

THE NECESSARY JOKER

OVER CENTURIES OF HUMAN HISTORY, TRICKSTERS MADE THINGS INTERESTING

By Walter Kendrick

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"Trickster" is the label that anthropologists attach to a figure who appears in myths and legends all over the world, throughout human history. For the ancient Greeks, trickster was Hermes, who stole Apollo's cattle; for the pre-Christian Norse, he was Loki, who let the giants steal the Apples of Immortality. The Yoruba of Nigeria tell of Eshu, who taught mankind the art of divination by casting palm nuts; Hindus honor the young Krishna, who ate up all the butter in his mother's larder, then lied to her so prettily she had to laugh, "charmed by her cunning and shameless child." Christianity used to admit trickster in the annual Feast of Fools that preceded Lent and allowed even the pope to be mocked. But that safety valve has largely been blocked -- to our peril, according to Lewis Hyde. "Beware," he writes in "Trickster Makes This World," "the social system that cannot laugh at itself, that responds to those who do not know their place by building a string of prisons."

"Trickster Makes This World" is an unclassifiable book. In part, it is an exercise in phenomenology, placing trickster stories side by side and identifying the features that transcend the stories' various times and places of origin to tell us something eternal about human life. If, for example, a native Alaskan tale of clever Raven shares elements with a Shinto myth of the storm god Susa-no-o, and both of these can be linked with Carl Jung's famous dream of God defecating on a cathedral, the differences among North America, Asia, and Europe drop away to reveal a story so universal it might as well be true: "a story whose protagonist challenges a weakened spritual system with its own exclusions and, out of that, acquires a psychological method, a new technology for the human race."

Hyde's subtle analyses defy brief summary; it's fair to say, however, that for him, tricksters represent the "strangeness and wonder of reflective imagination," which loves to cross borders, violate boundaries, consecrate the low, and debase the exalted. Many myths portray tricksters as thieves or liars, but as Hyde shows, "Theft is the beginning of meaning. To put it another way, a prohibition on theft is an attempt to constrain meaning, to stop its multiplication, to preserve an 'essence,' the 'natural,' the 'real.'" When Hermes steals the divine cattle or Krishna gobbles forbidden butter, they are moved by physical appetite, but this low drive compels them to considerable ingenuity in the interpretation of signs, to produce a meaning other than what the owners intended. And trickster's thievery demonstrates that all prohibitions are arbitrary: If they can be breached, they can be changed.

When tricksters lie, their motives, again, are base, but they do not stop at simple denial:

“Anyone whose lies merely contradict the truth is still part of a game whose rules have preceded him; he or she merely inverts the case, offering not-A in place of A. The problem is to make a ‘lie’ that cancels the opposition and so holds the possibility of new worlds.” Caught by his mother, Yasoda, with butter on his face, Krishna tries out several excuses before he hits on the one that makes her laugh: “I didn't steal the butter, Ma. How could I steal it? Doesn't everything in the house belong to us?” The boy god has leapt out of the system, not opposing the prohibition but relocating it; he has uttered, as tricksters typically do, a “mind-boggling falsity that calls the truth itself into question.”

Moving from anthropology into literary and cultural criticism, Hyde seeks out such figures in modern Western culture, which, though it has abandoned trickster himself, sorely needs his spirit. Hyde finds traces of it in such disparate figures as Frederick Douglass, Marcel Duchamp, Allen Ginsberg, and Maxine Hong Kingston. Statesman, artist, poet, novelist -- all situate themselves between sets of cultural or political imperatives, regarding neither code as essential but using each to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the other.

In Ginsberg's “Kaddish” (1961), for example, he worked, according to Hyde, “the edge between what can and can't be said,” describing the most sordid details of his mother's madness. These were things of which, American culture declared, he should have been too ashamed to speak. Yet what qualifies Ginsberg as possessing some of trickster's spirit isn't just that he spoke them; it's that he spoke the shame as well. Ginsberg and Kingston exemplify for Hyde those artists who “do not escape from shame but turn toward it and engage with it. They wrestle with it; they try to change its face; they kill it in one form so as to resurrect it in another.” When trickster gets hold of the line between speech and silence, a new world can break open.

At bottom, Hyde says, all the world's tricksters, both mythical and real, assert “a paradox”: “that the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that culture is based on.” Any culture so obsessed with purity that it seeks to stifle its tricksters courts “a subtle but serious danger”: “this suppression hobbles the imagination that copes with the shifting and contingent nature of things, and so invites apocalyptic change when something more playful would have sufficed.”

The rich and fascinating tapestry of “Trickster Makes This World” becomes a bit bewildering at times, as the reader attempts to keep pace with Hyde's agile leaps from century to century and culture to culture. Now and then he grows a bit overingenious, as if he felt himself a trickster, too, spinning out one idea after another simply because he gets such pleasure from doing it. Yet like the classic tricksters, Hyde is always serious, most profoundly so when he plays around. What the world needs now, he says, isn't more prisons; it's more of trickster's spirit, which “will play with any concept, no matter how serious,” rejoicing in the miracle of the human mind.