

THE DARK SIDE OF BRER RABBIT

by

Brooks Major

A Paper Prepared for Presentation to the Athenaeum Society, Meeting on

February 7, 1985

at

Hopkinsville, Kentucky

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There are many fairy tales and myths which are a part of our common heritage. Just about all of us shared these stories when we were very small and then proceeded to pass them on to our own children. Such stories as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Cinderella" and common nursery rhymes such as "Old Mother Hubbard" and "Little Jack Horner" are entertaining at a certain age for their surface dramatic qualities and we seldom pause to consider their origin or examine them for any deeper meaning. We do know that many of our fables (myths in which animals have human characteristics) are attributed to Aesop, a Greek of the Sixth Century before Christ.

In this paper, I propose to examine the tales of Uncle Remus for underlying assumptions which we often miss, partly because we tend to be interested in these at a very early age and partly because the stories are so fascinating on the surface. It is my thesis that they tell us a great deal about the African heritage, from whence they ultimately spring, and, as doctors do when they sugar coat a pill, provide us with a fair amount of subliminal teaching without our awareness of it.

Joel Chandler Harris, the creator of Uncle Remus and over 150 tales of Brer Rabbit and his lively society of all the other "creeturs" is the best known and ablest successor of Aesop. While most of us haven't thought of Uncle Remus since we were children - and then our acquaintance

was probably through the cartoon characters of Walt Disney - there is a serious side to this delightful form of literature which is as delightful to the adult as to the child.

When Harris, who was born in Putnam County, Georgia, in 1848 and who spent most of his adult life as an editor and columnist for the Atlanta Constitution, published his first tales spun by Uncle Remus for the amusement of the little son of his master, he was unprepared for the tremendous reception they received. The stories went through edition after edition. Public interest and literary acclaim created a seemingly insatiable demand from the first Uncle Remus story in 1876. The stories were cherished for a number of reasons: the essentially gentle and humane character of the author, which was reflected in Uncle Remus; the re-creation of the circumstances of a lost era in American history; the depiction of a subject race in a non-political and non-hortatory manner, and the sharing of myths, many previously unknown by scholars and many previously identified from the rich African cultural heritage.

Much had been written about Afro-Americans by 1876, but it was written primarily by whites and primarily in the context of the pros and cons of slavery. Most blacks prior to the 1870s were, of necessity, non-literary. Those few who did make print did so either with polemics against white masters or, as often, dealt with questions far removed from the black experience. Few indeed were interested in black mythology which had been transmitted orally from generation to generation, sometimes even from Africa itself. Except for Harris, this interest was not to develop until a century later. Black writers were trying to escape the heritage and white writers despised it. Harris's stories of Uncle Remus were not the products of his own imagination, but were transcriptions of fables which he had heard in

the slave quarters in Putnam County, primarily when he worked as a printer's apprentice for Joseph Addison Turner, who published The Countryman during the Civil War. Harris created the composite character of Uncle Remus and provided the artful setting of the stories as well as a faithful reproduction of the dialect.

What do these stories tell us of the blacks who passed them on in an oral tradition that spanned continents, generations, and the restrictions of slavery? Myths, or fables, "are often viewed as highly improbable stories used by primitive people to explain things before there was science." The significance of myth, however, goes far beyond this. According to Jannaro in The Art of Being Human, "Mythology sustains life in the psychological sense. The values, ideals, hopes and fears which underlie mythological stories are fundamental to the human outlook....Mythology can be called the cumulative wisdom of the human race." Plato, in his Republic, recommends that education begin with myth, as did Aristotle, who observed: "The friend of wisdom is also the friend of myth." Consider the accurate reflection of our own national hopes, ideals, and self-image in such myths as Washington and the cherry tree, Paul Bunyan, and the Jeffersonian Agrarian Myth. Myths reflect, not external fact, but internal ideals and conceptualizations.

In the case of Uncle Remus, the fable - in which the animals display human characteristics (and character) - provides the ideal vehicle. Words and ideas that would be offensive or subversive to the established order if spoken by people, become amusing when spoken by "creeturs." Often his young hearer was troubled by the lack of a sense of right and wrong among the animals, even, indeed especially, in the case of Brer Rabbit. To put

it bluntly, Brer Rabbit stole with impunity, with abandon, with positive relish. The little boy could not understand why, if the animals could talk and reason like people, stealing was not wrong for them. Brer Fox had stolen some pullets and a duck from Mr. Man and Brer Rabbit, in turn, had stolen them from Brer Fox. I quote Uncle Remus's ingenuous explanation:

"It seem like," he said, glancing at the little boy, "dat folks is got one way er lookin' at things, an' it's all bleeze to be des de way dey think it oughter be. Ef dey had diffunt eyes, an' ef deze eyes wuz on a diffunt level, dey wouldn't see de way dey does now; what dey see would be a little mo' slonchways, an' den eve'ybody would git diffunt idees. Well, de diffunt eyes an' de diffunt idees dat folks mought a had, dat des zactly what de creeturs got. What dey see dey see slonchways, stidder upendickler. Folks got der ways, an' de creeturs is got der'n, an' deze yer ways wuz proned in 'em fum de fust.

"Creetur law ain't folks' law, nohow you kin fix it," Uncle Remus went on, with the unction of a country preacher. "Dar wuz ol' Brer Fox, wid his pullets an' his puddle duck; an' you done got de idee dat Brer Rabbit done wrong when he work his head an' han's fer ter git holt un um. But le' me ax you dis: Whar did Brer Fox git um? He ain't git um at home, kaze he wuz totin' um dar when he fust ran across 'im; he ain't git um in de woods, kaze pullets an' puddle ducks ain't grow on trees - an' ef dey is, Brer Fox can't clim' no higher dan he kin jump. Now, you kin put it down an' carry four, dat wharsomever Brer Fox lay han's on um, he ain't buy'd um, an' needer wuz dey gun to 'im. Dat much you don't hatter guess at; you des knows it by yo' nose an' yo' two big toes."

"Let 'lone dat, de pullets an' de puddle duck mought not a b'long'd ter de one what Brer Fox tuck um frum, an' I boun' you dat 'twould take a mighty long time fer ter hunt up an' s'arch out de nick-names an' de pettygrees er all dem what had um 'fo' Brer Rabbit drapped um in his rasher-bag."

No clearer explanation could be given of the way property rights depend upon the point of view. To steal may be one thing, but to "take" is quite another.

Like many myths from entirely different sources (Hansel and Gretel, or Little Red Riding Hood, for instances), the tales of Uncle Remus mix an incredible amount of cruelty in with the general account of the narrative. Since these popular myths are generally considered tales for the amusement of children, the amount of mayhem and grisly death they contain is really astounding when you look at it closely. One time, Brer Rabbit decided he would play a prank on Brer B'ar who, like all the larger or more predatory animals, was not too bright. Knowing that Brer B'ar and his wife felt that they should always be in the latest fashion, Brer Rabbit carefully combed his hair and plastered it down slick. When Brer B'ar saw this and inquired about it, Brer Rabbit said this was the latest style among the best folks. Brer B'ar promptly went home and told his wife but know matter how they tried, neither Brer B'ar nor his wife could achieve the proper result. Brer B'ar then asked Brer Rabbit how it was done. Brer Rabbit replied that it was simple. Every night, he simply went home, took off his head, combed it carefully, then replaced it. Brer B'ar told his wife, but neither could get the hang of removing their heads. On further inquiry, Brer Rabbit indicated it required an ax. Brer B'ar then went home and required his wife to remove his head in this fashion, which she did, much to the amusement of Brer Rabbit.

On another occasion, Brer Fox ran Brer Rabbit into a hollow log. There was a hole at the other end and Brer Rabbit kept going, but Brer Fox didn't know that and he promptly stopped up the entrance and built a fire and burned the log. He then rejoiced at Brer Rabbit's untimely demise. Upon seeing Brer Rabbit happy and healthy the next day, Brer Fox was astonished. Brer Rabbit thanked him for the favor of the day before, explaining that the log had been soaked with honey and the heat of the fire

caused it to pour from the log, both filling Brer Rabbit's stomach and providing him with a protective covering. Brer Fox liked honey and Brer Rabbit said he knew where there was another hollow log and would be glad to accommodate him. You don't have to guess the result. Brer Fox was burned to a cinder. Another time, Brer Rabbit suggested to King Lion that the only cure for his ailment was the application of a fresh foxhide. So said, so done, as Uncle Remus would have said. Then Brer Rabbit thoughtfully said it would be nice to send the meat to the widow and the little foxes, since they would probably be needing help. Of course, its only fair to remember that Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, and numerous others spent a fair amount of time chasing Brer Rabbit and their intent was more than just passing the time of day. Nevertheless, for stories intended apparently for the amusement of children, these tales do contain a lot of callousness respecting life and limb.

One time, the little boy said to Uncle Remus, "I think that Brother Rabbit was very cruel."

"Shoo, honey," exclaimed the old man. "You might talk dat away 'bout folks, but creeturs - well, folks is folks en creeturs is creeturs, en you can't make um needer mo' ner less....You er what you is, en you can't be no is-er; I'm what I am en I can't be no am-er. It all done been fix, an' I ain't see nobody yit what kin onfix it. Creeturs is natchully got ha'sh ideas, en you may take notice: wharsomever you see h'ar en bristles, right dar you er mo' dan ap' ter fin' claws en tushes."

In addition to a lack of commonly accepted morality and a certain harsh cruelty, the tales consistently exalt sly wit above brute strength. One thing about the stories that the little boy failed to understand was the remarkable success of Brer Rabbit when the rabbits that he saw on the

plantation were not only weak, having neither claws nor tushes, but also very timid. One evening he laid this problem before Uncle Remus.

"Ef I ain't mighty mistaken, honey, you wanter know how come Brer Rabbit kin outdo de yuther creeturs when he ain't got no tushes nor claws, an' not much strenk....Well, dat's de very idential thing dat de tales is all about. Look like he wuz born little so he kin cut up capers an' play pranks no matter whar 'bout you put 'im at. What he can't do wid his foots he kin do wid his head, an' when his head git 'im in trouble dats deeper dan what he counted on, he puts his 'pen'ence in his foots, kaze dats whar he keeps his lippity-clip an' his blickety-blick."

The heroes of Uncle Remus's tales, other than Brer Rabbit, are such small creeturs as Brer Tarrypin, Brer Cricket, and Miz Pa'tridge. Perhaps this is not surprising since the myths themselves are intended to give comfort as well as amusement to the small and the helpless. They are not designed to help the masters of "the System" adjust to life.

A final characteristic of the tales of Uncle Remus fits into the more widely held concept of the purpose of myths through the ages: that is, to explain the origin of things to a pre-scientific people. Many of the more delightful stories of Ovid, one of the primary sources of Greek and Roman mythology, are etiological in content, as are many of those of Uncle Remus. Who, other than Uncle Remus, is prepared to state that the guineas got their spots as a gift from Miz Cow? It seems that King Lion was attacking Miz Cow, and the guineas stirred up so much dust with their wings that the King was blinded and Miz Cow "jes' natur'lly hooked his intruls out." When Miz Cow asked the guineas what they would like to have, they said some sort of camouflaje. So, Miz Cow let down her milk, dipped her tail into the pail, and speckled the guineas with white, which they have worn ever since.

How, except courtesy of Uncle Remus, would the world ever know why the rooster always scratches? Didn't he have to tell us that one time when all the fowls were invited to a party, and old Mr. Peafowl blew the dinner horn, there appeared to be no food except a large pile of cornbread and ashcake. Mr. Rooster turned up his nose, and "out he strut." The others discovered that underneath the bread was a "whole passel of meat an' green, en bake' taters, en bile turnips." Of course Mr. Rooster was too proud to go back to the party, but ever since then, he alway scratches to see what's underneath, even when "der rations is in plain sight." We can also learn why Brer Dog sniffs at any and everything as he travels along. It seems one day King Lion wanted to go fishing, and Brer Rabbit persuaded him that he should sit in for the king while he was fishing. One of the first petitioners was Brer Dog, who was no friend of Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit had a little "turkentime" mixed with about a pound of red pepper and had the others grab Brer Dog and rub him thoroughly from head to heel. Brer Dog let out a howl and took off and from that day to this has not been found. When the other dogs said he was gone and asked how they could find him, Brer Rabbit said they could find him by the smell, since he had doused him to kill the fleas and cure the bites. So, since that day, Brer Dog's relatives have been smelling for him.

One can also discover how the lion lost his wool and the buzzard his voice, not to speak of why the African is black but has white palms and soles on his feet. The myths of Uncle Remus conform to a standard of mythology which is common to human thought and which goes back further than the written language. The basic content is universal, though the setting is in terms of the pre-war Southland as seen from the black perspective. In this sense, the myth reveals not only our common human heritage, but also, in its external setting, the peculiarities of our place and time.

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