



When the King turns to his Shadow

by William Willeford

When Shakespeare's King Lear asks, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" his Fool answers, "Lear's shadow." The Fool is saying several things to the King, and he is also speaking to the rest of us about ourselves.

If one "has ever but slenderly known himself," as one of his evil daughters says of Lear, then the missing self-knowledge must be somewhere in the shadow as one's unknowing of what needs to be known. That unknowing is often imagined as a domain, called, for example, Shadowland. One must seek out the custodian of this domain, since, as Lear's

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Fool understands, the shadow is also an agent and must be encountered personally. One of the most important qualities of this agent is precisely that he knows what we do not. He *has* our self-knowledge by *knowing* it—and his knowing it is thus the key to our coming to know it.

This may seem self-evident but it is not, and it is essential: if I discover a document I sense would be important for me but it is unknown language, it will remain useless to me unless I can learn to read the language or form a working partnership with someone who can. Gaining access to self-knowledge often requires such a partnership with the shadow.

This prospect is not entirely appealing, because it may mean, psychologically speaking, getting one's hands, and indeed the rest of oneself, dirty. The prospect also requires getting the hang of it.

Easier to get the hang of is a version of dealing with the shadow that is common in writings influenced by C.G. Jung (who was well aware of the problematic one-sidedness I now have in mind). In this version the shadow—manifest in, say, troubling aspects of dreams—is to be made subject to the ego's knowing of it. This is well and good, because doing it enhances the proficiency of the ego, gives it useful information, and may also effect a helpful increase in modesty as the ego realizes the difficulty of the problems it is required to contemplate. And the ego may even come to understand such humbling to be required by the larger psychic totality. But in all this one can do oneself the disservice of getting ahead of oneself.

This ameliorative version of the relation of ego to shadow easily results, as one rushes ahead, in an undeservedly cheerful blindness to important things. In any case, it is only part of the picture, as in one's haste one may fail to realize.

Another part of the picture I have already meant to suggest by calling attention to the pregnant remark of Lear's Fool about the shadow. Let us try to gain a better sense of this part by turning to a text in which shadow-induced awfulness cannot be dealt with in a hurry.

The title story of the collection *The King and the Corpse* by the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, an important associate of Jung's, will make clearer what I mean by getting dirty as part of psychological understanding.

An Indian King sat in state in his audience chamber, hearing petitions and dispensing justice. Every day for ten years a holy man in the robe of a beggar ascetic appeared there and without a word offered him a fruit. This trifling present was handed on to the King's treasurer, and the beggar withdrew, having made no request and showing no sign of disappointment or impatience. (Indeed his name, it turns out, was Rich-in-Patience.) One day a tame monkey bounded in and leaped on the arm of the throne. As the beggar had just offered his gift, the King handed it to the monkey, who bit into it. A valuable jewel dropped out.

The treasurer rushed to the vault into which he had been throwing the fruit for years. On the floor lay a mess of rotten fruit and a heap of priceless gems. (Focused on in isolation, this scene supports the ameliorative view I have mentioned—grabbing the jewels and fleeing the foul mess is dealing with the Shadow as a downright cheering pastime.) Prompted by the King, the beggar finally utters a request. He needs a hero, a truly fearless man, to assist in a work of magic. The King vol-

unteers.

Following the beggar's instructions, the King goes to a dreadful burial ground, where bodies are cremated and criminals hanged, and demons and specters carouse. There the beggar tells the King to go to the other end of the burial ground, cut down the corpse of a hanged man dangling from a tree, and bring it to him. The King cuts down the corpse, puts it on his shoulders, and begins walking. The ghost inhabiting the corpse then offers to tell him a story to shorten the way.

According to the story, a prince goes into the woods with a friend who serves as his counselor. There the prince sees a beautiful maiden bathing and already making signals to him, which the friend is able to interpret, that identify her and tell of her love for him. After some obstacles, including her menstruation, the lovers get together intimately. But realizing that it was the friend who interpreted the messages, and thus would be in a position to betray her secret, she intends to poison him. Foreseeing this, he is ready with a plan. He will disguise himself as a beggar ascetic, with the prince pretending to be his pupil, and they will bring the girl into suspicion as a witch. All this done, they then convince the king of the country that she has been the cause of the recent death of his infant son. The King condemns her to a disgraceful death. Exposed naked outside the town, she is prey to the jungle beasts. But at the moment of her abandonment, the prince and his friend on horseback snatch her up and flee with her to the prince's realm, where the lovers will be married and become its rulers. Her parents, grieving over the disgrace and loss, die of broken hearts.

"Now who was guilty of the death of those two?" suddenly demanded the specter in the corpse. 'If you know the answer and do not reply, your head will burst into a hundred pieces.'"

The King gave a reasoned and plausible answer—by implication blaming himself for having been an inadequate king—whereupon the corpse flew back to the tree and awaited for the King to cut him down again and begin another march across the hideous terrain.

In the larger story, this pattern is repeated twenty three more times, in the very last of which the King is unable to answer the question put to him. His helpless silence initiates the resolution, in which the cosmic background of the action—including the god Shiva—is revealed.

Zimmer comments about the "unmonkish monk" that he

comes before the king as an incarnate analogy to his own counterfeit of omniscient wisdom... The [monk's] challenge is of threatening dimensions in proportion to the number of years of kingly failure. Precisely this deceitful sorcerer had to confront this all too guileless king: the two were one. It was the king himself ... who created him as the counterpart of his own spiritual blindness.

And pondering the significance of this figure for the audience, Zimmer remarks that he:

proves to be our savior, the oracular spirit who wishes us well. This elusive, invisible quintessence of our unfulfillment ... turns out to be ... the only guide in the darkness of the night of our being, who can save us from the circle of our self-created evil.

In Zimmer's view the hearers of this tale are thus not innocent bystanders somehow detached from it. We are meant to identify with the King and to admit with him that the only guide we have is relentlessly dark and ambiguous.

King Lear exclaims, "You heavens, give me that patience I need," and later vows, "No, I will be the pattern of all patience ..." The Indian King is as patient as his almost endlessly patient counselor. This King's patience seems of no more avail than Lear's impatience.

Exasperated by the plain truths spoken by his loyal servant Kent, Lear cries, "Out of my sight!" to which Kent replies, "See better, Lear," and for his bluntness is banished. What Lear needs in order to see better he cannot have with one glimpse provoking an "Aha!" as in an imagined miracle moment of psychotherapy. As the King had to realize, it takes as long as it takes to see what was there all along waiting to be seen.

In time—often a very long time—the creative imagination may do its transformative work, and we surely feel that the outcome of Zimmer's story is benign. But the price is not thereby erased. In the King's contest with the dark magician, which the King pursues on our behalf, the King loses. There is clarification at the end, but only with the precondition of the King's—and our—defeat.

The story is nonetheless one of triumph and transformation. The defeat of the ego is indeed the climax. But by means of it the King becomes free from the game he was losing and newly conscious of the larger life being played out in it ■



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