

Mother Catherine

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 09 Oct 1998

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Robert Borski — 09 Oct 1998, 11:48

In LEXICON URTHUS, under the entry for Catherine can be read the following commentary: "she probably was a Pelerine and her reason for leaving the order (of 'professional virgins,' as Agia called it) may well have been the carnal knowledge of Ouen and resulting pregnancy. She was probably arrested not for any crime, but for the unknown Severian's protection."

My take on this, however, is slightly different and is based on Ouen's testimony (CITADEL, Chapter 32) when Severian asks him, "A woman you loved--or perhaps only one who loved you--a dark woman--was taken once?" To which his father replies: "Once, sieur. Yes, sieur, Catherine was her name. It's an old-fashioned name name, they tell me." And then: "There was trouble, as you say, sieur. She'd run off from some order of monials. The law got her, and I never saw her again."

My read of this is that Catherine was **already** on the run when she met Ouen, and then became pregnant in the one conjugal episode they had, shortly **after which** she's arrested. Given Ouen's livelihood--he's been working in inns since he was ten--I find it difficult to imagine him first meeting monial Catherine, then Catherine (who after all is probably an exultant) surrendering her virginity to a potboy/waiter. Whereas being on the run, and needing a place to stay or hide out for a night, she'd probably accept a berth from most anyone. And given the fact that she and Ouen coupled only once, it also seems likely her pregnancy would only be detected later, after she'd been incarcerated. (This is why I have trouble with the protective custody aspect mantis suggests--I doubt the authorities realize she's pregnant until well into her incarceration).

As to why she's on the run from the Pelerines, I can only speculate. She may have been a slave like Winnoc who wanted her freedom or she may have simply stole something from the order (the Pelerines have a fair amount of wealth, it seems). My pet theory, however, is that she stole the Claw--or more appropriately it stole her (the same way it did Severian after the fiacre crash), this being the Claw's way of ensuring the Conciliator's eventual rebirth.

I also think it's fairly obvious that Valeria is Catherine's mother (meaning Severian has slept with both grandmothers).

As for the woman Severian sees under arrest in the Path of Air by the Praetorians on his return to the House Absolute (URTH, Chapter 41), this is the **original** Katherine, the patron saint of the Torturers, recalled to him (or perhaps revived like the assassin in the secret passageway) by the long-dead Maxentius, who's present in Severian like all the other autarchs. In many ways it's a completion of a cycle. (I also believe it's possible for us to posit Katherine may have been involved in a plot to assassinate Maxentius, a crime for which she'll be beheaded first figuratively and then ritually for centuries to come).

Robert Borski

m.driussi — 09 Oct 1998, 20:15 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski,

I think it was in Feeley's essay where the idea that the pelerines had regular commerce with the cloisonne shop family was first raised. The shop sold crucifixes; the pelerines are Red Cross girls. This was a direction as to the how and why Catherine (formerly of the pelerines) would end up with Ouen (formerly of the cloisonne shop).

While I don't for a minute suppose that the pelerines would have one of their own sent to the Matachin Tower for any crime, let alone something as mild as breaking a vow of virginity, still, you bring up an interesting point that has vexed essayists for years--what crime, real or suspected, would be serious enough to warrant Catherine's stay with the torturers? And who is issuing this warrant for her arrest (since it can't be either the pelerines or the torturers)? After all, the prisoners therein are basically political prisoners or sick wackos like the woman who made furniture out of children. This then is the Mystery of Catherine's Arrest.

=mantis=