so sadly belated,
That a poke by a pin,
Though ever so thin,
Was a prospect that made her elated.
21. To be brief, the great action was done:
There was artfully planted, a son,

- Through a bodkin that filled her,
And wonderfully thrilled her—
More fun than a son of a gun!
22. This syringe, which was long but quite thin,
Left a hole that Fyfe couldn't get in,
But he kept right on busting
And jousting and thrusting,
On account of his excess of vim.
23. While she mused on this synthetic screw,
The sperm got well-planted, and grew,
And the great day approached
When her breech would be broached,
But Fyfe, the poor wretch, never knew.
24. One night, while in sheer desperation
He prodded and poked like tarnation,
His wife groaned with pain—
She gave way!! Would he gain
The goal of three years' contemplation?
25. The head of his dingus went in!
He felt sure he was going to win!
He thrust like a demon,
He spilt all his semen,
And scraped off a square inch of skin.
26. But despite all his trying, he found
He was losing, not gaining, his ground.
Though he clung to her thighs
While he tried for the prize,
Each push *in* caused a greater rebound.
27. The harder the poor fellow tried,
The more her hold filled, from inside,
Till he fell back quite spent,
His prick battered and bent,
And a few minutes later—he died.
28. As he passed, a new life was begun,
And his tomb tells how he was undone:
"Shed a tear for poor Fyfe,
His imperforate wife
Did him in with the aid of their son."