

Bloodsport

The Urth list — 8 messages, 3 voices, 26 May 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6027>

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JBarach at aol.com — 26 May 2011, 21:23

Urthers --

Last night, I read Wolfe's recent short story "Bloodsport" in *Swords & Dark Magic*, ed. Jonathan Strahan and Lou Anders (Eos, 2010) and noticed that it hasn't received any discussion on this list, as far as I can tell. (If I'm wrong, please point me in the right direction!)

As is typical for Wolfe, it seems to be a straightforward story at first, such that you even think you're catching the unreliable narrator stuff and noticing some of the tricky moves being made ("Aha," you say to yourself), only to find yourself noting more and more things that you want to think about later ("Not sure what THAT means") and end up wondering what exactly you've read.

So ... I welcome your comments. What's going on in this story? There's a lengthy discussion here ([_http://everythingisnice.wordpress.com/2010/06/24/bloodsport-by-gene-wolfe/_](http://everythingisnice.wordpress.com/2010/06/24/bloodsport-by-gene-wolfe/) (<http://everythingisnice.wordpress.com/2010/06/24/bloodsport-by-gene-wolfe/>)), which is quite helpful. Some of my questions and comments follow....

SPOILERS

* Is there significance to the names of the main characters, Valorius the Knight (surely connected to "valor") and Lurn the pawn (surely an allusion to Lune, the moon)? She reminds V, at one point, of "the maid no man has bussed," which is probably Diana, right?

* What is the game they're playing early in the story? It sounds like chess with human pieces, but the names of the pieces aren't all the same as in our game of chess. We don't have bowmen or slingers, etc. Is that difference significant? In the larger game that they're playing, Lurn makes it to the far side of the board, as it were, and becomes a queen, which is what happens in chess. At the same time, however, Valorius makes it to the far side of the board, as it were, and he becomes able to defeat Lurn, which suggests that he has become a king, which is what happens in checkers.

* Valorius's father's head has been cleft with an ax (p. 83). By whom? Presumably by the Hunas, though that's not explicit. Later in the story, V says that his father "had entered my mind" (p. 94), and V rubs his head because "It is where the ax went in. I rub it because the place is healed and my father at rest" (p. 95). Somehow V's attaining his goal leads to rest for his father ... but I'm not sure what this is about.

* What does the father's dream writing mean: "I blessed and I cursed you, Valorius, and my blessing and my curse are the same. You will inherit" (p.

83). Here's what I suspect: The blessing and the curse, which are the same, is that V's father sent him to the Game. The Game involved curse in that V has to suffer and even has to slay Lurn, whom he has come to love. But the Game involved blessing because it led to his ultimate triumph and inheritance ... though I'm not clear what the inheritance is. Nor, it seems, is V: "Whether they be so or no, who is to say? Perhaps I have inherited already, and know not of it" (p. 83). How typically Wolfe!

* When V meets Lurn again, immediately after this dream, he is initially afraid that she will want to engage in combat (p. 84). Doing so, he says, "would be but folly *as the world stands today*" (p. 84). At first read, that could be taken this way: "We're both trying to escape from the Hunas, so it would be foolish for us to fight each other."

But Lurn immediately makes it clear that "as the world stands today" has more than one meaning. The world doesn't stand, she says. Rather, it "circles the moon as both swim among stars" (p. 84). Later, we're told again that the earth circles moon (p. 95). If the moon is dominant, then the sun hasn't yet risen ... which will change when V is kinged at the end of the story and defeats Lurn. So this is night-time, and Lurn wants to keep it that way by reestablishing the kingdom (though it would really be a "queendom," with her in power), with the game back in place, and so forth. (Shades of pagan Rome and the coliseum!) And that's precisely what can't happen, so that V has to defeat her and does with the help of "Our Lord the Sun" (p. 96). From henceforth, I guess, the earth circles the sun, not the moon.

So "as the world stands today" has to do with eschatology: In the present age ("as the world stands today"), it would be folly -- for who? Valorius? Lurn? both? -- to fight, but there's coming an time (as the world will one day stand) in which they will need to engage in combat and it won't be folly to do so ... and V will win.

As Lurn says, as the world stands right now, sometimes the sun and moon do fight and when they do, the moon wins (eclipse), defeats the sun, and then "having bested him she bids him rise" (p. 85). That's what happened when V and L fought in the Game. But, she adds, "Someday he will best her and, besting her, take her life. So is it written. When the evil day comes, you men will walk in blind dark from twilight to dawn and much harm come of it.... Women will have no warning, so that they bleed in the market" (p. 85). In other words, the sun will kill the moon so that it will be black at night and women will not be able to predict their monthly cycle any longer.

Is that what has happened at the end of the story? Or is Lurn mistaken (or deliberately trying to keep V from killing her)?

* What does V mean when he says that eventually he "beheld something in Lurn's eyes that I had never seen in the eyes of any woman" (p. 85). My guess is that it is love.

* Is there some deeper significance to the battle against the Hunas (pp. 86-89)?

* It seems clear to me that V is NOT a Christ-figure, though he may be, as Wolfe has said of Severian and others, a Christian figure. He won't say that he has never been cruel, though he has tried to be such a man (p. 89).

* What does V mean when he says "Deserts call to demons and not to ghosts."

(Yet not to demons only.)" (p. 90)?

* Why are there *40* palaces (p. 91)? That's neither the number of chess pieces in a game (32) or checkers pieces (24). An online search indicates that there are 40 pieces on the board at the start of a FRENCH game of checkers

(http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_checkers_on_a_board_at_the_beginning_of_a_game_ (http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_checkers_on_a_board_at_the_beginning_of_a_game_)). And sets of checkers usually involve 40 pieces (including two extra checkers and six "kings" for each player). Significant?

* There is a wolf in the story: "I was able to dash among them like a wolf" (p. 91).

* They're looking for a palace which includes a garden on a mountain, a mountain meadow (p. 91) ... and that's an echo of Eden, isn't it?

* What's the significance of V seeing ghosts (pp. 89-90, 92ff.)? Who is the ghost V sees, leading him into the vaults (p. 92)? Why is it that, when the ghost speaks ("Where you wished to go, O pawn"), it's V speaking, so that Lurn says, "Why are you talking to me like that, Valorius?" (p. 93)?

* There are winged figures in the garden who don't move or breathe but aren't statues either (p. 93). Angelic, it seems, but what's the significance here? If I may theologize after the fashion of James Jordan (AKA Patera Nutria), during the time from creation to Christ, man was "a little while lower than the angels" (Ps. 8; Heb 2). The Law was given to Israel by the mediation of angels. And Israel's calendar was regulated by the moon, which was created in the beginning for "seasons" (Gen 1: the term doesn't refer to summer, winter, spring, fall but rather to festival times). But the lunar/angelic period lasts only until the coming of Christ, who is the "Sun of righteousness, who rises with healing in his wings" (Malachi 4). When the Sun comes, the lunar period is over. Is it possible that Wolfe has any of this stuff in mind?

* What is the significance of the tomb, with the door opening (p. 94)?

This is something of a resurrection image, isn't it? It is, in fact, his father who is resurrected in a sense, who comes to enter V's mind, and who robes him with his own mantle -- an echo, perhaps, of Elisha with Elijah's mantle, which designated him as his successor? In some way, this is V's becoming king ... which would suggest that his father was the king (and hence what V inherits, through his father's blessing/curse, is in fact the kingdom). Right?

* Why in the world does V (or Wolfe) echo Mercutio's words from Romeo and Juliet: "The steel that went in was not so long as my hand and less wide than two fingers together, yet it was enough. It sufficed" (p. 96)? The line from R&J is: "'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough," J is: "'tis n Was this an accident on Wolfe's part? That hardly seems likely. Coincidence? Maybe. But it was noticeable and a bit jarring to me. Deliberate? Maybe, but then ... to what end?

* Okay, the last paragraph, with its Christ-like allusions, I'm not sure about. V has inherited the kingdom, presumably, but at this point, there's still a lot of darkness, there are tyrants, etc. But not forever. That much I understand. But what do the various elements of this paragraph mean?

- "Should our folk require a sword, I am the sword that springs to their hands"

- "Asked to heal, I cure their sick -- when I can": He isn't Christ, but he is a Christian figure.

- "If they bring food, I eat it. If they do not, I fast or find my own": An allusion to Jesus' instruction to his disciples when he sent them out to make their living from preaching the gospel?

- "East lies the past, west the future": in Genesis, the Garden has a door on the east side, so that to leave the Garden is to head east (and then Cain is banished further east, and then people move even further east to the land of Babel) and to return to the Garden is to head west. Similarly, the Tabernacle and Temple are in such a way that you enter them from the east, heading west.

- "Go north to find the gods, south to find the blessed": I'm not sure about this. North is associated with the gods in pagan mythology, but in the Bible, too, the Garden is located symbolically in the north. Eden is a mountain from which four rivers flow (Gen 2), and they all flow south, so that God's mountain is associated with north. That's the best I can do with that, but "south to find the blessed"? No clue.

- "Above stands the All High, and below lies Pandemonium": Well, the "All High" appears to be the one true God over all the gods, and Pandemonium is Milton's term for hell, the place from which the demons come to earth to attack man.

* The story is framed by references to you, the reader, as a traveler whom V has encountered ("from time to time I entertain a lost traveler, such as yourself": p. 96). Note the word "lost." To this traveler, V gives his orienting speech about east and west, north and south, above and below and then urges the traveler (us): "Choose your road and keep to it, for if you stray from it, you may encounter such as I" (p. 96). Huh? That makes it sound as if encountering such as V wouldn't be good ... but then who is "such as I"? And why, then, after giving that warning, does V add "We shall not meet again"?

Many puzzles. Thanks for your help.

John

James Wynn — 26 May 2011, 21:53 · in reply to JBarach at aol.com

See mine and Marc Aramini's conversation here:

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021710.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021712.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021713.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021715.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021716.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2011-February/021718.html>

On 5/26/2011 4:23 PM, JBarach at aol.com wrote:

Urthers --

Last night, I read Wolfe's recent short story "Bloodsport" in *Swords & Dark Magic*, ed. Jonathan Strahan and Lou Anders (Eos, 2010) and noticed that it hasn't received any discussion on this list, as far as I can tell. (If I'm wrong, please point me in the right direction!)

JBarach at aol.com — 26 May 2011, 22:07 · follows James Wynn

In a message dated 5/26/2011 4:53:38 P.M. Central Daylight Time, crushtv at gmail.com writes:

See mine and Marc Aramini's conversation here:

Huh. I searched the archives online for "Bloodsport" and nothing came up.
Thanks for the links!

John

James Wynn — 26 May 2011, 22:43 · in reply to JBarach at aol.com

SPOILERS

* Is there significance to the names of the main characters, Valorius the Knight (surely connected to "valor") and Lurn the pawn (surely an allusion to Lune, the moon)?

Valorius is fine name for a knight. I can't find any likely reference to "lurn" in any language. It bothers me.

She reminds V, at one point, of "the maid no man has bussed," which is probably Diana, right?

I think we're talking about Persephone (the Maiden). But it is possible that he is talking about Caissa the dryad who is the muse of Chess.

* What is the game they're playing early in the story? It sounds like chess with human pieces, but the names of the pieces aren't all the same as in our game of chess. We don't have bowmen or slingers, etc. Is that difference significant?

The game, I think, is like chess, but not exactly like chess. It has certain variations such that an attacker does not always win. In some countries, the bishop was an archer.

In the larger game that they're playing, Lurn makes it to the far side of the board, as it were, and becomes a queen, which is what happens in chess. At the same time, however, Valorius makes it to the far side of the board, as it were, and he becomes able to defeat Lurn, which suggests that he has become a king, which is what happens in checkers.

No. Any queen can be taken by a knight or anything else.

* When V meets Lurn again, immediately after this dream, he is initially afraid that she will want to engage in combat (p. 84). Doing so, he says, "would be but folly *as the world stands today*" (p. 84). At first read, that could be taken this way: "We're both trying to escape from the Hunas, so it would be foolish for us to fight each other."

I take it to mean, "There is no game. So there is no benefit in us fighting." It is possible that you are over-thinking the phrase "as the world stands today".

But I think you are right. Valorius and Lurn live on the moon of another planet. For them, the planet is their 'moon'.

Is that what has happened at the end of the story? Or is Lurn mistaken (or deliberately trying to keep V from killing her)?

See my comment to Marc regarding this.

* Okay, the last paragraph, with its Christ-like allusions, I'm not sure about. V has inherited the kingdom, presumably, but at this point, there's still a lot of darkness, there are tyrants, etc. But not forever.

Again, I think he endeavors to put an end to tyrants.

That much I understand. But what do the various elements of this paragraph mean?

- "Should our folk require a sword, I am the sword that springs to their hands"

- "Asked to heal, I cure their sick -- when I can": He isn't Christ, but he is a Christian figure.

- "If they bring food, I eat it. If they do not, I fast or find my own": An allusion to Jesus' instruction to his disciples when he sent them out to make their living from preaching the gospel?

As I see it, he is the ideal of the knight errant. He serves but does not demand service.

I'll think about the rest of your questions.

J.

JBarach at aol.com — 26 May 2011, 23:07 · follows James Wynn

Thanks for the response, James.

I understand that a knight can take a queen in chess. But I'm not persuaded that that's what happens at the end of "Bloodsport."

First, Valorius undergoes a transformation at the end, marked by the opening tomb, the presence of his father, now at rest, and the passing on of a mantle.

Second, Valorius is linked up with the sun at the end, and it is by the sun that he is enabled to kill the moon-queen, Lurn. This is associated with their previous conversation about sun and moon combatting. Sun and moon correspond to man and woman or, more specifically, to king and queen. So it seems to me that Valorius is now a king, which could happen only in checkers (though, I'd add, he's also clearly under Our Lord the Sun, which is an appropriate view for a Christian king).

And then there is a common expression "X was playing chess when Y was playing checkers" (or vice versa): [_http://tinyurl.com/444c5pw_](http://tinyurl.com/444c5pw) (<http://tinyurl.com/444c5pw>) .

John

James Wynn — 27 May 2011, 14:28 · in reply to JBarach at aol.com

On 5/26/2011 6:07 PM, JBarach at aol.com wrote:

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Yeah, but the following is not the description of a king:

"Should our folk require a sword, I am the sword that springs to their hands. Asked to heal, I cure their sick -- when I can": He isn't Christ, but he is a Christian figure. If they bring food, I eat it. If they do not, I fast or find my own".

That's the Knights Templar (The Hospitalers), who protected pilgrims (lost travelers).

Jeff Wilson — 27 May 2011, 19:46 · in reply to James Wynn

On 5/26/2011 6:07 PM, JBarach at aol.com wrote:

That's the Knights Templar (The Hospitalers), who protected pilgrims (lost travelers).

It might be one or the other but not both; the Templars and the Hospitallers were rival orders.

JBarach at aol.com — 27 May 2011, 20:35 · follows Jeff Wilson

James writes:

That's the Knights Templar (The Hospitalers), who protected pilgrims (lost travelers).

That sounds good ... but Valorius makes it sound as if the traveler doesn't WANT to meet someone like him. He says something like "Choose your path and stick to it, for if you don't, you'll meet such as I." That seems to mean, "Stay on the path or else you'll meet someone like me." And that sounds like a warning, doesn't it?

John