

Short Story 64: When I was Ming the Merciless

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 12 May 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6548>

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Marc Aramini — 12 May 2014, 18:53

"When I Was Ming the Merciless" is copyright 1975 and appeared in **The Ides of Tomorrow**. It is collected in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY:

The narrator is interrogated after an experiment on distributing resources with different groups of people goes awry. He defends his actions in creating an Empire from the yellow group of the experiment, subjugating the green and blue groups, who, even if they were known before the experiment, were treated as people without names or identities. They create weapons such as polearms and swords and forge a dragon banner, and at the end the speaker orders his underlings to kill a woman, who is eviscerated. Since she was being monitored by the outside world, her death summons the psychaids to break through the barriers and put the experiment to a stop, though the Yellow group still fights against them with their inferior jury rigged weapons.

COMMENTARY:

A relatively straightforward story, there are still a few things worth mentioning. This is obviously an outgrowth of the results of Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971 in which volunteers to be treated as prisoners and guards were selected. Originally scheduled for two weeks, after six days it was disbanded because of the observations and interviews of a psych student who questioned the morality of the experiment as a whole, which was encouraging depression in those playing prisoners and authoritarian abuse in those who were enacting the roles of guards. This story seems to involve world resources and how competing groups could come to share them, and this particular group has chosen subjugation and violence to achieve its ends. It might also echo the Blue-eye, Brown-eye classroom experiment carried out after Martin Luther King's assassination in the refusal of allowing mixing between the color groups (in this case, Yellow, Green, and Blue) though this seems imposed to some degree by the leader's decree in the story.

THE WEAPONS:

Simple engineering of brooms and mops with cleavers, knives, and scarf joints allow polearms to be formed, and the swords were made from metal reinforcing bars under the floor and beaten into swords. The speaker's own sword had a bone handle (What kind of bone?). It is quite clear that the leader has been changed to some degree by his experience in a way that removing him from the environment is not going to eliminate: "Out here there will be more scope for ingenuity; we might even be able to get hold of some fissionables. Just joking, of course."

THEME:

Naturally this story is important because it introduces one of Wolfe's most enduring themes: Imitation begets reality. If we pretend to be something, we become it. However, there is still room for this to be something of a fantasy story in its atavistic totem treatment of the Lung-Rin and the effigy of the speaker:

?There are things we don't know about that live in the world with us — things in another plane of reality. And when you make something like that, it comes — one of them comes. It shapes itself to fit your image of it, becoming the real Spirit of the Yellows. Anyway, when we had the torchlight processions, sometimes you might think you could see it move. — We caught rats and pigeons when we built it and put them inside, so it would make strange sounds; some of them must have lived a long time. .. You can't kill the *thing*, the Spirit of the Yellows. Not unless you kill all of us. We'll be free some day.

The threat of getting fissionables and the story of the "something" that takes over: "when a man — a male, let's call him — has been fighting a woman, and he wins and knocks her down, and she drops whatever it is she has, a club or whatever — and often her shirt and shorts are torn, there is an impulse that takes command — and then, when a woman has had that happen once or twice, it takes everything out of them. — Some of the men said that they really liked it, underneath, but I don't think so."

This dominant, conquering, raping "impulse" is given flesh, and the implication is that the leader, with all his self-justification, still implies that no one really likes it, but it happens of itself.

The story also shows the circle of power fairly effectively: "Each of us would tell the rotten things that had happened to him — but we were all thinking that it wasn't like that here. We were all together — all Yellows together. — We swore that we were going to stand together or fall together."

Yet this solidarity imposes its rules on others: "I don't feel bad about her, whoever she was. We were all volunteers — she kept getting out of line, over and over again, when she was just a stinking Green or Blue or whatever she was. I can't even remember. So I decided she should be punished. We made a ceremony out of it, with fire in the braziers, and the big gong. — Jan put the sword through her belly — she liked the blood from the blade." From the determination to make the world better when they are in charge because terrible things happened to them outside before, they fail to recognize the humanity of any other group, and create something just as or even more horrific.

LUNG-RIN

While it is easy enough to associate the symbolism of the Lung-Rin (according to our speaker, an image of two dragons fighting sewn from the back of his shirt) with China and its Yellow Emperor, said to be descended from the dragon, (Lung is, of course, a dragon), Rin is a bit more problematic it is a Japanese name and can be used in speaking of something cold, but I would prefer to stick with the Chinese connotations. Is this a combination of the mythical Kirin with the dragon? The Kirin does serve to herald the arrival or passing of a great leader. In the early Chinese representations, the dragon was said to assimilate the features of those it conquered, thus becoming more like a Chimera than one unified creature. While the color Yellow obviously impels them to identify themselves as Mongolia, shortening it to the Mongo hoard allows the leader to actually, perhaps in jest, perhaps seriously, assume the persona of Ming the Merciless, obviously the leader of the Mongols in Flash Gordon.

The overarching theme seen here, that we become what we pretend to be, will be recapitulated over and over in Wolfe, for good and for bad.

STEREOTYPING:

While this story may at the surface be guilty of stereotyping (Ming the Merciless is a fairly negative Chinese stereotype to begin with, and the group identifying itself as Mongolia/Mongo based on their yellow bands and clothing does tend to latch on to an obvious color association) — at its heart the construction shows how easily it is to fall into arbitrary groups and deny the humanity of others, even when we believe ourselves to be just. Thus the hunger for control and respect makes the leader something of a superstitious totalitarian stereotype. I feel that the stereotypes are intentional, self-conscious, and fit the theme of the story.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Are there any real distinctions in the groups that justify differences in behavior before the experiment? (ie — Greens being culled from hard sciences rather than soft sciences?) The theme would seem to be no — that there is no difference in behavior based on any pre-existing class or state, as the new world order is immersive and subjectively “real”.

What kind of bone handle does the leader’s sword have?

APPENDIX: Unstated questions.

They are ultimately extremely predictable though they are elided from the text to present the pure voice of the leader trapped in his relative delusions. They would usually appear between every paragraph. This allows the leader’s voice to predominate the text to culminate in his absurd claims: “none of you could possibly know how it was then, when I was Ming the Merciless.”

“Welcome.”

“Is there anything you would like to say?”

?Would you like a cigarette??

?Why was there no coffee??

??What went wrong [during the experiment]? (It is unclear what the question is at this point, to which our narrator responds: “Odd that you should put it as you did. Because I’ve thought of it so often myself, since the end, in just that way”)

“Aren’t you ashamed?” which is silenced.

“Relax/Calm down.”

“Tell us about your leadership tricks/weapons/how you did it?”

?Do you feel the need to justify yourself??

?Time spent doing what??

?Are you okay?

There may be several paragraphs with no questions while he describes making weapons.

“Would you like to see your sword?”

?What is [the Lung-Rin]??

?Was that your god??

?No, we haven’t talked to Don.

?What happened to [the Spirit of the Yellows]?

“What did you talk about outside?”

?No. The recorder stays on.

“Did the women want to fight?”

?Were you a government/sociology/psych student? (hard to determine which major they attempted to pigeonhole him in after he claimed he wasn’t Emperor).

“Were there differences?”

?Did you let [the rapists/abusers from other colors] join you??

?So you tried to take the colors off??

?Were the brave women’s shirts in a similar torn state??

?The colors could not band together??

?The Greens had no fighters??

?Can you tell us what all this was about??

?What did you call your Empire??

?How do you feel about killing [the girl]??

?Did you kill her yourself??

?And that was when the experiment stopped? (Or something to that effect)

“Do you understand how we feel about this?”

Marc Aramini — 12 May 2014, 19:21 · follows Marc Aramini

Sorry - that should be Mongo hordes, not hoards, of course.

jbarach at aol.com — 12 May 2014, 19:50 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Marc --

This is one of my favorite Wolfe stories. The passage you quoted ("There are things we don't know about that live in the world with us — things in another plane of reality. And when you make something like that, it comes — one of them comes. It shapes itself to fit your image of it, becoming the real Spirit of the Yellows"), I submit, provides a glimpse of Wolfe's view of other gods and of idolatry.

In the Bible, Paul says that idols are nothing. But he also says that eating at the table of the idols is eating at the table of demons and having communion with them. Both are true, and Wolfe's words here strike me as a way of understanding how they work together. The idol itself is nothing more than a piece of wood, carved to look like a bull and called by the name "Baal." So the biblical prophets make fun of those who cut down a tree, start a fire with part of the wood in order to cook their food, and carve another part of the wood into an image, before which they prostrate themselves. It's just a hunk of wood! But at the same time, it's not, in another sense, because it is identified with Baal (which means, as Paul puts it, that it's identified with demons), such that eating at Baal's table (or Zeus's table or Jupiter's table or whatever) is having communion with Baal, which is to say, having communion with demons.

So, too, the Lung Rin is some stuff. Nothing particularly important. But once it is made and given special honor and worshipped, something comes and becomes the real Spirit of the Yellows. You worship a thing you've made and you're having fellowship -- becoming one with -- a demon.

It seems to me that someone could write up a helpful essay on idolatry, images, and (false) gods in Wolfe's works, bringing this passage together with, say, the gods in Long Sun, which are equally man-made and even pre-programmed, so that they appear on giant TV screens, but are also equally as real as "the Spirit of the Yellows."

John

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

From: Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Mon, May 12, 2014 2:36 pm

Subject: (urth) Short Story 64: When I was Ming the Merciless

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"And that was when the experiment stopped? (Or something to that effect)"
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Tony Ellis — 12 May 2014, 20:52 · follows jbarach at aol.com

Marc Aramini wrote

"Some of the men said that
they really liked it, underneath, but I don't think so.

This dominant, conquering, raping "impulse" is given flesh, and the
implication is that the leader, with all his self-justification, still
implies that no one really likes it, but it happens of itself.

I suppose you could read it either way, but I think when the narrator says "Some of the men
said that they really liked it," 'they' refers to the women, as it does in the previous sentence.
The men were trotting out the old bullshit excuse that their victims wanted to be raped.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 12 May 2014, 21:00 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Tony - that's how I read it also.

On Mon, May 12, 2014 at 1:52 PM, Tony Ellis <tonyellis69 at btopenworld.com> wrote:
Marc Aramini wrote

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raped.

Marc Aramini — 13 May 2014, 03:17 · in reply to Tony Ellis

Yes, I see that you are right - that it is the raped women who supposedly liked it who wanted to
join. The unclear pronoun reference in Wolfe - Fifth Head and Long Sun make an art of that. I
was looking at the whole passage and the spirit of the yellows kind of taking over things
possession style to explain the impulse that takes over the men, but you and Dan'l are most
assuredly correct here. Sorry.

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