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The Mythic Journey of Kundry: Lowliness to Holiness

Happily, after I had put on a recording of *Parsifal* by Richard Wagner, I began reading the *Story of the Grail (Perceval)* by Chrétien de Troyes. For quite a while the tale moves along without too many setbacks for the hero, when all of a sudden there is a sudden change: The change comes when Chrétien writes:

The king, the queen and the barons gave the most joyful welcome to Perceval the Welshman, and led him back to Carlion, returning there that day. They celebrated all night and the day that followed: until, on the third day, they saw a girl coming on a tawny mule, clutching a whip in her right hand. Her hair hung in two tresses, black and twisted: and if the words of my source are true, there was no creature so utterly ugly even in Hell. You have never seen iron as black as her neck and hands, but that was little compared to the rest of her ugliness: her eyes were just two holes, tiny as the eyes of a rat; her nose was like a cat's or monkey's, her lips like an ass's or a cow's; her teeth were so discoloured that they looked like egg-yolk; and she had a beard like a billy-goat. She had a hump in the middle of her chest and her back was like a crook ... She greeted the king and his barons all together - except for Perceval. (Chrétien 437-438)

Chrétien never tells us exactly who this is, but she certainly has plenty to say:

Sitting upon the tawny mule she said: 'Ah, Perceval! Fortune has hair in front but is bald behind. A curse on anyone who greets or wishes you well, for you didn't take Fortune by the hand when you met her. You entered the house of the Fisher King and saw the lance that bleeds, but it was so much trouble for you to open your mouth and speak that you couldn't ask why that drop of blood sprang from the tip of the white head; nor did you ask what worthy man was served by the Grail that you saw. How wretched is the man who sees the perfect opportunity and still waits for a better one! And you, you are the wretched one, who saw that it was the time and place to speak and yet stayed silent; you had ample opportunity! It was an evil hour when you held your tongue, for if you had asked, the rich king who is so distressed would now have been quite healed of his wound and would have held his land in peace... (Chrétien 438)

We learn from Eschenbach that she is Cundrie (Condrie/Kundry), when he writes:

This maiden was so talented that she spoke all languages: Latin, Heathen and French. She was familiar with both dialectic and geometry; and she had also knowledge of astronomy. Her name was Condrie; her nickname the sorceress. Her mouth was not restrained for she could say quite enough. With it she dampened much joy. In appearance this learned lady did not resemble what we call fine people. She wore a fine fabric of Ghent, bluer even than azure such as bridal gowns are made of; made into a well-cut coat in the French fashion. Beneath it there was fine brocade. A hat of peacock feathers from London, lined with cloth-of-gold (the hat was new, the ribbon not old), hung down over her back. Her news was a bridge carrying grief over happiness. She killed the joy of the company. A plait of her hair fell down over her hat and dangled over the mule: it was so long, black, tough, not altogether lovely, about as soft as a boar's bristles. Her nose was like a dog's, and tusks jutted from her jaws to the length of several spans. Both eyebrows pushed past her hair-band and drooped down in tresses. In truth I have erred against propriety in having to speak thus about a lady, even if no other has cause to complain about me. Cundrie's ears resembled a bear's, her rugged visage was not such as would arouse a lover's desire. In her hand she held a knout: the lashes were of silk and the stock of ruby. This fetching sweetheart had hands the colour of ape-skin. Her fingernails were none too transparent; for my source tells me that they were like a lion's claws. Seldom were lances broken for her love. (Eschenbach 163-164)

Neither lovely, nor silent, (Condrie/Cundrie/Kundry) laid into Parsifal without warning. The continuation in Eschenbach is even more scathing than the version in Chrétien. Robert Johnson works this material from a Jungian perspective and gives a rich interpretation. He writes:

The hideous damsel rides into the camp on her mule, stops everything cold and recites all of Parsifal's sins. She recites in detail what he didn't do in the grail castle, why he didn't do it, the plight of the king because of this, and then she says that it is all Parsifal's fault. (Johnson 75).

He elaborates further by contextualizing the character in a psychological sense by stating:

This is the hideous damsel. This usually happens at the very apex of a man's career, at the time of his greatest success. He has just been named president of the corporation, has just been elected to the academy, has just made his first million or whatever the apex of life is for him, and within three days the hideous damsel will walk in on him. (Johnson 75)

To what does Johnson attribute this phenomena? “This is the *anima* gone absolutely sour and dark.” (75). He states further: “When a man really makes it, then he is often in for one hell of a time with his *anima*. I am told that the technical term of this is involuntional melancholia. I prefer to call it the hideous damsel.” (75).

Now, the hideous damsel is a familiar figure in mythology. As Campbell states in *Creative Mythology*:

This figure of the Loathly Damsel is comparable, and perhaps related, to that Zoroastrian *Spirit of the Way* who meets the soul at death on the Chinvat Bridge to the Persian yonder world. Those of wicked life see her as ugly; those of unsullied virtue, most fair. The Loathly Damsel or Ugly Bride is a well-known figure, moreover, in *Celtic fairytale and legend*. We have met with one of her manifestations in the Irish folktale of the daughter of the King of the Land of Youth, who was cursed with the head of a pig (as [in *Wolfram's* text below] a pig's bristles and boar's snout), but when boldly kissed became beautiful and bestowed on her saviour the kingship of her timeless realm. The Kingdom of the Grail is such a land: to be achieved only by one capable of transcending the painted wall of space-time with its foul and fair, good and evil, true and false display of the names and forms of merely phenomenal pairs of opposites. (455).

Campbell goes on to elaborate other sources of similar tales by stating:

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340? - 1400) provides an elegant example of the resolution of the Loathly Bride motif in his *Tale of the Wife of Bath*; John Gower (1325? - 1408) another in his *Tale of Florent*. There is also the fifteenth- century poem *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnall* as well as a mid-seventeenth- century ballad, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. The transformation of the fairy bride and the sovereignty that she bestows are, finally, of one's own heart in fulfillment. (455)

Limitations of space do not permit me to fully explore each of those citations with you, but I have to share at least one loathsome damsel vignette, from Chaucer:

In Arthur's day, before the friars drove away the fairies, a lusty bachelor of the king's court raped a young maiden. He is taken and condemned to die (such was the custom then) but the king, in deference to Queen Guenevere's pleas, allows the ladies to judge him. They tell him he can save his life only if a year and a day later he can tell them what it is that women most desire. He wanders long without finding the answer; he is

about to return disconsolate when he comes upon an old and remarkably ugly woman. She says that if he swears to do whatever she will next ask him, she will tell him the answer. He agrees and returns with the answer: women most desire to have sovereignty over their husbands. Guenevere and her ladies are amazed; they grant him his life. The old woman then makes her demand: that he marry her. She will accept no less. On their wedding night; he turns away from her. She asks him what is the matter. He answers that she is old and ugly and low born. The old woman demonstrates to him that none of these matter -- especially noble birth, since true *gentillesse* depends on deeds rather than birth. She offers him the choice: he can have her old and ugly and faithful or young, beautiful, and possibly unchaste. He tells her to choose; he grants her the sovereignty. When he does so she turns into a beautiful maiden, and they live thereafter in perfect joy. (<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/cantales/wbt>)

Loathsome damsels and anima figures aside, I want to push the clock forward to the latter part of the nineteenth century, and look at Kundry from the Wagner opera *Parsifal*. The Kundry in Syberberg's film is a bit different than the production I'm going to show you, taken from the Metropolitan Opera performance. While the Act I Kundry in the Syberberg film is not loathsome, she is fairly wild. I'd like to show you a scene from Act II and Act III of the Metropolitan Opera Production. However, a few comments are perhaps necessary about this opera.

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) wrote a variety of operas on German mythic themes, including *Lohengrin* (about the son of *Parsifal*) which was his first real success (1850) and *Parsifal* (1882) his last opera. While Wagner's letters and philosophical writings are very anti-Semitic, there are really few overtly racial or political elements in the opera. However, Wagner's music was much heralded by the Nazis, which is part of the motivation behind the Syberberg adaptation. Interestingly, though, the Nazi's forbade the production of *Parsifal*, even at Bayreuth, probably because it was more pacifistic and not warlike enough for their tastes. Seemingly, the purity referred to in the opera is purity of thought and action, not blood. That, however, is a controversy for another time.

The scene I want to show in Act II, is the seduction scene between Kundry and Parsifal. In an extended, musical dialogue, the two characters participate in a psycho-sexual drama of seduction. Kundry has been ordered by Klingsor to seduce the hero and reduce Parsifal to the status of his vassal; Parsifal however, will not submit. In this particular production, Parsifal seems to come close to succumbing, but recovers. In order for the seduction to work, Kundry needs to be far more attractive than the loathsome damsel of Chrétien or Eschenbach. In Wagner's conception, she is the full flower of womanhood, ready and able to handle this simple fool, as she did Amfortas, the Grail King.

Parenthetically, there is no Fisher King in the Wagner setting of the tale. The Grail King goes down to the lake merely to bathe his wound, which only the spear that made it has the power to do. By the nineteenth century, virtually all the Arthurian vestiges have been distilled from the libretto and only the Germanic vision of Wagner remains. Another interesting twist is that Titurel, the father of Amfortas, is kept alive in some sort of semi-dead state, so Amfortas is never fully the Grail King, which avoids the usurping of the throne by Parsifal at the end of the opera. That seems to me to be the only overtly political statement I can detect in the opera.

However, returning to the loathsome damsel, the next scene I wish to show is from Act III, after Parsifal accepts his role as savior of the Grail brotherhood, Kundry takes on another role. Freed from the bondage of Klingsor, she functions as a parallel to Mary Magdalene, washing the feet of Christ (Parsifal). Afterwards, she is baptized and then finally admitted into the Grail assembly. In the presence of the Grail, the loathsome damsel is made forever beautiful.

Whether one interprets the character of Kundry as an anima figure, or an emblem of the journey of femininity from baseness to consecrated holiness, she is a wonderfully rich and powerful figure in the legend of the Grail. I sincerely hope that you've had as much fun exploring this figure as I have.

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