

An Introduction to Brian McClellan

A brief introduction to the flintlock fantasy of Brian McClellan, tracing the central theme of fatherhood through his Powder Mage Trilogy and its sequel trilogy Gods of Blood and Powder.

Hello and welcome to this episode of the Oxford Fantasy Literature podcast. I'm Katherine Olley, a Junior Research Fellow in Medieval Studies here in Oxford and in this episode I'll be introducing the work of Brian McClellan noted for his Powder Mage novels, The Powder Mage Trilogy and its sequel trilogy Gods of Blood and Powder. And a warning at the beginning that there will be major spoilers for both these trilogies.

Rather than taking its inspiration from the medieval period, McClellan's work is set in a kind of early industrial period and could be categorised as flintlock/gunpowder fantasy. Alongside a fairly traditional magic system, in which users called Privileged reach for and manipulate The Else, each finger of the hand being attached to one of five elements: Fire, Earth, Air, Water and Aether and enabling them to do powerful sorcery, there is a competing gunpowder based system. Those with the affinity called Powder Mages or Marked can snort or eat gunpowder in order to attain a heightened state of awareness, a 'powder trance', and manipulate gunpowder-based weaponry, for example, floating a bullet farther and with greater accuracy than could be obtained by simply firing a rifle (a method often used to assassinate Privileged) or igniting gunpowder from a distance with their powers. And this disturbs the previous balance of power in which the Privileged had no rivals, so you can see the social disruptions of the early industrial period in which an emerging class of industrialists and manufacturers begins to challenge the supremacy of the old, landed elite being recast in magical terms.

Opening with a military coup masterminded by Field Marshal Tamas of the Adran army, which takes obvious inspiration from the French Revolution, with the aristocracy being guillotined in the streets, McClellan's work is an excellent example of how to successfully take the royalism out of fantasy. But it's also a study in contradictions and a demonstration of just how pervasive and inescapable such royalist tropes are because by the end of his second trilogy, and major spoiler alert here, it emerges that one of the series principal female characters Ka-poel, the mysterious companion of Field Marshal Tamas' son Taniel, is in fact a lost Dynize princess, and the trilogy ends with her ascending to godlike-status and becoming the new Empress of the Dynize Empire. From a reader's point of view, it's a satisfying ending in spite of the cliché. From a more critical perspective, it's very interesting to see a series that began by so definitely rejecting fantasy's fascination with royalty end by succumbing to that very lure, although Ka-poel is far from a traditional Empress and indeed hopes to use her position to modernize Dynize to the point where a monarch is no longer needed and she can retire (*Blood of Empire*, 639), still the resilience of the 'Lost Heir' motif is remarkable. Both Ka-poel and Field Marshal Tamas then seize tremendous (almost unlimited) power with the aim of using it for the common good, but a good that is defined almost entirely according to their own perspective, a perspective I believe we are meant to share, seeing modernization and democratization as a good thing, but there remains a fascinating tension between despotism and democracy in McClellan's work. His narrative's coalesce around individuals who usher in sweeping change, shaping the world according to

their desires and his books leave little room for the slower, gradual march of progress amidst all their revolutions and wars for independence.

Of course, its also a vexed question (and one ripe for deeper sociological analysis) whether depicting a military coup like Tamas' segueing successfully, if not entirely smoothly, into democratic governmental rule, is not just as wishful and unrealistic as the optimistic noble royalism which characterises many earlier and indeed current fantasy works? History would perhaps suggest that military revolutions have more chance of leading to turmoil or a military dictatorship than to democratic self-governance and key to the success of the revolution in McClellan's novels is the death of its instigator at the end of the Powder Mage trilogy, which precludes the possibility of his holding on to power for too long, becoming the very dictator he has deposed (though McClellan does revisit this idea in his second trilogy in the character of Lindet, who begins as a liberation leader and is transformed by the reality of power into something more oppressive). Safely dead Tamas offers a non-threatening legacy that can be embraced without fear. His death offers a kind of political closure but also a personal one, resolving finally the troubled relationship he had with his son.

Indeed, the theme of fatherhood runs prominently through both of McClellan's trilogies. As a sidenote, it's extremely fitting that the book which starts it all, *The Promise of Blood*, is dedicated to McClellan's father. It's the figure of Tamas, of course, who really embodies paternity and becomes the vehicle for its exploration in the first trilogy. Tamas's efforts to become the father of a nation, masterminding the transformation of Adro from a monarchy into a republic, take a heavy toll on his personal relationships most particularly his relationship with his son Taniel but also slightly more peripherally with his adopted son Borbador and his adopted daughter Vlora.

At the beginning of the Powder Mage trilogy Tamas and Taniel have a fraught, almost impersonal relationship as a result of the many years Tamas has spent meticulously planning his revolution rather than building a relationship with his son. On Taniel's side, Tamas impressive reputation as a military commander also leaves him a lot to live up to. When they initially reunite after two years separation Tamas is seemingly more moved by the exquisite pair of duelling pistols Taniel gifts him than by his son's actual return. 'Tamas introduced Taniel as a powder mage. Was that all he was to the field marshal? Just another soldier?', Taniel muses in *Promise of Blood*, p. 25. Their slow journey toward understanding and acceptance of one another is, I would argue, the major emotional arc of the trilogy and culminates as Tamas lays dying and finally admits to his son just how proud of him he has become, something that has been unspoken but finally achieves full expression. His last words to his son in *The Autumn Republic*, p. 555: 'Your mother says hi, my boy. We love you', finally reconcile the fractured pieces of their family into one harmonious whole, present together, if only for an instant before death separates them again.

Ben Styke in McClellan's second trilogy, set in Fatrasta, a former territory of the Kez Empire, serves as an interesting comparison to Tamas and continues McClellan's exploration of fatherhood. Like Tamas, Styke is a military figure, the leader of the Mad Lancers who fought bravely in Fatrasta's War for Independence. Also like Tamas, he is a man on a mission, in his case out to get revenge on the men who betrayed him at the end of the war and saw him sent to a penal labour camp for ten years, just as Tamas wanted revenge on the King of Adro

on a very personal level for allowing his beloved wife to be executed years before the main action of the series. And again, like Tamas, Styke is an important paternal figure, the only one of the main protagonists in the Gods of Blood and Powder trilogy with parental responsibilities: while incarcerated he adopted an orphaned girl, Celine, to protect her in the labour camp when her own father died there.

In contrast to Tamas, however, Styke manages to walk away from his mission and not to be consumed by it. Tamas gives everything for his vision of Adro, including his life, while Styke succeeds in the end in building a new life for himself and Celine. His growth as a parental figure is underlined by his troubled relationship with his own abusive father, whom he killed as a boy to protect his younger sister (*Wrath of Empire*, 381). Styke takes after his father in the sense that he is a very violent man, but he has channelled that violence into controlled military action rather than indiscriminate abuse and when it begins to control him, in his revenge quest, he is able to reject its influence and walk away. His ability to do so is directly linked to his parental role and the value he places on familial relationships. On the verge of killing Tenny, one of the men who betrayed him Styke looks back to find Celine, his adopted daughter, watching him, not it has to be said in horror, more in anticipation, but the sight makes Styke hesitate, and he spares Tenny instead, explaining to Celine afterwards that "Hardest thing a soldier can do is leave the killing behind him. Tenny didn't sell me out for money or power. He sold me out for a better life. Shitty thing to do, but he went somewhere he couldn't hear the hooves and the cannons and became a good husband to a fat little country girl. He did what I should have done twenty-five years ago." (*Wrath of Empire*, 182). In the middle of fighting a war, Styke's development over the trilogy actually charts a course away from violence to peace and contentment finding in the very experience of fighting the truth of its limitations as a way of life.

McClellan's work is inescapably military in its focus, and those who don't enjoy reading about military manoeuvres or army organisation may find his books not to their taste but to reduce his books to only their military themes would be to do them a disservice. As I have discussed there are many fascinating political and social overtones to McClellan's work, as well as religious ones I've not had time to touch on, explorations of incarnation, sacrifice and the nature of the divine which I leave you to explore for yourselves. I hope you've enjoyed this short introduction to the works of Brian McClellan. Thanks again for listening.
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