

Were Jolenta and Dorcas lovers?

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 31 Oct 2006

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Brent Dyer — 31 Oct 2006, 03:32

I've been enjoying the list for a couple of weeks and just finished perusing part of the archives. I'm re-reading BotNS for the second time and enjoying it quite a lot, which is a relief, since the first reading mostly befuddled me. Last night I read a passage that was, for lack of a better word, shocking. It's at the beginning of Chapter XXV of tSofL:

"I knew then how Dorcas had felt when Jolenta died. There had been no sexual play between the boy and me, as I believe there had been at some time between Dorcas and Jolenta; but then it had never been their fleshly love that had aroused my jealousy. The depth of my feeling for the boy had been as great as Dorcas's for Jolenta, surely (and surely far greater than Jolenta's for Dorcas). If Dorcas had known of it, she would have been as jealous as I had sometimes been, I thought, if only she had loved me as I had loved her."

What? My initial reaction was that this passage was Severian engaging in sour grapes about Dorcas, slandering her memory to console himself about her recent loss. And that still seems to be the most likely explanation, but two things about the passage that seem contrary to this explanation: (1) the chapter occurs some time after Dorcas spurns Severian in Thrax and (2) it is written not as an account of Severian's thoughts and feelings at the time, but in his capacity as a narrator writing years after Thrax. Severian certainly would have to be carrying a lot of bitterness to still be feeling the need to trash Dorcas years after the fact. So, if I assume (at least for the sake of argument) that Severian isn't just speaking out of spite, the passage raises several questions for me.

1. Were there any indication, prior to that point, that Dorcas and Jolenta had a sexual relationship? I've been reading carefully, and I don't think that I would have missed something that big.
2. Was Severian jealous of Dorcas and Jolenta? Once again, I don't remember being under the impression that Severian was jealous about Dorcas' relationship with anyone. Quite the contrary, Severian seemed pretty callous toward Dorcas' obvious devotion to him.
3. What on Earth (or Urth) would cause Severian to think that he loved Dorcas more than she loved him? As nearly as I can tell, Dorcas was completely faithful to Severian after the night they spent in the storeroom (except, perhaps, for the sapphic interludes with Jolenta that I might have completely missed) while Severian seemed intent on coupling with every attractive female he encountered. He even overtly dallied with Jolenta immediately upon being reunited with the Talos/Balders drama troupe, clearly intending to hurt Dorcas.

I have a few theories to explain answer these questions. One is that Severian has imagined a sexual relationship between the two to justify his own boorish behavior. "So what if I slept with Jolenta, Dorcas did too. And she never really loved me anyway."

Another theory is that Severian assumed, perhaps wrongly, that there must have been a sexual relationship between Jolenta and Dorcas because he has a difficult time comprehending filial devotion. To Severian, attachment only occurs when someone is (1) a sexual partner or (2) your master or apprentice.

My last theory is that Severian assumed a sexual relationship between Jolenta and Dorcas because, at the incident at the Piteous Gate (sorry to open that can of worms again), Dorcas chose to go with Dr. Talos, Baldanders, and Jolenta instead of Severian and Jonas. That might also explain the comments about jealousy and the deliberate choice to have sex with Jolenta

first when Severian was reunited with the rest of the troupe---both to hurt Dorcas in the same way that he (believed) that she had hurt him and to try to drive a wedge between Dorcas and Jolenta. Ultimately, this drama is inverted and reenacted when Dorcas sleeps with Severian beside the campfire and Severian notes that she seemed very interested in having Jolenta see them.

David DiGiacomo — 31 Oct 2006, 03:42 · follows Brent Dyer

I like your theories! Another one is that this passage is telling us that Talos's surgical skill made Jolenta irresistably attractive to everyone, even Severian's dead grandmother.

Or, Severian may just be trying to convince us of that, to justify his rape (?) of Jolenta.

Brent Dyer — 31 Oct 2006, 03:48 · follows David DiGiacomo

I thought of that too, but I have a hard time accepting it as an explanation. Wolfe seems to go out of his way to allude to lesbianism (like when Severian and Cyriaca are cleaning up after their encounter and are joined at the fountain by a pair of women). If Jolenta and Dorcas were actually lovers, why would Wolfe not even hint at until well after Severian had left them both behind? It seems more likely to me that Severian's sudden "unmasking" of the women's physical relationship his way of explaining something else that he doesn't understand or can't accept.

----- Original Message -----

From: David DiGiacomo <david at slack.com>

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Sent: Monday, October 30, 2006 9:42:06 PM

Subject: Re: (urth) Were Jolenta and Dorcas lovers?

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Or, Severian may just be trying to convince us of that, to justify his rape (?) of Jolenta.

Dan Rabin — 31 Oct 2006, 05:05 · in reply to Brent Dyer

My own theory about the passage that Brent Dyer cites is that the juxtaposition between Severian's casual treatment of the possibility of sex between him and the boy, and the possibility of sex between Dorcas and Jolenta, is intended to be strange to us who read it: the former is shocking in our culture, the latter somewhat titillating. Severian seems to find both possile relationships not only matter-of-fact but also comparable: they are "play".

I also note that Jolenta speaks in the boating scene of her enhanced looks leading women to want to protect her (out of lust, presumably), whereas Severian's adoption of his young namesake seems to arise out of a sense of responsibility rather than desire for sexual companionship. Somehow this makes me think of that bit of Severian's character that qualifies him to be the New Sun.

More suggestive associations that I can't weave into a nice essay at the moment:

The stories of Jolenta and Little Severian are both woven with enemies of the New Sun.

Baldanders starts as Frankenstein, and creates his ideal Doctor to manage him as he becomes more the Monster. The homonculus Doctor enhances the "sylph" into an idealized image of

human beauty (Bride of Frankenstein?), but only for amusement: the creation cannot survive without him, and he is indifferent to her survival (indeed contemptuous of it).

I think there's some sort of parody of the humas/Hieros mutual-regeneration cycle in the Baldanders/Talos relationship, but it's not an exact correspondence, since the devoted Talos is more like the Hierodules than like either of the two races in question. There's also an inversion of the enumerated characteristics of the Hieros: "united, compassionate, just" into characteristics of Baldanders: solitary, callous, self-interested and ambitious. But then again Talos comments on how Baldanders created him to have characteristics that he himself lacked--contrast with the story of the humans of the last cycle shaping the Hieros to have the humans' *best* (not lacking) qualities.

[I may have the terminology of Hieros vs. Hierogrammates mixed up here, and would welcome correction.]

The Little Severian story brings in Agia, Hethor, the magicians, and Typhon from the Anti-Sunny party. Little Severian loses his family to the alzado and must rely on Big Severian, who rescues the boy from the magicians and is himself rescued from them by the diverted malice of Hethor. The boy is lost to the indifferent automatic malice and arrogance of Typhon, from whose clutches Severian rescues the Claw before losing it to Baldanders. Rescue, lose is the repeated pattern. At the end of the third volume Severian has no Dorcas, no boy, no Claw-as-jewel, no Terminus Est, no guild. He has been stripped of external objects of devotion and sources of power. He rescues the Claw-as-claw and, er, soldiers on. In the chapel at the lazaret he experiences praying to himself. At this point, when he can finally see that his implicit quest for the New Sun leads to himself and not through external objects and persons, he gives up the Claw voluntarily. He reports being under the impression that he was doing this to fulfill his self-imposed obligation to return the Claw to the Pelerines, but (as he himself observes in the first book) it is not necessary to understand such symbols to be affected by them. He goes on to rescue and lose Master Ash, to lose the companions he found at the lazaret, to gain and lose the companionship of Guasacht's irregulars, and finally on to "back into the throne".

I just reread the passage in which Severian returns the Claw, and I noticed

1. He puts the Claw pretty much where a relic of a saint would go in a Roman Catholic altar, and
2. He bloodies himself tightening the clamps holding down the altar stone, so his possession of the Claw both ends and begins with him bleeding.

Enough for now. Amazon US says that Soldier of Sidon comes out tomorrow, and Amazon UK claims to have it available already. We may be distracted from The Book of the New Sun for some weeks hence.

-- Dan Rabin

b sharp — 31 Oct 2006, 12:53 · follows Dan Rabin

I agree with Dan Rabin's analysis. The hint about Dorcas and Jolenta's relationship is in Jolenta bragging that she turns all women into tribadists. We're led to think this applies only to audience members but later the revelation about Dorcas is surprising but not a complete shock.

In a previous post I noted what Dan notes: that Wolfe sometimes pairs his shocking revelations, causing us to focus on one and gloss over the other. In this case it is the potential for sexual play between Severian and Little Severian which is glossed over.

I can't resist a chance to re-iterate my theory that Severian, Dorcas, Jolenta and Little Severian are all family members and the subtext of a Greek style family curse helps explain why such sexual shenanigans are going on among these odd pairs of people.

I have mixed feelings on the rape aspect of Severian's tryst with Jolenta. Severian himself later calls it a rape but always, on reading that passage, I get the feeling it is a Wolefean stab at showing sensitivity to feminist issues, i.e. date rape.

Some aromatic herbs in the cushions of the boat they ride in make Jolenta very passive maybe even unconscious. So I assume Severian's later evaluation of it as a rape is based on her lack of open consent. But the boats were designed for lovers and the herbs for the purpose of setting the mood. Jolenta, having been around the garden for a few days, is more likely to have known the purpose of the boats than Severian. Yet she willingly takes a ride. Her pride is inspiring desire in others so I can imagine her feigning unconsciousness to avoid showing any hint of her own desires (inspired by boredom though they be). I can imagine this being a semi-autobiographical account of an alcohol fueled event from Wolefe's past. The pleasure and shame are both apparent. Women have been known to drink, to have an excuse later... but sex with an unconscious person is certainly rape by modern definition. I'm left with ambivalent feelings about whether it was rape, as perhaps I was meant to.

-bsharp

p.s. I think it has been decided that Hieros are the human race cognate to our own (well cognate to Severian's human race anyway, maybe they are us) which created more perfect beings which became the Hierogrammates, their larvae, the Hierarchs and their servants, the Hierodules.

Dan Rabin:

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