

Journey to the West

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 10 Apr 2001

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Dan Parmenter — 10 Apr 2001, 18:07

From: "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

3) It's also in dialogue with several other things besides KSR's Mars books (which I haven't read, btw: are they really worth the effort?).

a) Another three-volume hero's journey: Dante. Nell mezzo del camino de whatever Horn finds himself all at sea (so to speak), lost. His journeys lead him through Hell (Green), Purgatory (the Whorl), and ultimately to, uh, well, that's where it gets kind of complicated...

People have pointed out Dante parallels in prior Wolfe books, and of course the parallels to the Odyssey have been brought up. Lately I've been vaguely considering another. I've been sort of fascinated recently by the old Chinese novel "Journey to the West" which tells (in rather fanciful detail) the story of a Tang Dynasty priest (based on an actual historic figure) who travels west in search of the Buddhist Sutra. The priest is accompanied on his journey by several disciples, mostably Monkey (aka the Monkey King) Pig and Friar Sand (a former sea monster apparently). If it sounds familiar, it should since it's served as the basis for many Japanese cartoons over the years (e.g. DragonBall) and has been adapted for countless Chinese dramatic productions including a "Monkey King" TV series that one occasionally sees on the International Channel on cable TV.

I haven't read the "original" (cobbled from various oral folktales and whatnot) but I can't help but observe some Wolfean echoes, specifically in RTTW, which concerns a journey to the west (pole) in search of Silk (not sutras, but I think the parallel is reasonable) and of course HornSilk is a reasonable stand-in for the priest, with Pig standing in for Pig and Oreb, though not a former sea-monster carrying one within him. The parallels sort of fall apart due to the lack of a Monkey King counterpart. In most versions of the story I've seen, the Monkey King is the main player and though one might find parallels with Hound at a stretch (Hound declares himself ready and anxious to go to Green, which sort of parallels the Monkey King's rebellious, adventuresome spirit and at least one story where he goes to Hell), it seems like a weak parallel; nevertheless, compared to what seem to me fairly weak Odyssey references (Nettle as Penelope, etc.), perhaps there's a case to be made.

Is anyone else familiar with this? As I said, most of my knowledge is second hand, though I've been considering a couple of different English translations of the story in novel form. I wouldn't be surprised if Wolfe had at least heard of it. I apologize for the very vague nature of this hypothesis. There's probably nothing to it, but it's been sticking in my mind.

Shellac (also currently reading RED MARS)

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Nicholas Gevers — 11 Apr 2001, 01:11 · follows Dan Parmenter

Dan Parmenter: interesting point about JOURNEY TO THE WEST, which we know of course influenced Cordwainer Smith very strongly. But then GW denies being influenced by Cordwainer Smith...

--Nick Gevers.