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The Whorl list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 18 Apr 2001

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akt — 18 Apr 2001, 13:28

From Shellac:

Yes, I'm very aware that I have named myself for a product made from insect goo (as silk is) and once used for phonograph recordings. It's all rather "fannish" I suppose, but occasionally I find it amusing. I used to laugh out loud at whoever it was who signed as "Sergeant Rock", being an occasional DC war comics fan.

I miss the Sarge. If you are still out there, could you please give us a salute, for old times?

From Ratty:

Women to be picked up and dumped at will. Well, we all know that the Odyssey is partly behind this narrative, and Odysseus was hardly a model of faithfulness to his wife. What is of note, though I don't know how much Wolfe has thought about this, is that pre-Christian heroes like Odysseus don't really undergo the kind of moral transformation we have come to expect in literature of the Christian (and "post-Christian") era. Odysseus does not change as a result of his descent into Hades; no "death and moral resurrection" here; and he's about as vicious at the end as he has been all along. But both Horn and Severian are becoming better people, though not very dramatically. They make a little progress, not great progress. In the case of Horn, it's Silk's influence, in various ways. Rape? Hey, what else are women for? Sure, MY WIFE is to be protected (and maybe yours also, if you're my equal), but the rest are fair game, to be used at will. That's the "ancient heroic" attitude, pretty much. (Though Homer was not totally blind to the problem, as the first book of the Iliad shows.)

Ratty, while I appreciate the general tone of your screed, I have to object to its specifics (well, you knew I would, didn't you?). Specifically, then, not only is there no rape in The Odyssey, but women are treated as powerful and controlling figures. There are four important featured players, as I recall: Calypso, Circe, Nausica and Penelope. Helen and Athena are significant background figures, while the women he encounters at the boundary of Hades are formidable, if sorrowful. Nausica is only a girl, but as a princess she compels respect, and much of the story is told directly to her and her father. No one could possibly call the other women victims. The outlook is so feminist that Samuel Butler, in fact, speculated that the true author of The Odyssey was a woman (Robert Graves concurred, also c.f. Harold Bloom and -The Book of J-). Women in the Greek plays get somewhat similar treatment. (I hedge because this is a big

subject and could be argued for a long time; also there is the actual position of women in Greek society, which was not so hot.) The Iliad, granted, is different, a war story, and two women are treated as sex slaves. Their male counterparts were slaughtered, however--plus ca change.

Let's go even further back, to Gilgamesh. At its opening, G, the king and partly divine as well, is having his swinish way with the about-to-be brides of the town (droit de seigneur). But, significantly, the entire populace objects and appeals to the gods, which sets the plot in motion. The other women of the epic, the ritual prostitute who humanizes Enkidu, G's mother Ninsun (a minor goddess, to be sure), and the uncanny tavernkeeper (who has a name that I've forgotten) are treated with great respect. The *dis*respect G and Enkidu show to the goddess Inanna is punished direly. The Scorpion Woman and Ziasudra's wife (OK, as wives you've accounted for these) get equal billing, even though Z's wife doesn't have a name. (Neither does Mrs. Noah.)

So I object to your thesis of Wolfe's using epic as an excuse. Epic is more complicated than that. And I hardly think the Middle Eastern view of women served up by the Bible--multiple wives and concubines, Mary and Martha etc.--is more progressive. Let's not forget that Mary's impregnation was exactly the same as that of Zeus's numerous ladyfriends. She didn't exactly ask for it, did she?

Wolfe, I'm sure, is quite sympathetic to some of the concerns of feminism. Men have very often treated women very badly, historically, and Wolfe wants us to think about this fact. Rape and also the sexual abuse of children is pretty damn common, and he's trying to deal with it. It's clear that HE does not approve of it. Where traditional epics like the Odyssey might find Odysseus'

adulteries

"good stuff," and the Kalevala presents Lemmenkainen's fornications as humorous, it's pretty clear that Horn's and Severian's follies are not held up for our amusement. Even in Jack Vance, though Cugel gets his comeuppance, his dalliances are presented as light humor. I don't think Wolfe ever presents adultery or fornication that way. Wolfe's "realism" is designed to make us uncomfortable, but I don't think his own moral perspective is hard to discern.

Well, I leave this up to others.

From Rostrum:

At a minimum, Horn is at fault and bears responsibility for insisting that Seawrack sing for him.

But what does Horn think about the rape? He says that the fault is his own, and he says the song is no excuse, but he does mention it, possibly wanting his readers to excuse him. (Of course this is Silk|Horn writing. Is Silk dragging an honest confession from a rapist who wants to excuse

himself, or is Silk finding the true cause behind Horn's attempt to blame himself?)

To have her bleeding to the point she cannot swim? Perhaps you are excusing him too much. Until the Wooly Bug's post, I tended to do that too.

And while Silk|Horn's killing of Jahlee was wrong, I think it's extremely understandable, considering the danger to Nettle and the depth of Jahlee's betrayal. In spite of Silk's contributions to the whole thing, it is amazing that Horn could learn to love as a daughter the creature that almost killed Sinew, leading to a major rift in his marriage to Nettle.

To bring Jahlee to Lizard was a huge imposition on Nettle, requiring her to put a lot of trust in Silk and/or Horn. It's not just Silk|Horn's trust in Jahlee that is broken, but Nettle's trust in Silk|Horn.

Yes, this is the point that I bump up against. Why, when so much of these books, or this book as we might as well call it, has to do with S/H's coming not only to terms, but coming to love as a father these three demonic creatures--a subject I found truly enthralling and worthy of serious contemplation--does he throw it all away so quickly? He started way back with Quetzal, an interesting, complicated character. The end of RttW seems to make trivial a huge investment of effort in a really chewy subject.

From Tim, re astral travel:

"Petty"...well it substantially decreased my enjoyment of the series, and leads directly to the issue discussed previously as to whether Wolfe is writing Science Fiction or Science Fantasy. It is something of a disappointment to find it's the latter after the earlier books in this "universe of discourse" (TBNS and TBLS) suggested the former. As I've asked before, why doesn't the Narrator try to astral travel to Seawrack or Nettle (the two places he repeatedly says he wants to be) once he's discovered this useful ability? The rules of astral travel don't seem sufficiently clear to rule this out. Instead he goes (involuntarily it seems) to Green, and (it seems eventually voluntarily) to Urth. The problem with giving characters these magic abilities is that it's irritating when they don't use them (or at least try to use them) in the way that would be rational given the motivations they've described.

This bothered me a lot on first reading. I got over it, for sheer enjoyment of the other worlds, but never completely--bringing it up makes me uneasy again.

What on _urth_ I'm talking about is that TBLS is IMHO (and not only mine...) clearly juvenilia by the standards Wolfe established in TBNS, especially in

terms of narrative style but also content. I won't repeat discussions that are in the archives. Obviously such aesthetic judgments involve matters of opinion. That's mine.

I felt **exactly** the same way. And am in the archives as saying so. What brought me around is admiration for the plot structure, which is formidable (**unlike** that of SS, which seems, well, sloppy--complicated but sloppy).

-alga

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

Alex David Groce — 18 Apr 2001, 13:56 · follows akt

alga wrote:

So I object to your thesis of Wolfe's using epic as an excuse. Epic is more complicated than that. And I hardly think the Middle Eastern view of women served up by the Bible--multiple wives and concubines, Mary and Martha etc.--is more progressive. Let's not forget that Mary's impregnation was exactly the same as that of Zeus's numerous ladyfriends. She didn't exactly ask for it, did she?

Not that this isn't purely a tangent, but actually in Luke 1 the angel announces things to come to Mary before she is pregnant, and Mary says "May it be to me as you have said." So, in fact, her consent is given. Indeed, in some sense the Magnificat is a poetic expression of the same sentiment.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Apr 2001, 11:27 · follows Alex David Groce

Alga oozed:

Let's not forget that Mary's impregnation was exactly the same as that of Zeus's numerous ladyfriends. She didn't exactly ask for it, did she?

Well... yes. Check out the Gospel according to Luke (the only account of the Annunciation to Mary -- Mt. has an account of the Annunciation to Joseph, a different matter). The angel tells her what God has in mind, and Mary says, "Let it be done to me," and proceeds a few paragraphs (but possibly several months) later to sing one of the finest psalms in the Bible in praise of God for doing this very thing.

Okay, it's a man's account told decades later: but (a) if we're talking about the text we have, then there's no point in saying "yeah, but" — the text is the text; and (b) this text is the only evidence we have at all, one way or another: you certainly can't support your claim simply by saying "there is no evidence at all."

--Dan'l

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

James Jordan — 18 Apr 2001, 13:32 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

At 01:28 PM 4/18/2001 -0400, Slimy wrote:

Ratty, while I appreciate the general tone of your screed, I have to object to its specifics (well, you knew I would, didn't you?).

Sure I did, Slimy. It was my purpose to draw you back into the discussion. ;-)

Specifically, then, not only is there no rape in The Odyssey, but women are treated as powerful and controlling figures. There are four important featured players, as I recall: Calypso, Circe, Nausica and Penelope. Helen and Athena are significant background figures, while the women he encounters at the boundary of Hades are formidable, if sorrowful. Nausica is only a girl, but as a princess she compels respect, and much of the story is told directly to her and her father. No one could possibly call the other women victims. The outlook is so feminist that Samuel Butler, in fact, speculated that the true author of The Odyssey was a woman (Robert Graves concurred, also c.f. Harold Bloom and -The Book of J-). Women in the Greek plays get somewhat similar treatment. (I hedge because this is a big subject and could be argued for a long time; also there is the actual position of women in Greek society, which was not so hot.) The Iliad, granted, is different, a war story, and two women are treated as sex slaves. Their male counterparts were slaughtered, however--plus ca change.

snip

Okay. Good point. Instead of using the Greeks, I should have simply pointed to the history of the world in general.

snip

Yes, this is the point that I bump up against. Why, when so much of

these books, or this book as we might as well call it, has to do with S/H's coming not only to terms, but coming to love as a father these three demonic creatures--a subject I found truly enthralling and worthy of serious contemplation--does he throw it all away so quickly? He started way back with Quetzal, an interesting, complicated character. The end of RttW seems to make trivial a huge investment of effort in a really chewy subject.

I still disagree. I think Jahlee's death is moving, and though it puts the narrator in a bad light, I think it communicates well to the reader. Jahlee dies AS A HUMAN, as a PERSON. Her death is, so to speak, her last step into true humanity. I know it did not have effect on you, so maybe Wolfe could have done a better job here; but I think most readers will feel as I do.

As for the narrator, well I've suggested that maybe this is the emerging Silk, who does not have the same sympathy for the inhumani that Horn has learned to have -- though I'm still not sure who the narrator is supposed to be at the end of the book. If anything, that's the point of Wolfe's failure as far as I'm concerned. I did not care to "meet Silk" again in such a way. ("Hurray! It's Silk again!" Gimmeabreak!) It also seems rather pointless, since the novel SEEMS to be about Horn's development, and just to wipe him out, or submerge him into Silk -- well, it does not work for me! And so, I guess I agree with your point.

I'd still rather think that it's Horn at the end, still being transformed by Silky influences, and that his attack on Jahlee was a lapse back into his "old nature." But I've been persuaded that I'm

probably wrong, and that all the rest of you are right -- though I don't like it.

The Rat

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James Jordan — 18 Apr 2001, 14:19 · follows James Jordan

Alga wrote:

So I object to your thesis of Wolfe's using epic as an excuse. Epic is more complicated than that. And I hardly think the Middle Eastern view of women served up by the Bible--multiple wives and concubines, Mary and Martha etc.--is more progressive. Let's not forget that Mary's impregnation was exactly the same as that of Zeus's numerous ladyfriends. She didn't exactly ask for it, did she?

Okay, I know your point of view. (I have your book on hell, after all.) My point was the influence of the Bible on our culture, and during those centuries it was believed that the Bible forbids polygamy and that people who practise it suffer for it. Obviously nobody believed that Mary and Martha were "wives" of Jesus, and they accepted the text as teaching that Mary accepted the role offered her. So, however some modern people may read the Bible, I was speaking of its cultural influence over the previous 1800 years. I don't suppose this is a good topic for this list to discuss in detail; I assume you see my point.

But I grant your point about Homer and the early epics, at least to a degree, as I stated in my other post.

King of Rats

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

Michael Straight — 19 Apr 2001, 11:11 · follows James Jordan

Alga wrote:

From Rostrum:

But what does Horn think about the rape? He says that the fault is his own, and he says the song is no excuse, but he does mention it, possibly wanting his readers to excuse him. (Of course this is Silk|Horn writing. Is Silk dragging an honest confession from a rapist who wants to excuse himself, or is Silk finding the true cause behind Horn's attempt to blame himself?)

To have her bleeding to the point she cannot swim? Perhaps you are excusing him too much. Until the Wooly Bug's post, I tended to do that too.

If anything, the extreme brutality of what happened makes me lean more toward believing that Seawrack's song produced some kind of irresistible compulsion to act as Horn did.

It all depends on how it works. If the song simply increases Horn's desire to do what he wants, then it reveals that his desires are pretty ugly and Horn should be condemned for acting on them (but I'd also be tempted to give him credit for normally keeping such desires in check--unless you buy an extreme Bad Horn theory that has him doing lots of ugly stuff he never tells us about--Nettle could hardly survive such treatment regularly even if she were the type to stay with so abusive a husband, nor is it likely his Gaonese concubine would escape with him if he were normally that brutal--but then that's Silk). But if the song actually compels Horn

to act in a certain way, then whether he's nice or ugly doesn't tell us anything about Horn because it's not him doing.

What we really need to know is what sort (if any) of madness or mind control the song causes. And given the scant evidence we have, I'm inclined to think that it is sufficiently mindwarping to give Horn the benefit of the doubt.

-Rostrum

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