

Severian as Marcus Aurelius

The Urth list — 8 messages, 4 voices, 27 Oct 1999

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Ron Hale-Evans — 27 Oct 1999, 14:32

I'm new to the list, so please forgive me if this has already been discussed.

We know that Wolfe is interested in writing about the classical period from the Soldier books, and that though a Christian, he shows an admiration for the virtue of certain ancient pagans, so it seems quite plausible to me that the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, better known as Marcus Aurelius, could form part of the basis for Sev's character. Not only is Antoninus a philosopher-emperor, just as Sev is a philosopher-autarch, but the tone of the New Sun books and the tone of the Meditations are very similar to my ear, and the books appeal to me for some of the same reasons, one being that both Sev and Antoninus are men who strive through their philosophy to be good.

Sev was a torturer before (and while?) becoming Conciliator and Autarch, yet we are faced with the paradox that he is somehow good. It is claimed, by some historians at least, that Antoninus as Emperor ordered a number of early Christians to be tortured and killed, yet he seems to the reader to have been a good man as well. Could these paradoxes be somehow intertwined in the Wolfean authorial mind?

Peace...

Ron H-E

Ron Hale-Evans: [rwhe at apocalypse.org](mailto:rwhe@apocalypse.org) ... <<http://www.apocalypse.org/~rwhe/>>
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Hexagram-8 I Ching Mailing List: <<http://www.apocalypse.org/~rwhe/hex8.html>>
Positive Revolution FAQ: <<http://www.ludism.org/posrev/>>

Charles Dye — 27 Oct 1999, 23:51 · follows Ron Hale-Evans

Ron Hale-Evans <[rwhe at apocalypse.org](mailto:rwhe@apocalypse.org)> writes:

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I think you may have more luck mapping Marcus Aurelius to Patera Silk. Severian is Claudius -- the Graves version. (Could the grave robbers in Chapter I of Shadow be some sort of horrible unspoken punning homage to Robert Graves?)

For fun, compare Master Ultan with Graves's description of Sulpicius at the end of Chapter V of I, Claudius. Ultan informs us that his Library has a reading room reserved for the Autarch Sulpicius....

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Ron Hale-Evans — 03 Nov 1999, 11:25 · follows Charles Dye

At 11:51 PM 10/27/99, you wrote:

Ron Hale-Evans <rwhe at apocalypse.org> writes:

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We know that Wolfe is interested in writing about the classical period from the Soldier books, and that though a Christian, he shows an admiration for the virtue of certain ancient pagans, so it seems quite plausible to me that the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, better known as Marcus Aurelius, could form part of the basis for Sev's character.

I think you may have more luck mapping Marcus Aurelius to Patera Silk.

Could be; I have only read the first two Long Sun books, and that some time ago. (One reason is they seem to me to lack the richness of tone that I find in both TBotNS and Marcus Aurelius.) But see below.

Severian is Claudius -- the Graves version.

Both Claudius and Severian backed into the throne, and both are lame. But I think Claudius is presented as something of a bumbling fool (though of course he often plays the fool as well), and this is hard to say of Severian. And Sev and Marcus Aurelius both lead armies into battle, something Claudius could never do.

Another tidbit: The concept of self-sufficiency was a primary one for the Stoics. What is that word in Greek? "Autarkês." (That's an 'e' with a circumflex accent for those with 7-bit mailers.) See <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>>. Malrubius's lecture to Severian on autarchy and self-rule sounds similar to Stoic passages on the same topic.

(Could the grave robbers
in Chapter I of _Shadow_ be some sort of horrible unspoken punning
homage to Robert Graves?)

Gallows humour occurs throughout TBotNS, so if Sev is to any degree a Claudius figure, I would not put it past Wolfe.

Disclaimer: I am mainly familiar with _I, Claudius_ through television, not the book.

For fun, compare Master Ultan with Graves's description of Sulpicius
at the end of Chapter V of _I, Claudius_. Ultan informs us that his
Library has a reading room reserved for the Autarch Sulpicius...

Will do.

Ron H-E

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Alex David Groce — 03 Nov 1999, 15:08 · follows Ron Hale-Evans

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Actually, in CLAUDIUS THE GOD, he does just that--using (IIRC, it's been a good while since I read it) elephants in the battle to frighten the British. Claudius is actually (in Graves' version) a decent military planner, and the battle description and especially the elephants are (I think) a clear influence on the "look and feel" of the battles in CITADEL. In general, from the prophecy of the Sybil at Cumae, etc., Severian is quite explicitly patterned on Claudius. In fact the quickest way to sum up what happens to Severian is: take the events that happen to Claudius, mix in the Gospel narratives, and then embed it all in a sword-and-sorcery journey tale.

Disclaimer: I am mainly familiar with I, Claudius_ through television, not the book.

The books are quite entertaining, and Claudius is much less of a fool than in the television series (or, quite probably, history). And they are definitely a big influence on NEW SUN--for example, I think Valeria's name is Valeria because Claudius' wife was Valeria Messalina.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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Matthew Malthouse — 04 Nov 1999, 11:05 · follows Alex David Groce

Ron Hale-Evans wrote:

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Claudius might not have "lead" armies into battle but he did, iirc, command them. Graves recounts the strategies of the battle of "Burnt Wood" (Brentwood, Essex, England) including the use of elephants and the stilt walking soldiers disguised as storks that strikes me as very Wolfean, or better that the one battle Severian tells of has elements reminiscent of Graves.

By the time Severian ascends to the Autarchy I doubt that he's any more "lead" armies into battle than Claudius did.

But as to characters Graves' trick is to slowly lead the reader into the realisation that Claudius understands far more than those around him, and the reader, realise. Wolfe however gradually exposes Severian's claims of authoritative memory as unreliable - an opposite process.

Matthew

Charles Dye — 04 Nov 1999, 08:24 · follows Matthew Malthouse

Alex David Groce <Alex_Groce at gs246.sp.cs.cmu.edu> writes:

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because Claudius' wife was Valeria Messalina.

Definitely, but the fact that Valeria is a *heliotropic* flower was clearly a big bonus!

Speaking of flowers, isn't Marcus's reign believed to have been mellowed by his use of a mind-altering drug? There's a connection with Severian, perhaps.

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Ron Hale-Evans — 04 Nov 1999, 13:14 · follows Charles Dye

To those who say Severian was modelled more on Claudius than Marcus Aurelius: Uncle! As Jim Henley put it the other day, "I yield to your superior evidence. Indeed, I roll on my back and stretch my neck before you, making piteous mewling sounds." (I found this retraction so charming that I sent the snippet to a few friends.)

At 11:05 AM 11/4/99 +0000, Matthew Malthouse wrote:

Ron Hale-Evans wrote:

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Claudius might not have "lead" armies into battle but he did, iirc, command them.... [snip]

By the time Severian ascends to the Autarchy I doubt that he's any more "lead" armies into battle than Claudius did.

Why the scare quotes? Do you not believe that what they do is worthy of being called leading? (Or is it a micro-spelling-flame -- did you think I was using the verb in the past tense?)

Assuming the former: My copies of TBoTNS have been in storage across the country for about three years, but I broke down and bought _Shadow and Claw_ recently, and I'll buy the next two volumes as I get to them. My memory of _Citadel_ is therefore somewhat vague, but didn't Sev at one point lead a charge on the battlefield? If he didn't lead an army as such, at least he led a squadron or a battalion or something. My only point was that this was a most un-Claudius-like thing to do, based on my limited knowledge of the Claudius books, which came through television rather than reading Graves. It fits with what we know of Marcus Aurelius, however.

Speaking of Wolfe and Graves, here's a slightly off-topic question: did anyone else get the impression that Wolfe was cribbing heavily from _The White Goddess_ in _There Are Doors_?

Ron H-E

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Matthew Malthouse — 05 Nov 1999, 10:46 · follows Ron Hale-Evans

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Why the scare quotes? Do you not believe that what they do is worthy of being called leading? (Or is it a micro-spelling-flame -- did you think I was using the verb in the past tense?)

Oh, nothing so subtle at all. Just trying to distinguish between daring-do, gung-ho leading from at the front, once more unto the breach stuff a la Harry V and the way sensible generals do it. :) Think Peirson's Puppeteer!

Assuming the former: My copies of TBoTNS have been in storage across the country for about three years, but I broke down and bought _Shadow and Claw_ recently, and I'll buy the next two volumes as I get to them. My memory of _Citadel_ is therefore somewhat vague, but didn't Sev at one point lead a charge on the battlefield? If he didn't lead an army as such, at least he led a squadron or a battalion or something. My only point was that this was a most un-Claudius-like thing to do, based on my limited knowledge of the Claudius books, which came through television rather than reading Graves. It fits with what we know of Marcus Aurelius, however.

"I yield to your..." etc etc.

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Damn! I hate it when people say things like this. It invariably means that within the week I shall be reading one, or both.

Matthew