

Ballad: Thomas Winterbottom Hance

In "The Bab Ballads," the ballad "Thomas Winterbottom Hance" tells the playful tale of an unmatched swordsman in Merry England, Thomas Winterbottom Hance, celebrated for his extraordinary ability to cleave objects like silk handkerchiefs and legs of mutton cleanly in two with his saber, without any strain. His daily practice in Dover draws the ire of Monsieur Pierre from across the channel in Calais. Pierre, proclaiming himself the bravest in France, is irritated and vexed by Hance's saber skills, mocking the ease with which Hance slices through inanimate objects which, he notes disdainfully, cannot fight back.

The ballad humorously contrasts the two men's fierce dedication to their art and the frustration it breeds in Pierre, who cannot understand Hance's passion for slicing non-retaliating materials. Amidst their personal vendettas and pursuits of mastery, both Thomas and Pierre are supported by their aging, proud mothers. Hance's mother, described as a "simple, harmless village dame," decides to travel to Dover to witness her son's saber prowess firsthand. Likewise, Pierre's fashionable, near-nonagenarian mother shares her son's disdain for Hance's actions, yet beams with pride over her son's infamous defiance.

The story encapsulates the folly of rivalry, the pride of maternal love, and the peculiar quests for excellence in provincial England and France. Through humorous jabs at national stereotypes and the eccentricities of its characters, the ballad winks at the absurdity of such feuds fueled by pride and misunderstanding. It paints a vivid picture of two families caught up in a cross-channel drama over saber skills and societal perceptions, punctuated by the mothers' pride in their sons' endeavors, however quixotic they may seem to others.