FOREWORD

No doubt some members of the American Folklore Society will be a little startled to find this volume one of their Memoirs in an era when publishers ignore collectanea and are dedicated to issuing interlinear (and painful) texts. In the selection process of a jury of readers—a process to which this editor is unwaveringly devoted and with which he complies even when its verdict disagrees with his own, although this time it did not disagree with him and he is more devoted than ever—the first reader to appraise the manuscript was quite negative, dismissing the work as *cute*, hardly a term to warrant scholarly publication; the second was neutral, less than enthusiastic, because of the lack of Sesotho texts; but then three quite affirmative votes came from readers who were an Africanist, an African folklorist, and an American folklorist.

I hope the doubting members will read through the volume; I feel confident that, if they do read, the majority of them will agree with me that this is a rare and excellent work. For the lay reader the volume, I think, will present a certain charm and a challenge to see the other-than-simple narrative significance: for instance, the sophisticated interplay of two proverbs in story 19; the flight from the female cannibal in 20, which has so many parallels including the American Negro version in the Alabama Federal Writers' Project in Ben Botkin's *Treasury of American Folklore* (pp. 682–687);

the jealousy in 21 like that of Joseph's brethren in the Old Testament; and 22 with its reminiscences of Cain and Abel combined with the common motif of the singing bird informant.

Although the professional folklorist may delight in such details, he will not, unfortunately, consider them adequate justification for publication by his scholarly society. There are, however, two very good reasons why professional folklorists should read *Tales from the Basotho*. One is the fact that it is, of course, a translation. The other is that the tales of a Black South African race are presented to White South Africa by one of their own group in the knowledge that a faithful production of those tales will win admiration for their virtuosity and respect for the tribal performers of the tales.

For the first point, I refer to the trichotomy, belonging I suppose to Alan Dundes, of text, context, and texture. Briefly the *text* is what the story says on the surface, the narrative line. The *context* is the situation of the tale performance, a situation that gives to a performance its particular meaning: what kind of a teller performed for what kind of an audience when and where under what social, economic, or political conditions. The *texture* is the stylistic formularization that makes the tale seem like a folktale instead of a popular or literary short story. The text is easily determined. The context can be determined by anyone who has been trained to look for it and to appreciate its significance. The texture can be sensed by anyone who is completely at home with the language in which the tale has been performed and who is in full sympathetic understanding of the folk for whom the tale is performed. Even this paragon of sympathy and knowledge may have trouble defining, except perhaps by example, that texture. And while it is quite possible to give a good idea of text in a translation, and it is even probable that translation can give a good understanding of context, it is usually felt that texture is impossible to translate. It's easy to point out "Once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after" as parts of the texture of English tales, but what is the distinguish-

ing texture of a Malay tale or a Chippewa fable? And why do translations of Zuñi myth sound either like gibberish or like stray segments of the King James Bible?

This is not the place to debate those questions, but the point is that *Tales from the Basotho* is a translation, indeed a kind of linguistic double play from Sesotho to Afrikaans to English. Yet I think most readers will feel instantly that these are folktales. And they will not feel so because these tales have a shadowy resemblance to the style of English folktales. I don't know Afrikaans, but I would suppose that these tales also don't resemble in style Afrikaans folktales. Certainly, I don't know Sesotho, and so I can't make any ridiculous claims for their similarity in style to Sesotho tales. Perhaps no one can give the exact effect of folkstyle in a quite different language. How could it be measured or determined except perhaps by someone absolutely bilingual in the two languages in question? Be that as it may, these Basotho tales somehow convey the impression of alien folktales expertly and coherently performed. Perhaps judicious use of simple, understandable, but uncustomary formulas and of a rather peculiar repetition is one key to the creation of this sense of texture. Whatever the secret, both Minnie Postma, who has done it in Afrikaans, and Susie McDermid, who has done it in English, deserve high praise.

The other point is a more ticklish one in these days of extraordinary sensitivity in matters ethnic or racial. I am going to say it right out in public, knowing it may not be understood as the high praise I intend it to be: in many ways Minnie Postma must be the Joel Chandler Harris of South Africa. Whatever his reasons, Joel Chandler Harris did attempt to put on paper folktales that he considered gems of narrative beauty and proverbial wisdom and that his peers had ignored as the paltry mouthings of an enslaved people who could be considered as, at best, simple irresponsible children incapable of, and unworthy of, the good things in life. And in his effort to give texture to his tales, Harris created for them on

paper a representation of a dialect that was variously considered scarcely intelligible, laughably ignorant, scandalously inaccurate, and most certainly not a vehicle for an art form. Harris turned the black (as he thought them to be) folktales of Uncle Remus into the standard entertainment for many generations of white children, wherever the dialect could be read. That much has to be granted Harris, whatever harm he unintentionally did by creating stereotypes of Negro subservience, happy-go-luckiness, and role-acceptance.

So far as one can tell from this volume, Mrs. Postma has wisely done nothing to create a stereotype Mosotho, favorable or unfavorable, to match Harris' Uncle Remus and Daddy Jake, but she has given the impression of a justly proud Basotho folktale trove and narrative performance of that trove that comes through into a foreign language as few other folktale collections have.

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