

The Longissima Via

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Tragedy, alchemy and the process of psychological development travel a long but parallel path to redemption. The stages of tragedy mirror the stages of the alchemical pattern: death, rebirth, and the transformation of consciousness. Both define a journey that begins with blackness, a nigredo, which the alchemists describe as the dissolutio, or dismemberment of the self, and will end in a coniunctio, a joining together of the parts anew. Both tragedy and alchemy begins with impoverishment and some type of corruption which endures torture and ultimate submission to some drastic, mysterious and overwhelming process. Mythically, this can be seen in the anguish of Osiris's dismemberment, the perils of the sea journey of Odysseus, the incestuous marriage that leads to exile and the death of Oedipus, and the dismemberment and death of both Inanna and King Lear. Psychologically, this refers to the outbreak of the unconscious into the waking consciousness of the individual which leads to an experience of the Self. The alchemical reconstruction of tragedy mirrors the stages of psychological development in analysis: separatio, calcinatio, solutio, coagulatio, sublimatio, mortificatio and ultimately coniunctio of the dismembered parts of the Self.

In his study of alchemical symbols and themes in the work of William Shakespeare, Charles Nicholl named *King Lear* the most extraordinary alchemical myth

ever written (Nicholl 216). Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* in 1605 during the first wave of the alchemical renaissance which reached its zenith with Adreae's *Chimical Wedding*, the *Theatrum Chemicum*, Thomas Tymme's *The Practise of Chymicall and Hermeticall Physicke* as, well as major works of Valentine, Sendivogius and Quercetanus (152).

Alchemy permeated the atmosphere in which Shakespeare lived and worked, and he used alchemy as a language to chart the breakdown and healing of the King.

In alchemy, the king is often a symbol for the Philosopher's Stone itself, which will undergo transmutation to become the Red King reborn (157). Hidden within the ailing degenerate king are seeds of the transcendent Red King, the fiery masculine element, symbolic of a mixture of spirit and soul; yet in order to bring them to union he must undergo dissolution and darkness. A new order will grow into the emptiness left by uprooting the old corruption (158).

The submission of the tragic hero to the "will of the gods" or to fate or destiny, is a sacrificial necessity. His journey through darkness and ruin becomes a healing journey. He is not healed, but by his destruction and sacrifice the community he represents—a kingdom within the drama—is redeemed. As part of that community, he is a recipient of that redemption. This process mirrors the repetitions in analysis where an unconscious attitude or complex manifests itself in behavior or in symbolic material such as dreams and is then made conscious and integrated into the psyche. The king or the ruling principle of the psyche must die so that the individual may become conscious.

Shakespeare's alchemical tale begins with a separatio: the aging Lear is preparing to abdicate his throne by dividing his land into three sections for his three daughters. He

takes his sword, a symbol of separatio, and raises it to divide the map of his kingdom into sections in accordance with each daughter's devotion. He intends to invest each with the privilege of royalty but he wishes to give the largest piece to his favorite, Cordelia, with whom he wants to live out his last days. Both Goneril and Regan profess their undying love for him, more than they even love themselves. But Cordelia, who knows the deception in their hearts, speaks simply of her love and bond to him. Lear asks Cordelia to express her love more lavishly:

What can you say to draw
a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia replies, 'Nothing, my lord.'

Lear: Nothing!"

Cordelia: "Nothing."

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (*King Lear* 1.1, 88-93)

With the word, "Nothing" Lear becomes enraged and declares he will disinherit her if she does not express a love for him greater than her sisters. He commands her to reconsider and Cordelia replies:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; no more nor less. (1.1, 94-96)

When Cordelia refuses to enter into the royal charade Lear is playing with her sisters, his composure is shattered. In his role as king, Lear has become inflated, willful and deluded and when Cordelia speaks her truth he cannot tolerate it. Something dark and monstrous rises up inside him.

Lear curses his most beloved daughter and banishes her from the kingdom, another separatio. When his loyal servant Kent comes to her defense and tries to bring Lear to his

senses, Lear banishes him as well. He then divides his land into two portions for his remaining daughters, declaring that although he will no longer retain the power of King, he will retain the title as well as a retinue of one hundred knights.

At this stage of the play Nicholl describes Lear as the dragon, the agent of his own dissolutio and putrefactio, or dissolution and decay (163). He writes, “Just as the alchemical Dragon is the true object of its own poison by devouring his poisonous tail, Lear is the recipient of his own curses” (165). In a rage, Lear yells at Kent:

Come not between the dragon and his wrath
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind
Nursery. Hence and avoid my sight! (1.1, 125-127)

Thus begins the first turning of the Alchemical Wheel and Lear’s fall ensues. Shakespeare uses the image of the Wheel as an icon of Lear’s purgatorial torment: the Wheel of Fire, the Wheel of Fortune and the Wheel of Generations (Nicholl 145). The Wheel of Fire turns and Lear who was once great is brought low; his fortune changes and the generations are upended. Those who had status at the top of the wheel are brought to the bottom and must climb back up to achieve a reinstatement different from their original station (145). The Wheel is the alchemical journey that all of the central characters, Lear, Gloucester and Edgar, will undertake.

Lear will endure torment of both outer and inner dismemberment, becoming a poor and naked outcast in order to attain knowledge and love (149). Gloucester will become blind so that he may see who really loves him and Edgar, his first born, will become Poor Tom, a beggar and madman who eventually will become king. All will be transformed by the turning of the wheel (145). Nicholl writes, “Shakespeare’s use of the wheel is like the

alchemist's circulatio as the pattern of the opus: matter, 'chaos' is redeemed by its journey through the depths of the nigredo (149). The nigredo each endures is foreshadowed in Gloucester's astrological observation about the sun and the moon:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon
Portend no good to us; though the wisdom
Of nature can reason it thus and thus,
Yet nature finds itself scourged by the
Sequent effects. (1. 3, 112-116)

Lear's daughters represent the transforming agent of the alchemical opus. The oldest sister, Goneril, and the youngest, Cordelia are two halves of a single figure, embodying the transforming principle of Mercury. Together they symbolize the destroyer and healer, the processes of solutio and coagulatio, a dissolution and reformation of the ego, the double nature of alchemical Mercury (Nicholl 168). When Lear comes with his hundred knights to live first with Goneril and then subsequently with his other daughter, Regan, each in turn rejects him. Goneril/Regan together symbolize the serpent or wolf who mortifies the king, the stage of calcinatio or sacrifice. They reduce the size of his retinue by half (another separatio) and humiliate him by turning him unprotected out into the raging storm. He is stripped of his status and the vestiges of his kingdom, reduced to nothing (175). Lear curses Goneril to be barren and ugly:

that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away!(1. 5, 309-311)

Lear tears off the golden garments of his kingship and wearing beggar's clothes, enters the alchemical stage of mortificatio, the breaking down, or stripping down of his raw stuff. Goneril's caustic treatment of her father is symbolic of the alchemical operation

necessary to break down his defenses so he can find something essential within himself (Nicholl 175). Goneril and Regan together as one are agents of Lear's dissolutio. Cordelia, on the other hand, is seen as the anima, the spirit cast out of the sick Lear which flies up in sublimatio and rains down healing grace. The spirit must be liberated from matter by the alchemist to become the Philosopher's Stone, the alchemical symbol of enlightenment or perfection, or according to Jung, individuation (170).

Cast out, Lear begins his dark journey into the storm accompanied by the Fool. The Fool torments Lear telling him that he has become the Fool himself because he "made thy daughters thy mothers," thinking he was going to be nurtured by them (*King Lear* 1.4, 188). Even though he adds to Lear's torment, he remains his loyal companion. Like Hermes, the Fool conducts Lear on a journey to the underworld, into the "region of danger," the storm-tossed heath where they are battered by the elements. This journey to the underworld represents the blackness of putrefactio. As the wind and the rain of the storm rages outside, he is broken into pieces. Lear undergoes a total dissolutio and goes mad.

In the language of alchemy, the King is fed into the furnace to be reduced to ash. The furnace removes the outer form which distinguishes him from all other forms of being. The removal of form is accomplished by the alchemical fire and his mind becomes a broth (solutio). Lear calls his madness a mother and Nicholl writes, "Goneril is a cruel and punitive mother to Lear, his madness is a suffocating and eclipsing mother inside him" (199). Lear cries out,

O! how this mother swells upward toward my heart!

Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow!
Thy element's below. (*King Lear* 2.4 56-58)

Lear's disintegration is complete. His reduction to nothingness is a gestation of a new form, revealing the seed of a new Lear who is concerned about the welfare of both the Fool and Poor Tom in the storm. His madness turns to wisdom as he tells the blind Gloucester he will see better than the seeing: "When we are born, we cry that we are come/ to this great stage of fools" (4.6, 186).

The exiled Cordelia learns of her father's trials and returns from France with an army to reclaim the throne from her villainous sisters. When she finds her father, her tears "descend on the blackened earth like dew," becoming the restoring remedy for Lear (Nicholl 204). In alchemy, dew or celestial rain represents grace, the *aqua sapientiae*, the moisture that heralds the return of the soul (Edinger 75). Like Isis, who put together the dismembered parts of Osiris, Cordelia is the Mercurial spirit that descends to restore the dismembered King. The dew of her tears restores Lear's love and humility symbolizing the stages of solutio and coagulatio.

Cordelia cradles her exhausted father, the wrathful dragon who cast her out at the beginning of the play. She heals him with her love and compassion. As if returning from the dead, Lear says,

You do me wrong to take me out of the grave.
Thou are a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, That mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead. (*King Lear* 4.7, 44-47)

Cordelia is the redeeming feminine who offers Lear renewal and regeneration. In

the “Regeneration of the Ethiopian” (Plate 1-8) of the *Splendor Solis*, painted in the 16th century, the queen offers a robe edged with gold to the naked man, standing up to his knees in mud. Cordelia is this very queen, the feminine principle, the Rising Dawn, who like Kwan Yin, Tara, Avalokitesvara and the Virgin Mary, is a symbol of renewal and redemption (Henderson 88). The nigredo has yielded up the rubedo, the goal of the alchemical process.

When Cordelia’s forces from France are defeated she and Lear are captured and imprisoned by Edmund’s army, accused of treason. As they stand before their captors in coniunctio, they dramatize the Stone, the Red King and the White Queen linked in the Chemical Wedding (Nicholl 212). When the Red King and the White Queen are joined in spiritual marriage a child of light is born. The daughter has symbolically given a second birth to her father; in his descent, Lear regressed to a pre-natal state and the return to the womb of the “mother” translates to a spiritual experience, a reintegration of a primal situation (Eliade 154). Lear is reinstated as king, yet that is not the end of the tragedy. Cordelia is strangled by Edmund’s captain and in his last words, Lear calls for everyone to witness her spirit rising forth from her.

If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 why then she lives.
 This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so,
 It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
 That ever I have felt. (*King Lear* 5. 3, 262-266)

The Wheel turns and Cordelia, the Mercurial princess, brings new life to her mortified father. Lear is delivered of his pride and willfulness through Cordelia’s devotion and love, and through her sacrifice the kingdom is restored. With Cordelia’s death, her

spirit is released and Lear himself dies of a broken heart, leaving Edgar as the new king. The reign of death and deception is over. “The wheel has come full circle,” says Edmond, as he lies mortally wounded (5. 3,174).

Lear is not the first king to undergo dismemberment and dissolution and Cordelia is not the first daughter who has functioned as the Mercurial spirit. Oedipus, in Sophocles’ tragedy, underwent a similar alchemical process and was brought low from on high. Like Lear, Oedipus experienced the loss of his kingship, self-banishment from his kingdom, and exile as a poor beggar in tatters. Through his journey into the elements, he was accompanied by his daughter, Antigone, his Mercurial spirit. He died and left his bones in Athens to protect the city and his daughter later met her death honoring the bones of her dead brother. In this tale, it was submission to destiny more than a fall from his own hubris that determined Oedipus’ dissolution, yet like Lear, he was a product of a patriarchal culture cut off from his feminine animating spirit.

From a feminist (perhaps non-alchemical) depth psychological perspective, at the beginning of the play Cordelia has no identity outside that of a father’s daughter. She is unformed, has no voice, cannot defend herself in the face of her father’s unbridled arrogance. Yes, she can speak her truth but she first has to separate from the overweening power of her father, becoming an outcast, to grow her own separate identity. Only then can she choose to return home to defend her ailing father and reclaim the kingdom. At that point, she is whole enough to sacrifice herself.

When I began to write *The Hero’s Daughter*, I dreamed about my father’s death. I had received a substantial contract from Ballantine and wanted desperately to impress my

father who was a big presence not only in my life but in the New York advertising industry at the time. Psychologically, I was a father's daughter. The dream was so visceral that when I awoke, I did not want to continue the project. The threat of my father's death was much too much to bear. I knew that if I proceeded, on some level my father would die. This is a portion of the dream as I recorded it in my book:

My father has died and I am bereft. I go to my mother to tell her that Dad has died, but she is not interested. She has to go to their new house site in Florida to oversee the construction. She acts as if his death is no big deal. I turn to my daughter to talk to her about it, but she doesn't want to feel my pain and she leaves. I try to phone my friend, Pauline, whose father died when she was thirteen, but she has moved to Kansas and I cannot reach her. There is no one around for me to talk to about my father's death and I feel lost. I think about how I will have no one to celebrate this Father's Day, and I realize that I've always taken his presence for granted. (Murdock 20-21)

I am not going to interpret the dream here, but at the time, it felt like a warning from my unconscious that I was entering forbidden territory and about to break a taboo about the father-daughter relationship. Did I really want to examine the archetypal father-daughter relationship celebrated with nostalgia on Father's Day? I was worried my words would destroy my relationship with my father. I was gripped with terror at the thought of no longer being my father's favorite, at the idea that I could even be the instrument of his death. Even if that death was only symbolic, I shuddered at the void such a death would leave in me. At the same time, I also knew I would not be able to get on with my own life until I came to terms with this powerful and primal connection.

The book took three years to write and when I completed it and sent it off to the publisher, I had a total physical and emotional breakdown. It started with shingles and progressed to an intestinal infection, a respiratory infection, and an anxiety disorder

complete with flash backs, hyperventilating and insomnia. I underwent a complete dissolutio. The powerful force of my unconscious broke through and I went mad. The only way I could deal with the psychic energy moving through my entire being was daily yoga. I had a series of visions that included angels and the Haida shaman Ravendancer together dancing in a circle around me which was both terrifying, and in some strange way, comforting. A month later, Los Angeles, where I was living at the time, was hit by a tremendous earthquake which unsettled me further.

I could not work so I spent a month living in the studio of an artist friend in New Mexico where I walked the land for several hours each day and painted. The land, breath work, and painting became my Mercurial spirit. I painted two large canvases with oil sticks; the act of using my whole body to apply the paint from the oil sticks brought me some physical and emotional relief. The paintings were of a one eyed mummy “at sea” in an Irish currach and a heart painting of the Hennessey (my father’s family) crest encased in barbed wire.

The dream had been correct; confronting the father, both personally and archetypally, had brought about my psychological death and the working through of my complex. Marie-Louise von Franz has written that only after a long process of inner development and realization can the projection on another person, in this case, a father, be withdrawn so that the individual can see it objectively as an inner factor. Then the unconscious can flow freely as the libido is freed from the complex (von Franz 84).

This too, happens to Cordelia. After she gets enough distance, she can see her father objectively and have compassion for the man. In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Cordelia

becomes the sacrificial element, the Mercurial spirit, the agent of transmutation, and she, too, is irrevocably changed in the process: she undergoes her own transformation. The silent father's daughter dies becoming one-onto-herself.

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