

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Berit Ellingsen

The Astronomer and the King

The astronomer is the royal astronomer, first among scientists and tutor to princes. He heads his own dynasty of astronomers, each son rushing to outdo his father. The lenses in his telescopes are the most advanced in the world.

The king rules the strongest nation on the continent, his power is unquestionable, undeniable, even to himself. He mounted the throne at fifteen, reign is his life. No one really knows what he thinks. He smiles gently to his ministers until he fires them or executes them. His coats are heavy with gold thread.

The astronomer and the king meet in an empty ballroom in the royal castle at night, to watch the dance of the planets and the stars.

One evening the king says:

"Have you seen God out there, in your telescope and charts?"

"Your highness," the astronomer Cassini says. "I have mapped the rings of Saturn, discovered four of its moons, charted the great storm on Jupiter, measured the size of the solar system, but not seen any signs of God."

"What about paradise? And our beloved dead?" The king has buried seven of his eleven children, his oldest son the year before. The monarch's hair has started to gray.

Cassini too knows the wintry stillness, the waxen cheeks, the helpless hands of a dead child, but shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, your majesty," Cassini says. "I have only traced the motion of the stars and the planets in the sky. God is outside the purview of science." He wishes he could say more, tell the king something else. He prays for it, despite not being sure there is a God.

"I see," the king says, his voice vanishing into the silence of the gilded room. He moves away from Cassini, his fur-lined robe sweeping across the parquet floor.

Three hundred years later a spacecraft bearing Cassini's name will enter Saturn's orbit as humanity's eyes and ears to watch and listen to the ringed planet and its moons. When the first images from Cassini return to Earth across the endless chasm of space, the cheers from the scientists and engineers, who have spent more than ten years shaping the space probe from their thoughts and will, sounds like a wave, a storm, the leap of flames in a fire. The orbiter with Cassini's name will send home sights no human being has seen before.

Cassini has no way of knowing this, and if he did, he would have even less to say in comfort to the king. But he knows this: Even if it looks like the stars are blinking, wavering, that is an illusion created by the Earth's atmosphere. The light from the stars is always steady, always present - like God is said to be.

"Sir," the astronomer says. He turns towards the king and rolls the star maps out on the table.