

Short Stories 73 and 74: The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus/The Woman the Unicorn Loved

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Marc Aramini — 30 Jul 2014, 23:11

“The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus” first appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1979; “The Woman the Unicorn Loved” appeared there in 1981. Both are reprinted in *Endangered Species*. The summary below also makes some comments about the poems interspersed throughout, so might be worth perusing.

SUMMARY, CREATURE OBSERVATIONS, AND POEM PLACEMENT:

“The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus”

In a tale set at the end of the 20th century or at the start of this one, Professor Anderson is awoken from his sleep before dawn by a call from his associate Janet and gets ready to go help her and her crew of Mythical Conservationists. Several ordinary species have gone extinct recently and advances in genetic engineering have allowed mythical beasts to become more or less a reality. Because of the widespread possibility of genetic engineering, people are making monsters and then releasing them into the wilderness if their experiments are not successful. The army is seeking to keep it under control, often using violence.

Anderson looks at the engineered waterhorse he keeps in an aquarium, made for him by his colleague Dr. Dumont. It reminds him of a verse from “The Battle of Lake Regillus” which mention the steeds of Castor and Pollux (see Literary Allusions below — Castor and Pollux resonate throughout the first story), and Anderson cannot recall the name of the author, Thomas Babington Macauley. He dresses in warm durable clothes, and thinks again of the middle lines of the quoted portion describing the armor of Castor and Pollux which begin “Never on earthly anvil” as he considers his cold-weather gear and remembers the murder of a bird woman, a “weak and frightened siren”, in the snow at the start of winter, then segues mistakenly into a poem called “Amphitrite” (the wife of Poseidon), which he attributes to Darwin's ancestor, regarding waves and the wife of Poseidon steering her shell, which he possibly thinks of because of the line about drinking from an earthly stream in the Macauley poem.

During his drive to meet Janet, Anderson thinks that the taillights of the cars in front of him resemble the red eyes of beasts, which brings to mind an Assyrian named Nin who was also murdered (certainly a Shedú man-bull, a male version of the lammasu, a protective winged deity with the body of a bull — one of these was also found in Aslan's army in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* books.) The wings of the Shedú remind him of the siren again, and he says, “They sell everything but Odysseus' wax, but then I don't need Odysseus' wax” - referring to the scene in the *Odyssey* where Circe gives Odysseus earwax so that the wail of the sirens will not tempt his men. (It does seem that Janet in some ways represents a siren's call for Anderson throughout the story)

Janet contacts him on CB, identifying herself as Sombelene, a reference Anderson does not recognize (it is from Lord Dunsany's "Bride of the Man Horse" — see Literary Allusions below) and Anderson as Peirithous (again, Literary Allusions below). She tells him where to meet them (they ostensibly use pseudonyms to hide their actions — working somewhat against the army who seeks to ?clean up?/annihilate rogue man made mythic beasts).

An army helicopter passing overhead puts him in mind of a poem called "The Cranes of Ibycus", where Ibycus praises the birds as companions. In reality, the cranes serve as an evil omen for the soon to be murdered poet Ibycus, and the helicopters bode ill here as well. Anderson sees a billboard praising the river sternwheeler *Apollo 2 *and turns off the road, thinking of lines from the "Hymn to Proserpine" by Swinburne which begins "Will thou yet take all Galilean?" (concerning the lack of joy the speaker sees in the deaths of the Roman gods and the ideological dichotomy between the pagan revelry and the somber sinless but still moribund one of the Judeo-Christian God, no doubt stirring the idea of a battle about to occur between the modern world and the ancient brought to life in the story) and knows that he is going to a fight. Anderson also thinks that the most important thing is to fight the good fight rather than win.

A bearded man working with Janet who is later named Paul says that there are more than one type of engineered beast out there, and their existence "makes one feel like Adam" in discovering new life. Anderson says they sense where natural life is dying out and migrate to those areas.

A colonel approaches Anderson, and is surprised that he teaches classical literature. He mentions a cat the size of small dog with the head of a snake was killed yesterday, and Anderson speculates real wild cats must be much more dangerous than that one. The colonel has been ordered to clean up the mess of these unnatural creatures, and the Mythic Conservationists are in the way — he assumes Anderson is in charge because of his height and male gender, but Anderson says the colonel is wrong about many of his assumptions.

When the media arrive, they hone in on Janet as the leader, and she indicates that these creatures are people. Dumont asserts that this "life-shaping" is moral and that the products of the work should be protected as animals are. Janet says it is done to finally see the "friends our ancestors dreamed of" while the bearded man, Paul, speaks in more religious terms, saying man has the authority to name, and to name was to create.

They go on the hunt, with the conservationists given orders to stand between the army and the beasts so none are killed. Anderson gets lost, then sees Janet in a red ski suit, thinking of the lines from The *Iliad* in which Thetis begs Zeus to grant her one desire (to give honor to her son Achilles). Dumont, Janet, and Anderson convene, and soon a wounded young faun appears. Contrary to their initial assumption, another genetic modification has bitten him and he has not been shot, as Anderson knows from his experience with gunshots in the Marines. The faun reveals that there was a "dead twin", bear-like footprints in the woods, and terror. They realize someone has created real monsters, like werewolves or Anubis and Set, even "Narashimha, the lion-man of the Vedas" (who is an avatar of Vishnu).

When Anderson admits that they must lead the soldiers to the dangerous created monster before humans are killed, Janet is enraged and runs off, where her centaur appears to carry her away in his dark enormity. Janet chooses the engineered myths over humanity of the 20th century, and Anderson walks back with the faun, thinking of Shelley's "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats" and the last visitor who comes to mourn for Adonais. "The road and the cars, all the relics of the dying twentieth century except himself, would be in the direction

opposite the one Pholus had taken. Anderson trudged towards them.”

“The Woman the Unicorn Loved”

Anderson is in his office, and sees a unicorn comes trotting between fragrant pines and the “river of steel and rubber roaring out of the heart of the city”. The unicorn is white, with dark red hooves and a bull's tail seen in heraldic beasts, with a horn as long as a man's forearm. When the unicorn is crossing traffic, Anderson thinks of merciless Pluto in a quote from book 9 of the Iliad — death being the only god unmoved by offerings. Anderson goes down to meet with Dumont and pushes through the crowd surrounding the unicorn. (Knowing only virgins can touch a unicorn, some students push a cheerleader towards it).

Anderson runs past it as Dumont tries to feed it, and warns the group not to antagonize the modified horse. Anderson wonders if the conservationists or the army will arrive first, and a female graduate student takes the white bread of Dumont and offers it to the unicorn. Anderson fears she will be killed, and he quotes Revelation: “Behold a pale horse: And his name that sat on him was Death.”

The horse takes kindly to the girl and eats the bread and lets her stroke its horn, before the police arrive in a gunship and gas the area.

Anderson returns to his office to clean up after the chaos, and finds the graduate student, named Julie Coronell, already there. She indicates she wants help finding the horse, and tells the story of the derivation of the name pumpernickel for the bread she has brought for it — a french general saving German bread for his horse Nicole at the time of Napoleon, saying “pain pour Nicole.” She asks about the origin of unicorns and Anderson reveals them to be Indian in nature, a misunderstanding an mistranslation of a description of an Indian rhinoceros. Anderson mentions Chesterton, saying that unicorns were always real - “to think of a cow with wings is essentially to have met one.” He says the unicorn is a symbol of masculine purity.

Dumont calls saying the unicorn was spotted on the far side of the practice field. Anderson needs him to get a hold of the tranquilizer gun or they won't be able to do anything.

Anderson indicates many people are making these genetic conglomerations in the city, but the horse is too big and must be from a rural area. They speak of his seahorse at home and he explains that Balios and Xanthos were Poseidon's steeds, but that the waves were his herds, the whitecaps a symbolic mane for his horses. He goes on to demonstrate that most of the creatures she would create have already been thought of in myth, such as the roc and Pegasus.

Dumont arrives and Anderson reveals he knew that Julie has hidden the unicorn herself or she would be more urgent instead of engaging in all that small talk. She says it is hidden in the library, in the fantasy section. The watchman was complicit with her, and soon, amidst discussion of the nature of fantasy fiction and its relationship to classical literature, with mention of Cabell, Gardner, Oz, and the Overworld (of Vance?) they come across the dead body of Bailey the watchman, gored by the unicorn. (He was called Beetle after the cartoon strip of the lazy Beetle Bailey, no doubt).

Anderson reasons that even without advanced intelligence his sense of smell led him to feel abandoned by Julie. He knows that with the doors closed the horse must still be there, and he plans to goad the unicorn outside by opening the doors and tempting it with freedom while Dumont waits with his tranquilizer. He quotes Aiken's “Semlin”, which states that unicorns “come down to the sea” in the moonlight.

Julie begins to cry and Anderson quotes Walter Scott's "Twist ye, twine ye" about the inextricable nature of suffering and happiness, and, according to Anderson, "That this isn't the end. Not for men or women or unicorns. Probably not even for poor old Bailey. Threads are long." She kisses him and the unicorn attacks in jealousy. His reaction is just quick enough to escape with a belly wound as he is knocked down. He grabs onto the horn and is dragged and kicked, eventually realizing his leg is broken.

Knowing that stallions don't kill if the other lies down and surrenders, he does so and sees "the white head — silhouetted against the twinkling constellations now, the colors seemingly reversed as in a negative, the longsword horn both new and ancient to the sky of Earth."

The horse spares him and he remarks that the unicorn is heading to the lake shore, and that he was "a superhorse — armed, with size, strength, grace, and intelligence all augmented."

Julie ends the story with a nursery rhyme about England and Scotland: "The lion and the unicorn/were fighting for the crown/The lion beat the unicorn/ And sent him out of town". She remarks that it all came true, except for the last part of the rhyme, which concerns plum cake, and Anderson denies that there was a lion at all.

COMMENTARY:

The juxtaposition of classical poetry and action shows us a pretty clear theme: those who understand the past and the mythical dreams of mankind know important things about not only contemporary humanity but also have useful knowledge about how those dreams are being explored. Anderson is perhaps the most erudite of Wolfe's heroes, with his Marine background and PhD in classical literature, and the third person limited point of view tied to his perspective seems to be reliable.

While the story is a fairly simple exploration of genetic engineering (re?)creating the mythical creatures of yesterday, the classical poetry throughout grants immense allusive depth to an otherwise straightforward tale and lets us see that the dreams and fancies of humanity have not changed unrecognizably — old knowledge is still useful. Since we are in a metaphysically simple situation in these stories, the third person narration is much easier to parse than in works such as "To the Dark Tower Came" or "The Eyeflash Miracles". While the quoted poetry usually only has a tangential or imagistic relationship to its surroundings, any look at these stories must examine the placement of the texts and see if the overarching poetic themes of the poems and quotations are relevant thematically as well.

When Anderson sees the small waterhorse, he remembers a verse from the Battle of Lake Regillus where the Romans and the Latin League of the Tarquins fight, and Castor and Pollux mysteriously arrive to fight for Rome on twin steeds. Historically this was the final bid of the once powerful Tarquins for power in Rome. The Tarquin's struggle has little to do with battle in Wolfe's story and instead invokes Anderson's strange feelings about his tiny watery steed, which has never been in nature. The water horse is of course associated with the kelpie, and the myths are mixed a bit — some malevolent, some benign. However, the presence of Castor and Pollux is no accident, as they will feature in the story of Perithous, the code name Anderson has chosen, whose betrothed is abducted by centaurs. The battle between centaurs and Perithous is mirrored in another mythical account, that of Pholus, the only civilized centaur besides Chiron, who is actually of semi-divine origin. When the centaurs anger Heracles, he slays them with poisoned arrows, and both Chiron (the divine centaur) and Pholus (a friend of Heracles) die in this fashion. We will return to this in Literary Allusions below.

The second story has another thesis: that fantasy is a natural outgrowth of classical literature, and, furthermore, that many of the fantastic beasts are misunderstandings or mistranslations of nature. The root of Pumpernickel as folk etymology, starting as bread saved for a horse named Nicole, as well as the exploration of a unicorn being a mythical outgrowth of a real description by Pliny of a “monoceros” or an Indian rhinoceros, with its traditional horn based off of a narwhale's. Thus myth and reality are strangely interwoven here, and it is the understanding of the stallion's nature that allows Anderson to avoid being killed.

The old thesis that fantasy and science fiction are the real heirs of the ancient classical literature so respected by the literary establishment is once again put forward by Wolfe in the second story quite forcefully in the library scene, and the relative paucity of classical poems in this section speak to its more modern theme. The character Ed says, “That's what fantasy is — classical lit that's still alive. When the people who wrote those stories did it, their books were called fantasy.” Wolfe of course has his classical scholar Anderson agree.

While both stories have “Woman” and “Love” in the title to show that they are part of a series, of course the women are different.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

Anderson's name, son of Andrew, also implies Son of Man. This Christian imagery is not overt but is reinforced by a few associations in the second story especially — when Julie reveals that her specialty is 20th century fiction, he says that his focus is 2000 years earlier — pretty close to the time of Christ's birth on the cusp of the change from the pagan world view to that of Christianity, which so many of the poems address. In addition, the final poem leaves with the image of the lion defeating the unicorn — while winged lions signify St. Mark, lions without wings represent Christ (according to the fairly contemporaneous “The Eyeflash Miracles” by Wolfe). Julie identifies Anderson as the lion, who “defeats” the unicorn by ironically surrendering and recognizing its beast with his superior foresight — it does not kill as men would.

In addition, while the first story almost entirely references poems set in the classic mode with a very few biblical statements concerning the beginning (Adam and “the word”, for example), the second story features some Christian apocalyptic imagery: “Behold a pale horse: And his name that sat on him was Death.” The large, tawny haired Anderson is certainly hinted to be a lion by Julie, who says every aspect of her final rhyme came true save the plum cake: “The lion and the unicorn/ Were fighting for the crown; /The lion beat the unicorn/ And sent him out of town.” While his tawny large frame is not directly mentioned in the first story and Anderson denies being the lion, the Dunsany quote below in literary allusions does make a rather memorable statement about Sombelene and lions who fear to woo her.

While there is perhaps not much to Anderson's association with this imagery, the second story seems to show the difference between man and beast, almost an inversion from the conclusions of the first one, that show the anger of Pholus and perhaps hint at a war between the world of man and these new beasts in much the same way that the pagan and Christian worldviews clashed. Anderson's knowledge of myth and the instincts of creatures allows him to triumph in the second story, but it is not certain that he does so in the first.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The name Sombelene which Janet uses for her handle comes from Lord Dunsany's story, “The Bride of the Man Horse” - for this reason, the more classically educated Anderson does not know it's source. There is a very telling line in Dunsany's story that I think resonates with

Wolfe's reference as well: "Not all of us have sat at historians' feet, but all have learned fable and myth at their mothers' knees." Of Sombelene, who a centaur who has just become an adult goes to woo, it is written:

Her father had been half centaur and half god; her mother was the child of a desert lion and that sphinx that watches the pyramids; -- she was more mystical than Woman.

Her beauty was as a dream, was as a song; the one dream of a lifetime dreamed on enchanted dews, the one song sung to some city by a deathless bird blown far from his native coasts by storm in Paradise. Dawn after dawn on mountains of romance or twilight after twilight could never equal her beauty; all the glow-worms had not the secret among them nor all the stars of night; poets had never sung it nor evening guessed its meaning; the morning envied it, it was hidden from lovers.

She was unwed, unwooded.

The lions came not to woo her because they feared her strength, and the gods dared not love her because they knew she must die.

The man-horse grabs her by the hair and takes her, ironically to be her servant, though she shows no animation or life in any of the narrated scenes.

This last lion reference is interesting in light of the final image we are left with of Anderson in the second story, as mentioned above.

Anderson's handle of Perithous is also interesting: Perithous and Theseus became friends after Perithous challenged Theseus' heroism. During his wedding party with Hippodamia (whose name means horse tamer, roughly), the centaurs became drunk and unruly and carried her off. The battle with them resulted in victory for Perithous. Later he attempts to steal Persephone from Hades after Theseus steals Helen (whose brothers, Castor and Pollux, steal her back when Theseus and Perithous are captured in Hades by the Furies — then Helen can be taken and start the Trojan War) . Heracles fails to save Perithous from Hades, but Heracles' friend the civilized centaur Pholus, along with the more divine centaur Chiron, will die from the poisoned arrows Heracles will use to slay the bestial, uncivilized centaurs.

Given the prominent position of Castor and Pollux and the types of poems selected by Wolfe, his primary source was probably Bullfinch's **Mythology** and the accompanying **Poetry of the Age of Fable**, which is the only source that Darwin's poem about "Amphitrite" is readily and easily accessible (no doubt Wolfe appreciates the irony of quoting Darwin's ancestor in a text about the manufacturing of entirely new - but already conceived - species through science).

Macauley's poem is listed under the Castor and Pollux heading in Bullfinch as well, primarily the section of the poem Wolfe quotes, and not far from there are references to the poet Ibycus and his story: believing that cranes are a good omen, he is robbed and killed on the road, and the cranes serve to identify the murderers so that justice can be maintained.

For this reason, rather than believing that the poems are randomly assembled, I think that the story of Castor and Pollux was one of the starting points for Wolfe's research into the story rather than a coincidence, and I do expect that there should be some "twinning" going on, though of special note is that Castor is normally considered a mortal, while Pollux is of more divine origin. On a different note, with Anderson's thoughts of the Sirens, it does seem that he is tempted to join the wilderness by Janet's pleas, and Darwin's poem of Amphitrite also mentions water spirits:

Fair Amphitrite steers her silver shell ;
Her playful dolphins stretch the silken rein,
Hear her sweet voice, and glide along the main

As round the wide, meandering coasts she moves,
By gushing rills, rude cliffs, and nodding groves,
Each by her pine, the wood-nymphs wave their locks,
And blue-eyed Naiads peer amid the rocks.

The final stanza that closes "The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus" describes a lonely stranger comes to mourn for the passing of Adonais, from Shelley's elegy on the death of Keats. The first part of that elegy laments the sadness and loss of all the joyous, natural things in pretty explicitly pagan cosmology. The stanza referenced is a turning point, however, in which this stranger, probably the poet Shelley himself, appears, and the tone of the poem shifts to one of the celebration of life even though Adonais/Keats is gone. However, the somber tone of the "The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus?" ending, and the separation between the resurrected mythic world and the "dying" world of the 20th century, seems to maintain the tone of the first half of the elegy.

Of special note is the idea that the Christian world and birth of Christ brought about the death of Pan, associated with Fauns, and here, at the conclusion of the story, we have a wounded faun returning to the world.

The second story has far fewer classical illusions, referencing the Iliad and the Bible, but by far the strangest reference is the Aiken's "Senlin", a series of vignettes in which the main character undergoes several metaphysical shifts, becoming the things that he thinks about, whether they be trees, his city, or other abstract concepts as he unearths the past into the light of day, finally becoming something of a dream. The section dealing with unicorns going down to the sea is rather oddly taken as incontrovertible fact — the unicorn is assumed to be heading to the water based on the passages from "Senlin".

The brief vignette from Osenso that begins "Pity the Unicorn,/ Pity the Hippograff,/ Souls that were never born/ Out of the land of If!" simply serves to ground the fantastic premise of a unicorn lingering in the fantasy section of a library.

It ends with a nursery rhyme which actually concerns the relationship between Scotland and England, since they are symbols of the United Kingdom.

THE TWINS:

With the pairing of Castor and Pollux (one human, one divine) and the historical blurring of Chiron and Phollus (one centaur, one divine) into one creature, is it possible that the final centaur is a twin? "Only once before had Anderson seen him. Then he had thought him roan, the human torso, arms, and face, Caucasian. Now Pholus looked black, bigger than any horse, immensely bigger than any man, muscled like a giant." Or is this change in appearance simply a symbol of his rage and rebellion against mankind and ideological separation from Anderson? The faun speaks of "the dead twin; the footprints like, but not quite like, a bear's; the terror in the winter-wrapped woods."

NAMES:

We have already mentioned the mythical names and how Anderson can imply Son of Man, another name for Christ, but in light of the limerick about the lion and the unicorn, Julie Coronell's name must certainly imply she is the crown that the lion and unicorn are fighting

over. (Even though her name more accurately means column, though the change to -r- in the name implies a crown).

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Are the roan and then black centaur really one individual, the same Pholus? Is the bearded man named Paul who quotes scripture in the first story just what he appears to be, a normal person involved with the Mythical Conservationists? Given the presence of the Castor and Pollux allusions and the conflation of Chiron and Pholus in some ancient documents concerning centaurs, it almost seems that the twin theme is quite deliberately repeated in the references Wolfe selected. There is a version of the Castor and Pollux myth in which they are given alternate times to live, sharing the immortality of Pollux.

Why is the man-bull shedu named Nin, which, in Assyrian, probably implies “sister?”

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

I feel this is the science fictional version of Wolfe's Nebraskan stories. The main character seems to be a bit more astute and well-informed than many of Wolfe's other protagonists, who are at times deliberately obtuse, but the future coming to resemble the imagination of the past summons New Sun as well.