



The Longissima Via

by Maureen Murdock

Tragedy, alchemy and the process of psychological development travel a long but parallel path to redemption and the stages of tragedy mirror the stages of the alchemical pattern. Both define a journey that begins with blackness, a nigredo, or dismemberment of the body, and ends 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 a mysterious, 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

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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. Shakespeare used alchemy as a language to chart the breakdown and healing of the King.

The king is often a symbol for the Philosopher's Stone itself, which will undergo transmutation to become the Red King reborn.^{1,157} Hidden within the ailing degenerate king are seeds of the transcendent Red King; yet in order to bring them to fruition he must undergo dissolution and darkness.

His journey through darkness and ruin is a sacrificial necessity; he is not healed, but by his destruction and sacrifice the community he represents—his kingdom—is redeemed. As part of that community, he is redeemed as well. 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 and divides 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. 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. 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” (*King Lear* 1.1, 88-91).

With the word, “Nothing” Lear becomes enraged and tells her that nothing will come of nothing. He commands her to speak again and when she refuses, his composure is shattered. In his role as king, Lear has become inflated and when Cordelia speaks her truth he cannot tolerate it. 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 purificatio.^{1,163} Shakespeare uses the image of the Alchemical Wheel as an icon of Lear's purgatorial torment. The Wheel is the alchemical journey that all of the central characters, Lear, Gloucester and Edgar, will undertake. Those who had status at the top of the wheel are brought low and must climb back up to achieve reinstatement.

Lear will endure torment of both outer and inner dismemberment, becoming a poor and naked outcast in order to attain

knowledge and love. 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 endure the stage of nigredo and be transformed by the turning of the wheel.

Lear's daughters represent the transforming agent of the alchemical opus. The oldest sister, Goneril, and the youngest, Cordelia are two halves of the transforming principle, Mercury. Together they symbolize the destroyer and healer, the processes of solutio and coagulatio.^{1, 168} When Lear comes with his hundred knights to live first with Goneril and then subsequently with Regan, each in turn rejects him. Goneril/Regan together symbolize the serpent or wolf who mortifies the king, the stage of calcinatio. He is stripped of his status and the vestiges of his kingdom, reduced to nothing.

Lear tears off the golden garments of his kingship and wearing beggar's clothes, enters the alchemical stage of mortificatio, the breaking 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.^{1, 175} 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). Like Hermes, the Fool conducts Lear on a journey to the underworld, onto the storm-tossed heath where they are battered by the elements. 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. Lear goes mad. 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 fool" (*King Lear* 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. The dew of her tears restores Lear's love and humility symbolizing the stages of solutio and coagulatio. As the redeeming feminine, she offers Lear renewal and regeneration. The nigredo has yielded up the rubedo, the goal of the alchemical process.

Cordelia's forces from France are defeated and she and Lear are captured and imprisoned by Edmund's army, accused of treason. The daughter has symbolically given a second birth to her father. 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 (*King Lear* 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.

From a feminist 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. She can then choose to return home to defend her ailing father and reclaim the kingdom. Only then is she whole enough to sacrifice herself. Marie-Louise von Franz writes 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.^{4, 84} 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: the silent father's daughter dies becoming whole-onto-herself.

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