

Castlevew and Arthuriana

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 08 May 2007

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Craig Brewer — 08 May 2007, 20:54

(A bit of a long one, but after teaching Malory not long ago *and* having reread it along with some students, I thought I'd share some of my questions/ideas.)

I know there have been many questions in the past about what exactly happens at the end of Castlevew. In the archives, the two most compelling versions were that 1) the whole Arthurian "good vs. evil" turns out to be just a pagan renewal of seasons (with King Geimhreadh — Gaelic "winter" — killing the Green Man "to die so that you and many another may live") or 2) that it's a mysterious battle between Faeries which mortals don't and can't really understand (and a lot of the confusion is therefore mortal confusion on perceiving the "feckless" fey).

But I'm not sure the pagan renewal story goes far enough, and the Arthurian resonances seem strong enough that "vague battle" of Faeries can be tied to the prophetic future of the Arthur myths more strongly. Much of the end suggests to me that we're witnessing some kind of larger battle between forces for which Arthur's coming is necessary. But I'm not sure that we've actually seen that final battle yet, and my real opinion is that the book is really about changing what we thought the Arthurian myths are "really" about.

I'm still not exactly sure what that "really" is, or why these groups of Faeries were after each other. I'm not even sure, to be honest, whether both sides were "Faerie."

after all Dr. von Madadh seems to be on some kind of anti-Faerie side, not only by saying that he and "his people" have been searching for a way into Faerie for a long time, but also by his battle cry (after I assume he kills Shields) that "The king is dead and the world lives! The end is not yet!"

Morgan's voice then calls out —
and will live again!?

So do we have some kind of anti-Faerie forces

(although perhaps still magical
— Or even alien see
below?) behind Dr. vM? One side gains from killing
Arthur and having the “world” live on after him, the
other for keeping his return a promise. Is this still
an Arthurian dynamic or something incredibly
different?

But as for the Arthur figure, is Shields really
Arthur? Or is he the Fisher King (who seems strikingly
absent from the book)? Or maybe (the idea I rather
like) he’s one of many Arthurs. (Further, his name is
“Sheilds,” not “swords,” and he never uses

Excalibur

Gawain is the only knight predominantly
associated with his shield.) Yes, Morgan says he’s her
brother. But Wrangler’s name is “Artie,” and, in the
car on the way back, Bob Richards suggests that
Wrangler should have been their champion, but he was
too hurt at the moment. Thus, Shields stood in his
place. (“They asked us to pick out a champion,
remember” The best we had. So we sent Mr. Shields.
That cowboy’s still pretty weak; so’s Seth, and Seth’s
too young, anyhow

?). Further, Seth ends up with

Excalibur (or the “alien” sword). Does this make him
Sir Bedivere or, for that matter, the Lady of the
Lake? Or is he another Arthur? (Would that make Tom
Howard the Uther and Sally the Igraine? If so, then
Dr. vM by perhaps “marrying” Igraine at the end,
becomes King Lot King who will, with Igraine, give
birth to Gawain, Mordred, and two other G knights
(?)

after all, Seth does wonder “what his half
brothers and sisters might be like, if there were
any.” And, early in the legends, Lot is Arthur’s
enemy, although he’s later his ally.)

What intrigues me, however, is how much Arthurian
material doesn’t seem to be here: the Grail? A grail
knight (Galahad/Percival)? A Lancelot? A Gawain? An
Uther? A Merlin? A Fisher King? A Dolorous Stroke?
I’ve always wondered with this book if I’ve been shown
enough of the Arthurian myth that the rest is supposed
to be there as well. I’m still not sure. I am
reasonably sure that we’re in a world where the
mysteries won’t be solved just by mapping characters
onto the old tales. The many Arthur suggestion is one
reason. Another is how the legend of the Wild Hunt
changes: any mortal, particularly women, who view it
are supposed to die or be killed. But Phyllis Sun “had
witnessed the Wild Hunt and lived.” So are we still in

a world in which Arthur is a champion and Camelot is an ideal?

I'm always torn with this one whether to agree with the idea that the "mysteriousness" is just part of interacting with Faerie or whether there's enough from myth/folklore to piece together a bigger narrative. But the clues never seem coherent enough as the Sun books to piece together more than speculations.

(And Excalibur as technology from a planet that was destroyed where the asteroid belt is now? I like the idea that we see Faerie either as Indians (Sally's neighbor) or sasquatches/yetis, or aliens depending on our cultural imagination. But that was Morgan telling Judy, who apparently can see Faeries as they really are, about the extraterrestrial sword? Are we seeing through "mortal" or "fey" perception there? So is the "truest" version of this that we're in some kind of X-Files battle of extraterrestrial forces? Ugh
If so,
then I have no idea what to make of what I've read. ;D
)

Ah, well. I'd love hashing some of this stuff out if anyone's game for returning to an older one (although with new Latro and TWK still new, there's still plenty of fresh fodder as well).

-Craig

Roy C. Lackey — 09 May 2007, 06:02 · follows Craig Brewer

Craig Brewer wrote:

What intrigues me, however, is how much Arthurian

material doesn't seem to be here: [. . .] I've always wondered with this book if I've been shown enough of the Arthurian myth that the rest is supposed to be there as well. I'm still not sure. I am reasonably sure that we're in a world where the mysteries won't be solved just by mapping characters onto the old tales.<<

I am delighted that you see it that way. On that point I am certain that you are correct. Wolfe *never* retells an old story quite the way he heard it. Not only is much of the Arthurian material missing, there is a lot of stuff in the story that has nothing to do with Arthur. Ghosts, vampires and other things from folklore and legend are all tangled up.

Ah, well. I'd love hashing some of this stuff out if

anyone's game for returning to an older one (although with new Latro and TWK still new, there's still plenty of fresh fodder as well).<<

It's been a few years since I last read the book, so I'm not as prepared as I might be. But I've always liked -- even preferred -- Wolfe's "mid-Western" novels. Have at it. Not incidentally, it is

encouraging to see longish, thoughtful posts such as this. They are all too few and far between.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 16 May 2007, 19:25 · follows Roy C. Lackey

I've read the book again.

Craig Brewer wrote:

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about what exactly happens at the end of Castlevue.

In the archives, the two most compelling versions were

that 1) the whole Arthurian "good vs. evil" turns out

to be just a pagan renewal of seasons (with King

Geimhreadh — Gaelic "winter" — killing the Green Man

"to die so that you and many another may live")<<

Well, that is certainly part of it; snow immediately began to fall and, after the battle, Wrangler/Arthur spoke to Lisa Solomon about how things would be better in the spring. He then proposed that they be married in the spring. Does that make the young Jewess a type of Guinevere? I doubt it. Why the hell was the Green Man riding Odin's horse? What does the Green Man have to do with the Wild Hunt?

or 2)

that it's a mysterious battle between Faeries which

mortals don't and can't really understand (and a lot

of the confusion is therefore mortal confusion on

perceiving the "feckless" fey).<<

A lot of the confusion is due to Wolfe mixing mythologies. <g>

[snip]

But as for the Arthur figure, is Shields really

Arthur?<<

Yes and no.

Or is he the Fisher King (who seems strikingly

absent from the book)? Or maybe (the idea I rather

like) he's one of many Arthurs. (Further, his name is

"Sheilds," not "swords," and he never uses

Excalibur

Gawain is the only knight predominantly

associated with his shield.) Yes, Morgan says he's her

brother. But Wrangler's name is "Artie," and, in the

car on the way back, Bob Richards suggests that

Wrangler should have been their champion, but he was

too hurt at the moment. Thus, Shields stood in his

place.<<

Yes, Wrangler was weak from loss of blood -- it was autumn. But the brother that Morgan spoke to Judy of (244), the one she kept trying to kill, was Wrangler. (Lucie drawing out his blood in the Jeep; Hwan with a knife at the hospital at Morgan's direction.)

Besides, the trouble at the camp started well before Shields came to town. Wrangler was the general object of those attentions. The phantom castle had been around for about a century before either man was born. Wrangler's family had been involved one way or another with the castle for generations.

(“They asked us to pick out a champion, remember” The best we had. So we sent Mr. Shields. That cowboy? still pretty weak; so’s Seth, and Seth’s too young, anyhow ?). Further, Seth ends up with Excalibur (or the “alien” sword).<<

Once the battle began, Seth tossed Excalibur to Wrangler. It's not clear that Wrangler ever used it; he made more use of his brother's forty-four. The battle ended almost as soon as it began. Back at the camp, Wrangler stored the sword in the bottom of his brother's old trunk-- minus the scabbard.

The Malory quote at the front of the book said that the scabbard was more valuable than the sword because it was a specific against loss of blood. In the epilogue, the empty scabbard hung above Shields' oceanic bed. The scabbard had done (if Shields was truly the "dead" king Dr. vM spoke of), and would do, neither man any good unless or until it was reunited with the sword.

Does this make him

Sir Bedivere or, for that matter, the Lady of the Lake? Or is he another Arthur? (Would that make Tom Howard the Uther and Sally the Igraine? If so, then Dr. vM by perhaps “marrying” Igraine at the end, becomes King Lot King who will, with Igraine, give birth to Gawain, Mordred, and two other G knights (?)
after all, Seth does wonder “what his half brothers and sisters might be like, if there were any.” And, early in the legends, Lot is Arthur’s enemy, although he’s later his ally.)<<

I don't think the analogy can be carried that far. I don't know why Sally would have let the doctor into her bed, or why Seth was accepting of it, particularly if he intended to pursue Shields' daughter. Merc couldn't have thought well of the being who had killed her father.

And exactly what kind of being was the doctor? What sort of dog/wolf could take the form of a man? And who or what was the large "wild-eyed, riderless hunter" who followed the Green Man into the courtyard (273)? A favored hound from the Huntsman's pack?

[snip]

I’m always torn with this one whether to agree with the idea that the “mysteriousness” is just part of interacting with Faerie or whether there’s enough from myth/folklore to piece together a bigger narrative. But the clues never seem coherent enough as the Sun books to piece together more than speculations.<<

The Arthurian material has been too distorted and tangled up with other stuff. How did Lucie come to die and receive a Catholic funeral (224)? Was she buried with a stake through her heart? Who found her body and where? Are we to believe that a comatose Sancha killed her in fairyland? Lisa and Wrangler seemed pleased at the end that the formerly dead Sancha had come back to life. Were they in for future grief? Or was Sancha, though apparently a real vampire (unlike wannabe Lucie?), on their side?

What has the ghost of a dead Jim Long to do with Morgan? How does Wrangler's missing brother Bart fit into the Arthurian family?

The literal fall of Excalibur to Earth from a destroyed planet has no place at all in Arthuriana (245). But Fee's true form seems to be that of an alien (262). Messy.

-Roy

Craig Brewer — 17 May 2007, 02:44 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy,

I'm so glad you took another look at the book (and at my ideas). The more I think about it, the more I agree that the jumbled mythologies are so "messy" that it may not be fruitful to try to untangle them all. Hopefully, that confusion is the point in this case, that "Faerie" in all its forms is mysterious. Otherwise, I feel either that I'm not that great a reader of this book or that Wolfe created something overly tangled.

Why the hell was the Green Man riding Odin's horse?

What does the Green Man have to do with the Wild

Hunt?

Great questions (and typical, I think). I know that some versions of the Wild Hunt associate it with the coming of a great person's death, so perhaps it's the death of Spring/Green Man?

A lot of the confusion is due to Wolfe mixing mythologies. <g>

Indeed. My question now is what to make of those mixes, either in general or in particular instances.

Besides, the trouble at the camp started well before Shields came to town. Wrangler was the general object of those attentions. The phantom castle had been

around

for about a century before either man was born. Wrangler's family had been involved one way or another with the castle for generations.

All this seems right. Does that mean, then, that when Dr.vM and Morgan yell about kings, they're talking about different ones? She's talking about Wrangler and the Dr.vM is talking about Shields?

Once the battle began, Seth tossed Excalibur to Wrangler. It's not clear that Wrangler ever used it;

he

made more use of his brother's forty-four. The battle ended almost as soon as it began. Back at the camp, Wrangler stored the sword in the bottom of his brother's old trunk-- minus the scabbard.

I thought Seth had it at the end. (I don't have my copy with me here.) But that was why I wondered if he was to be another Arthur figure.

The Malory quote at the front of the book said that the scabbard was more valuable than the sword because it was a specific against loss of blood. In the epilogue, the empty scabbard hung above Shields'

oceanic bed. The scabbard had done (if Shields was truly the "dead" king Dr. vM spoke of), and would do, neither man any good unless or until it was reunited with the sword.

Good point. Getting the sword and scabbard back together again is a different kind of mythological future than Arthur returning for the glory of England?

Castleview? Something else?

And exactly what kind of being was the doctor? What sort of dog/wolf could take the form of a man? And

who

or what was the large "wild-eyed, riderless hunter"

who

followed the Green Man into the courtyard (273)? A favored hound from the Huntsman's pack?

Perhaps. But then he also claims to be from a society that seems rather set on discovering (and quelling?) supernatural occurrences. So he's either anti-?supernatural? (which is obviously wrong) or in some antagonistic faction but antagonistic to what/whom?

The Arthurian material has been too distorted and tangled up with other stuff.

I'm starting to think that's true. It makes some of the Arthurian material seem, if not a red herring, at least occasionally misleading in its broader implications.

The literal fall of Excalibur to Earth from a destroyed planet has no place at all in Arthuriana (245). But Fee's true form seems to be that of an alien(262). Messy.

And it's with the aliens that I want to throw up my hands (or treat it as some master key, which I have trouble with as well).

So
no mysteries solved but more questions raised. If we come to think that this book is essentially knotted, that at least does give a very interesting counter-example to the common notion that all of Wolfe's "puzzles" can be solved by discerning readers. It also makes me question whether some of the puzzles in the other works are supposed to remain so. That said, it raises some other interesting questions about the literary merit of "puzzles" like this: what purpose(s) do they serve when they are solvable and when they are opaque. After all, puzzles and ambiguity have very different interpretive consequences.

Again, thanks for taking the time to reread the book (and my earlier post)!

Craig