

NOTES FOR QUERIES

REFLECTIONS AND REGURGITATIONS UPON THE WELL-KNOWN URBAN BELIEF TALE "THE RED VELVET CAKE" AS THE ALAN DUNDES NEW AND IMPROVED METHOD OF LEGEND INTERPRETATION, PRESENTED FOR THE FIRST TIME TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN THE SOMEWHAT RECENTLY PUBLISHED REPORT OF THE SOMEWHAT LESS RECENTLY CONCLUDED UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES CONFERENCE ON THE LEGEND, MIGHT BE APPLIED TO IT SHOWING -- YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO, OR: A MODEST CONTRIBUTION TOWARD THE REVIVAL AND REVITALIZATION OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY MODE, CURRENTLY SO SADLY NEGLECTED AMONG US, OF SATIRE DIRECTED TOWARD DIVERSE MATTERS OF SCHOLARSHIP

In the recent book American Folk Legend: A Symposium, known in folklore circles as "The Hand Book of Legend," Alan Dundes has an article entitled "On the Psychology of Legend" which develops a new, old approach to folklore analysis which can best be characterized by the words he himself had previously applied to the famous article on the famous Jack of the Beanstock in his famous The Study of Folklore; this is indeed, as was said in times past, a "short but wild Freudian Interpretation" (p. 107).

I fear it may lose something in translation, but my summary of his analysis of the legend of old G. Washington and the Cherry Tree, my favorite in the article, goes something like this: G. is a real father figure to us all as witnessed by the many signs saying that he slept hither and yon and as witnessed by, reason par obvious, the monument we "erected" (notice the word; that curls the old eyebrows, doesn't it?) to him -- clearly the world's largest phallic symbol. Dundes also offers as evidence the fact that the word "cherry" is a widely used verbal symbol for virginity and for sexual intercourse when used with the verbs "to get" or "to break." Thus, and so, he concludes that the story of Good Ole George chopping down the cherry tree clearly means that he wanted to sleep with his mother and we all love him for it.

My first reaction to this ingenious explication was mild doubt, but after sober reflection this snap judgment was replaced by full blown incredibility.

However, once upon a time, some professor in some class I was taking suggested "reduplicability" as the primary test for any attempt at a "Scientific Method." By this word, which is not in even Webster's Third, he meant, he explained, that any valid method could be repeated by another researcher with similar results and could also be applied to other similar data with similar results. I remembered these wise words and decided it was only fair to reserve judgment and attempt to apply the Dundes method to another legend.

The next problem was one of choice. Several folklorists have suggested that one of the most widespread urban belief tales in modern America is the "Red Velvet Cake" story; and, since ethnocuisine has always seemed to me to be a tasteful branch of folklore research, I chose that legend for my attempt.

The story, as all men know in this kingdom by the C1000, is that a lady was served a most delicious piece of a dark, red cake at a famous and

expensive restaurant. She asked, nay pleaded, for the recipe, and finally received it -- and a bill for one hundred dollars plus versions and variations.

"On the Psychology of the Red Velvet Cake" -- it seemed rather unpromising at first; I feared even the master would find it hard to make sexy cake. But then, ah, my friends, and ah, my foes, by candlelight a vision appeared, based on the most significant of evidence, to wit; the words "red" and "velvet" are certainly verbal sexual symbols, or at least sexy adjectives; and the cake, at least in one variation I cooked, is covered all over with a thick, white, gooey icing.

Ah ha!

Then I remembered not to forget the contextual situation. Except for the artificial classroom situation (we read the legend; a student says, "That happened to my aunt!;" and I say, depending on whether he is smallish or a football tackle type, either, "The story is usually reported as having happened to an acquaintance or relative of the teller; that is why it is called a belief tale, stupid," or, "Far out, man.") the only times I have collected the story have been when it was told to me by kind ladies who concluded these natural performance situations by offering a sample of the goodie in question. Also, everyone of these women has, absolutely without a single exception, cut the cake before they served it. I thought for a moment, searching into the hidden recesses of my mind; "cut cake" -- a sharp, pointed object is held erect (recognize that monumental word?) and thrust into the cake and then pushed and pulled back and forth and forth and back. And then, and then, friends, a piece is eaten!

I realized that the Red Velvet Cake tale lets you have your cake and eat it too.

And then I remembered also those profound popular songs that touched deep currents in the collective unconsciousness of America: "If I Knew You Were coming, I'd a Baked a Cake" and "Come on My House, I'll Give You a Cake." I noted also the remark that laid bare the decadence of an empire and inspired a deluge, "Let them eat cake."

I can't bear to go on, but from my analysis of the Red Velvet Cake emerge the requisite magic three conclusions, which I trust are not half-baked: 1) By performing the item of the "Red Velvet Cake" in its normal contextual situation, the teller is telling the tallee that she has a \$100.00 cake (i.e. real hot stuff) and by offering a piece of the cake is communicating (remember the novel The Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding?) that she should have been George's mother; 2) When you, as a folklorist are visiting this nice old lady and she tells you "that" story and offers you "a piece" you, as a cool, scientifically dispassionate observer should either, depending on your personal predilections, a. blush prettily and turn the cake upside down on her head, or b. take your tie et. al. off and chase her around the room; 3) With imagination, verve, creativity, and a thorough knowledge of all names used for the sun in all the Indo-European languages, the Alan Freud method can be applied to the "Red Velvet Cake" legend as well as it can be applied to the "G. Washington, C. Tree" tale.

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