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“Auntie, What Ails Thee?”: The Parzival Question in *Orphan Black*

Abstract

In Arthurian legend, the question Parzival fails to ask upon first seeing the Grail procession in the Fisher King's castle, and must return to ask later, is the central turning point of his quest. While in many versions the question is about the Grail and its purpose, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's retelling, the question posed is "What ails thee, Uncle?", and it is the moment of humility, compassion, and sympathy that is essential to the achieving of the Grail vision, the healing of the Fisher King, and the restoration of the land. In the television series *Orphan Black*, the innocent child Kira poses a similar question to two of her mother's clone-sisters, each time leading to a rehabilitation and realignment of that character's loyalties away from the cult or corporation and towards the Clone Club, the family of women at the core of this series. In this paper I will examine these moments, looking especially at the meanings of the Parzival quest, its relation to male fertility, and how reimagining it with female participants in a series so concerned with female fertility complicates and resonates with the underlying mythic structure.

Additional Keywords

Orphan Black; Parzival; Wolfram von Eschenbach; Grail; Fisher King



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UNCLE, WHAT AILS THEE?:
THE PARZIVAL QUESTION
IN *ORPHAN BLACK*

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

THE BBC AMERICA TELEVISION SERIES *ORPHAN BLACK* (2013-2017) tells the story of a group of young women who discover that they are clones,¹ experimental subjects bred by the Dyad Institute for the wealthy and shadowy Neolution organization as part of its project to secure immortality for the powerful financial elite of the world, while sterilizing and eventually eliminating everyone else. Unlike their brothers in the para-military Castor project, who were cloned from the same chimeric original they were² but brought up as self-aware, the female Leda clones were carried by in-vitro surrogate mothers widely scattered around the globe and (with one exception) kept ignorant of their origins and of each other. Over the course of five seasons, a core group of these young women form alliances with each other, their families, loved ones, and colleagues, to expose and defeat Neolution, cure the self-limiting diseases built into their own genetic structures, and free themselves to live their lives as they wish. Themes of self-determination, motherhood and sisterhood, female strength, trust, recovery from trauma,³ the influence of nature and nurture, and the power of community are central to the show.

This female-centricity, still ground-breaking in broadcast television, makes *Orphan Black* a rich and interesting subject for analysis of its underlying archetypal and mythological themes. One such theme is a Grail-quest pattern that can be found in the story of young Kira Manning (Skyler Wexler). In Arthurian legend, the question Parzival fails to ask upon first seeing the Grail procession in the Fisher King's castle, and must return to ask later, is the central turning point of his quest. While in many versions the question is about the Grail and its purpose, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's retelling, the question posed is "What ails thee, Uncle?", and it is the moment of humility, compassion, and

¹ All of the adult female Leda clones (and one trans-gender clone) are played by Tatiana Maslany; all the adult male Castor clones by Ari Millen.

² For a scientific explanation of how a person with naturally occurring "tetragametic chimerism" could be used as a basis for two distinct cell lines, see Griffin et al. 88-107; for a more approachable summary, Pence 157-164.

³ For an analysis of trauma and recovery in the series, see Buckman.

sympathy that is essential to the achieving of the Grail vision, the healing of the Fisher King, and the restoration of the land. In *Orphan Black*, the innocent child Kira poses a similar question to two of her mother's clone-sisters, each time leading to a rehabilitation and realignment of that character's loyalties away from the cult or corporation and towards the Clone Club, the family of women at the core of this series. But what happens here is not simply a straight-forward retelling of the myth; it is complicated by the way the wounded Fisher King archetype is manifested in many ways by many very different characters, often female, and how reimagining the myth with female participants in a series so concerned with the control of reproduction and the quest for immortality complicates and resonates with its underlying mythic structure.

Kira is the daughter of Sarah Manning (Tatiana Maslany), one of the sister-clones in the Leda project and our main viewpoint character from the start of the series. Sarah grew up as a ward of the state and was eventually adopted by Siobhan Sadler (Maria Doyle Kennedy), fondly known as Mrs. S, who kept her hidden away from Dyad and Neolution. Sarah was a juvenile delinquent and a grifter, and Kira was the result of a one-night-stand with one of her marks, Cal Morrison (Michiel Huisman), but she is trying to turn her life around and become a better mother.

The female clones were designed to be infertile, as their creators felt this would be proper practice for their experiment. As one of the original scientists on the project, Ethan Duncan (Andrew Gillies), explains to one of the clones, Cosima, it was a built-in "sterility concept. Degrade the endometrium, prevent ovarian follicles from maturing. [...] Normal development was the prime directive. This was the least invasive solution. Unfortunately, we didn't foresee the consequences," which for many of the female clones meant a painful death as the autoimmune disorder spread to other organs, particularly the lungs ("Things Which Have Never Been Done," 2.9). Somehow Sarah escaped that fate and managed to bear Kira, who has a remarkable ability to heal from injury extremely rapidly. Once Sarah and Kira are discovered by Dyad, they both become the targets of competing factions who want to exploit their genetic anomalies.⁴

Kira also has a never-fully-explained psychic empathy with her mother and her clone-aunts, keenly feeling the pain and distress of the ones she is closest to. This sympathy, as well as her naïve innocence as a child of seven years old at the start of the series, underlies what might be called her two important

⁴ Sarah's in-vitro twin Helena, too, becomes a target when it is confirmed that she is also fertile. Her Psyche-like quest and multiple descents into hell while carrying her twin boys form the subject of my paper "Hell and Back: Helena as Kore and Shaman in *Orphan Black*."

"Parzival moments," when a question she asks of another character turns the plot around.⁵ But before we explore these moments, let's review the Parzival legend.

THE LEGEND OF PARZIFAL/PERCIVAL/PARSIFAL

As Sørina Higgins says in the introduction to her essay collection on the Inklings and their engagement with King Arthur, there is no "urtext" of the Arthurian legends and therefore no question of "fidelity to a source text"—adaptations from the body of legend are "richly intertextual" and "fertile" and must be judged on their "own aesthetic terms" (31). The mutable nature of the stories makes them infinitely adaptable; in the words of Emma Jung, the "peculiar vitality inherent" in the underlying pattern of the Parzival tale has transformed it "from the popular fairy-tale of the simpleton into a mystical religious quest" (35);⁶ it becomes a story that "startl[es] the imagination only to mystify it" (Swincow 29). What we seek here, then, is not a one-to-one relationship of the *Orphan Black* plot and characters to a particular Parzival text (of which there are many—the earliest versions being by Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, and Wolfram von Eschenbach). Instead, we will tease out conscious or unconscious echoes and reverberations of an underlying story-pattern that may help us understand why particular elements of the story are especially meaningful to us when we encounter them somewhere unexpected.

In most classic versions of the tale, Parzival is brought up in isolation by his widowed mother, who wishes to shelter him from the dangerous world of chivalry which killed his father. As a young man, he comes across a group of knights jousting and, taking them for angelic beings in his naïveté, questions them eagerly about knighthood and resolves to go to King Arthur's court to become a knight himself. He is taken in hand by an older knight who gives him some training and advice on this chosen path. Among other things, he is taught that asking too many questions is gauche and unworthy of a knight, so he learns

⁵ I will mainly use the spelling *Parzival* in this paper because the version of the Question I am most interested in is the one given in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (written circa 1210).

⁶ It is especially fitting, given the female-centric topic of this paper, to acknowledge that it was not Carl Jung who analyzed the Grail story using the tools of depth psychology he developed: "Jung remained faithful to his wife Emma in one way only serious scholars can understand: He promised never to talk or write about the Grail Legend, as Emma Jung spent thirty years of her life researching the Grail story. She died in 1955 before she could finish and publish her work. In keeping with his promise to her, Jung asked Marie-Louise von Franz to complete his wife's life-long endeavor" (Waddy 12; Jung and von Franz 7).

the civilized practices of suppressing his natural curiosity and guarding his reputation above all else.⁷

In one of his *aventures*, he comes to a wild or devastated country and enters a mysterious castle, in some versions at the invitation or direction of a man fishing in a stream or lake. Here he is treated with great hospitality by the castle's king, who may or may not be the same person who was fishing; the Fisher King is sometimes one person, sometimes paired with a brother, sometimes split into father and son. This King suffers from a mysterious, never-healing wound to his thigh or groin, and his impotence is clearly somehow connected to the infertility of the waste land around the castle.

In the castle Parzival witnesses a mysterious procession in which certain objects treated with great reverence, usually a spear or sword and a cup or platter, pass through the dining hall. While deeply curious, he remembers his "literally understood instructions in chivalrous behavior" (Murphy 159) and, thinking only of his "knightly honor" and his "reputation" (Campbell 52), does not ask any questions because they might make him look foolish—or because he is entirely self-centered, another valid interpretation at this stage of his journey.⁸

The next morning the castle has disappeared, and Parzival encounters a figure who explains what he did not know: that "[t]he King can only be restored to health if a knight of conspicuous excellence finds the castle and at the first sight of what he sees there asks a certain question. Should he neglect to put this question, then everything will remain as before, the castle will vanish and the knight will have to set out once more upon the search" (Jung and von Franz 9). Parzival must return to the castle and fix his mistake by directly and sincerely asking the proper question. In many versions, just asking is sufficient and "the King will be restored to health, the land will begin to grow green, and the hero will become the guardian of the Grail from that time on" (Jung and von Franz 9). Campbell insightfully points out that at the end Parzival "has become the Grail King *without inheriting the wound*. That is to say, it is possible to be in that position intact and entire" (79, ital. in original). Because of his "integrity,

⁷ The theme of the wild man becoming civilized and losing his native emotional openness and foolish wisdom is as old as Enkidu, who in the ancient Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh is "seduced by a harlot from the city" and "wins a knowledge that brings him only unhappiness" (Sandars 30-31).

⁸ As Joseph Campbell describes it, "Parzival has suppressed the impulse of his heart in deference to an alien social ideal: his public image as a proper knight. The baleful impulse of the motivating principle responsible for the wasting of the Waste Land itself has cut off in Parzival an impulse of his nature [...] and thereby has compromised the authenticity of his life. [...] The social ideal interfered with his nature, and the result is desolation" (Campbell 52-3).

honesty, courage, and forthrightness [...] he is able to restore the proper natural order" (156). In other versions of the story, further action is required and Parzival's story gets subsumed into that of Gawain and the Dolorous Stroke.

In her historical review of versions of the Parzival story, Jesse L. Weston contends that the nature of the question becomes of increasing importance as the tale evolves—it changes from "What is the Grail?" to "Whom does the Grail serve?" ("a departure from an essential and primitive simplicity," as she puts it [15]) to, in Wolfram's version, "What aileth thee, mine uncle?" (14), where the question is directed at curing the king rather than Parzival's own explicit religious education. In parallel, the connection between the state of the land, the king's malady, and the question evolves: from a land cured by asking the question, to a land blasted by the failure to ask the question, to Parzival himself cursed by his failure in Wolfram (19).⁹

Richard Barber points out that Wolfram's Parzival is not told specifically what question he should have asked; it is left for him to figure it out, after being scolded thus by Cundrie the sorceress:

When unconsoled the Fisher sat,
So sorrowful and full of grief,
Why would you not give him relief?
(*Parzival*, Book VI, ll. 1078-80, qtd in Weston 19)

John R. Searle's *Speech Acts* is of some help to us in understanding the impetus to ask the question. In his breakdown of the philosophy of language, a question is a type of "illocutionary act," in which the "[speaker] does not know 'the answer,'" "it is not obvious to both [the speaker] and [the hearer] that [the hearer] will provide the information at that time without being asked," and "[the speaker] wants this information" (66). In both cases, Parzival must perform a speech act—he must ask a question—in order to find out what he wants or needs to know, because no one has volunteered the information to him. The non-performance of this act will leave him in ignorance and unable to complete his quest (see also Cherian 95). He must want to *know*, even more than he is afraid of appearing rude.

When at last we come to the final scene, Parzival simply asks Anfortas, "oeheim, waz wirrit dir [sic; *dier*]?" (Uncle, what troubles you?). The

⁹ Jessie L. Weston considered resurrection, in opposition to death, to lie at the heart of the Grail legend, though her insistence on finding specific sources for the Grail in ancient pagan nature cults and rituals was later dismissed by many scholars as unsound. As Swincow suggests, the patterns exist in the unconscious; "whether or not the poets were historically influenced by actual pre-Christian myths is immaterial" (35).

question is not about mysteries or objects, but is a straightforward declaration of human sympathy. Wolfram has elaborated the significance of the question in Chrétien, where Percival's failure to ask it is due to the selfishness he has not yet outgrown: his concern is with what others will think of him if he breaks what he believes to be the rules of polite society. Here, the same self-centered attitude leads Parzival to quell any interest in the sufferings of his host. (Barber 109)

As might be expected, the Grail legend has been subject to a wide range of interpretation focusing on different aspects of the story. Campbell, for example, says "The entire poem [in Wolfram's version] can be seen [...] as a kind of cathedral, with stained-glass windows showing loving people, people engaged in different forms of loving relationships" (Campbell 62). Ronald Murphy, in his study *Gemstone of Paradise*, also finds Parzival's education in love of central importance. Parzival represents the innocent Fool or simpleton, as Emma Jung called him, and this is applicable as our focus here is on an actual child character. The identification of the wounded king with the land's infertility and stasis is also important to what I want to discuss, and widely represented in artistic depictions of the Grail story (for example, the movie *Excalibur* and T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*).

But what is particularly applicable here is that Parzival's failure to ask the question can be interpreted not just as a personal failure of maturity and sympathy, but as a reflection of larger societal issues around the imbalance of masculine and feminine spiritual principles in the world at the time the Grail legends began to become popular. This story-pattern is worth examining in relation to a show that deals very clearly with both a similar unhealthy imbalance in our present social structure, and a plot focused on exploitation of women at a basic bodily level.

Murphy touches on this idea when noting that both the disastrous end of the fourth Crusade in the sack of Constantinople and a conjunction of Mars and Jupiter in Leo occurred at about the time of the composition of Wolfram's *Parzival*; the masculine planets representing the gods of "war and domination" only a degree apart reflecting the wasteland that this "fraternal conflict" of Christianity and Islam, this "passion for fighting and dominance," had made of the medieval world (11-13). He sees women in the poem as "ahead of men. In the quest, not for military superiority but in the greater quest to become real human beings, they show the way" (13). D. Swinscow further connects the rather sudden appearance of Grail stories at the beginning of the 13th century to the rise of Mariolatry: Grail legends symbolically "describe the questing masculine spirit searching for" a missing "feminine spiritual element, which was markedly deficient in orthodox Christianity" at the time, and "for lack of

which life eventually withers away and petrifies as the Church did" (30). The Question, then, is "stating in the clearest manner that to ask the meaning of a symbol being thrust up from the unconscious is half way to assimilating it" (39), and the disturbing symbol of the Grail is an imperative to assimilate the neglected feminine principle into spiritual practice.

This is useful here as we see in *Orphan Black* another call to rebalance the world, rejecting Neolution's sterile and patriarchal vision based on artificial extension of the individual's physical life, personal accumulation of resources, and the eventual elimination of all rivals—life as a zero-sum game—and championing a more broadly fertile vision of life that values connection and community, where the individual's influence and value is based on passing down traits through both nature *and* nurture, rather than through mere life-extension of that particular individual or precise replication of his or her individual genetic pattern.¹⁰

KIRA AND HELENA: DEMON TURNED ANGELIC KNIGHT

With this background in mind, let us turn back to *Orphan Black*. The series begins with Sarah, who had run off with her drug-dealer boyfriend Vic (Michael Mando) and was gone for nearly a year, returning to Toronto in hopes of escaping his abuse and reuniting with seven-year-old Kira, whom she had left with Mrs. S. This simple plan becomes complicated when Sarah witnesses the suicide of a woman who looks just like her, takes advantage of the opportunity to fake her own death and reap what benefit she can from taking over the woman's identity, and thus comes to the attention of both the group of clones who have already become self-aware and connected, and of someone who is seeking out and assassinating those clones.

The assassin, as it turns out, is Sarah's biological and mirror twin Helena, who was also hidden at birth, given to a convent in Ukraine, and later taken away to be trained to hunt down and kill the other clones by the fundamentalist Prolethean cult. At the point where Kira has her first encounter with her, Helena has been jolted out of a clear dedication to her mission by a puzzling sense of connection to Sarah, which kept Helena from killing her like she has so many of the others. Discovering that Sarah has a child, Helena tracks her to Mrs. S's house.

¹⁰ The importance of the survival of the broader recombining genome, rather than individual personal immortality, is expressed at a mythic level in ancient mother-daughter stories and rituals: "Every grain of wheat and every maiden contains [...] all its descendants and all her descendants—an infinite series of mothers and daughters in one. [...] Every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and [...] every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter." (Jung and Kerenyi 153, 162)

Like Parzival's mother, Siobhan has tried to keep Kira isolated and safe from the world, training her not to answer the door unless she has invited someone; Sarah, too, is very protective of the daughter she has been missing so terribly while on the run. But Kira has recently met and interacted with Alison, who looks just like her mother, and is intensely curious about the bits of information she has picked up and overheard about why they look so much alike. While eavesdropping on Sarah and Mrs. S, she peers through the glass of the front door and sees Helena emerge out of the dark, another woman with a face just like her mother's, her bleached blond hair glowing like a halo. On either side of the glass, they touch fingers and share a smile, and Kira opens the door to her.

Helena leads her down an alley several blocks away, but seems unsure about what it is she wants to do with the girl. "Where are we going?" Kira asks; "I'm taking you to meet someone" is the answer (that someone is Tomas [Daniel Kash], her Prolethean master), but then they pause and Helena kneels down to Kira's level.

HELENA: How can you be Sarah's daughter, child? How can that be?
[...]

KIRA: You're just like my mom.

HELENA: No, I'm not. She's not real. [*Helena had been taught by the Proletheans that she was the original and the other clones were copies and abominations.*]

KIRA: Of course she is. [*Pauses a moment.*] Helena? [*Kira touches her face with a mittened hand.*]

HELENA: Yes, angel? [*Helena responds hesitantly, overcome by the gentle touch. Note the use of angel imagery, which is already strongly associated with Helena due to her halo-like hair and her habit of cutting angel wings into her own back with a razor blade, and how this echoes the angelic knights Parzival encounters.*]

KIRA: What happened to you?

HELENA: I don't know. [*She responds brokenly, blinking back tears, as tinny out-of-tune piano music plays on the soundtrack rather than the horror-movie "scree-ah" sounds we have so far always associated with Helena. Kira hugs her tightly, and Helena's lips tremble as she lifts her face to the light and her eyes fill with tears.*]

KIRA: I should go home now.

HELENA: Yes – do you know the way?

KIRA: Of course! [*Kira scoffs, as only a seven-year-old can.*]

HELENA: Good night, angel. ("Entangled Bank," 1.8)

But as Kira sees her mother, who has chased after her in the snow, and crosses the road towards her, both Helena and Sarah watch, horrified, as a car hits her

and her small body goes flying (1.8). However, at the beginning of the next episode we find that Kira, miraculously, was barely injured. While waking up back in her own bed, she murmurs about Helena looking "like mummy" and Sarah reassures her "I'll keep you safe from her." Kira insists that Helena is not to blame:

KIRA: It wasn't Helena's fault . . . I went outside to play with her.

SARAH: [*distrustfully*] She tell you to say this?

KIRA: No!

SARAH: She's dangerous. She's sick in the head and it makes her want to hurt us.

KIRA: She just needs your help.

SARAH: I'm sorry, Kira, I don't think anybody can help Helena now.
("Unconscious Selection," 1.9)

In the next episode, when Sarah says "Don't worry about Helena, Kira, okay?" she responds "I don't—she's not a real monster" ("Endless Forms Most Beautiful," 1.10). Kira considers Helena one of her "new" aunties, including her in a picture she draws of her mother's sisters ("*Ipsa Scientia Potestes Est*," 2.5). Kira doesn't see Helena again until the "clone dance party" near the end of the season, where Helena says "I came back to see your little face." They touch hands like they did through the window. "I'm so happy to see you I'm going to eat your finger!" Helena teases ("By Means Which Have Never Yet Been Tried," 2.10). They share a special bond through the rest of the series.

Meeting Helena is a "call to adventure" for Kira, and she answers that call, responding with curiosity and openness to Helena's obvious need for emotional connection. Like Parzival at this stage, she doesn't think to be cautious about this stranger; Siobhan's protectiveness may have kept her safe, but it didn't teach her how to be responsible for her own safety. The results are in some ways disastrous—she is injured in the crash, the Neolutionists and Proletheans both become aware of her existence, and Dyad obtains a sample of her genetic material from the hospital. But in some ways the results are beneficial—she is now more a part of what is going on around her, people who care about her are aware of her remarkable healing abilities, and she is an advocate for Helena.

What is most important, though, is that Kira's act of caring and humanity towards Helena is a major turning point for the assassin-clone. Note that the question "What happened to you?" is rather general. The answer might be circumstances, or it might be the actions of specific people, and Helena can't really answer—in fact, she seems never to have really thought about it before. But because of Kira's spontaneous human sympathy, Helena refuses to give Kira up to Tomas, and even rejects his tempting offer that she should kill Sarah and

take Kira away as her own child. An honest question asked out of impulsive compassion, not by someone trying to use or manipulate or fight her, has started to turn the tide. Helena of course has a long journey to go on yet,¹¹ and so does Kira, who later learns to ask better questions.

KIRA AND RACHEL I: FAILURE TO ASK MEDUSA THE QUESTION

If Kira is to be considered a type of Parzival figure, enacting the major elements of his story, we should next determine if she has an important *failure* to ask a question when she really ought to, and if so, why she did *not* ask. In the Parzival story, his “bounden duty as a knight is that he ask a question and find a solution to bring about order in a society. He fails to ask the question and fails in his knightly duty” (Cherian 96). In the second season, Kira undergoes traumatic experiences that make her far less trusting of even close family members, and encounters a wounded clone-aunt in a position of power but fails to make a connection with her as a person and ask the needed question.

The final shot of season one shows Sarah coming home to a ransacked house. Mrs. S and Kira are both missing without a trace. Over the first several episodes of season two, it is revealed that the elaborately realistic kidnapping scenario was Mrs. S’s attempt to fool Dyad and get Kira out of the country to a place of safety. Sarah was to follow the clues, pass through a security “airlock,” and later join them in London along with her foster brother Felix (Jordan Gavaris). Kira passed through the same “airlock,” utterly convinced until she saw Siobhan that she was in great danger and might never see her family again. But Mrs. S’s confederates betray her, and Sarah takes Kira and flees. Kira witnesses Siobhan’s execution of one of the traitors. They take refuge at Cal’s place, where his parenthood is revealed when Kira asks another innocent question—“Are you my dad?” (“Mingling its Own Nature With It,” 2.3). But at the end of this episode, Kira experiences violence again when a Dyad agent holds her hostage, then kills a policeman in front of her and takes her mother prisoner, leaving Kira to stay in hiding all alone at Cal’s place while he goes to rescue Sarah.

This sudden education in flight, violence, treachery, and concealment is a shock, in spite of Kira’s native resilience. So perhaps it is not too surprising that just weeks later, kidnapped by Rachel Duncan, she thinks only of escape, not of sympathy and connection with her captor—especially one who has hurt her family so much in the past.

Rachel is yet another of the clones, but she is aligned with Dyad. She was raised as self-aware by her guardian, Aldous Leekie (Matt Frewer), after the (supposed) deaths of the founding scientists of the project, her adoptive parents

¹¹ See my essay “Hell and Back: Helena as Kore and Shaman in *Orphan Black*.”

Ethan and Susan Duncan. She enjoys her position of power in Dyad immensely, reveling in her possession of hidden knowledge and the feeling of ruling from behind the scenes, rarely leaving her "castle." However, she is more of a figurehead than she realizes, still controlled as an experimental subject, and both her orphaning and her infertility are deep but well-hidden personal wounds. She was told as a child by Leekie that she would never be able to have babies,¹² and when Ethan Duncan is found to still be alive and brought in to Dyad, she asks him how Sarah managed to be successful where all the other clones had failed. "In her fertility? Rachel, she's a failure, not a success. You are all barren by design." A "reproducing prototype," Rachel agrees, would be "irresponsible." While Rachel carries on the conversation coldly and professionally after only a brief pause, in her mind we see her trashing the office in a towering rage of shattering glass and flying papers ("Variable and Full of Perturbation," 2.8).

Her woundedness manifests in her need to control and manipulate her sisters and her desire to continue the cloning program, and it is behind her intense resentment of Sarah and later Helena for their ability to bear children. In the final season, in her parallel desperate need for acceptance from a father-figure, she will even align for a time with P.T. Westmorland (Stephen McHattie), the egomaniacal charlatan behind the whole edifice of Neolution.

The Wounded Woman archetype is a female counterpart to some aspects of the Fisher King, in the way her wounding and emotional damage spread to affect those around her. As Sarah Beach describes this figure, the "impulse to destroy and to bring others into the realm of pain she lives with can rip to shreds all sorts of relationships around her. Unless [she] can absorb the experience of being injured, find healing and move beyond the boundaries of pain, she will become like a black hole in space, pulling all into her nothingness and destroying them" (Beach 163). Out of her resentment and her yearning for the biological motherhood denied to her, Rachel willfully creates a waste land for her clone sisters, as unable as Helena was while under the influence of the Proletheans to see them as her proper family. She must move beyond her pain and find strength in relationships of mutual support with her sisters; the entire

¹² In the comic book *Orphan Black*, young Rachel is playing with a doll when Leekie tells her "... You know that not all little girls can grow up to be mothers, right? [...] Sometimes, their bodies just don't work that way. And ... I'm afraid your last checkup showed ... it looks like you won't be able to have children when you grow up." This flashback is followed by Rachel, angered by the false kidnapping, thinking "She [Kira] is supposed to be mine!"

arc of *Orphan Black* constantly emphasizes the value of “relational skills” (Beach 165) and connection over self-absorption and selfishness.¹³

To return to Kira, after her abduction, she wakes up in a lavish and feminine pink bedroom, but the windows are barred and fake, and Rachel is at the desk waiting. Kira’s first word is “Mommy?”

RACHEL: Hello. My name is Rachel. How are you feeling, Kira?

KIRA: [*plaintively*] Where’s my mom? Where’s Mrs. S?

RACHEL: [*in a condescending upper-class drawl*] Dear child. I know how frightening this must be for you. [*Kira covers away.*] But you’ll get used to it. [*Rachel sits on the bed.*] You may even grow to like it here. Just as I did. (2.9)¹⁴

Sarah gives herself up to Dyad to get Kira back and is allowed to observe her through a one-way mirror from a soundproofed room. She watches as Rachel visits Kira:

RACHEL: Hello, sweetheart. Are you comfortable?

KIRA: [*glances at the mirror, almost as if she knows, then back to Rachel.*] Is my mum here yet?

RACHEL: Soon, I hope. [*Rachel touches Kira’s shoulder in passing, looks at the mirror, and sits down on bed.*] The last time I saw your mother, she laid hands on me. Do you know what that means?

KIRA: [*shakes her head*] No.

RACHEL: It means she wasn’t very nice to me. And then she kept running away. Just as she ran from you so many times. Did that make you sad?

KIRA: [*nods*] Yeah. But—she says she’s all grown up now.

RACHEL: [*laughs a little, almost scoffing; touches Kira’s face.*] I hope she is. [*She moves to the mirror again.*] Even mothers have to do as they’re

¹³ Another fruitful way to consider Rachel’s story, to draw upon a different mythology, is in the light of the legend of Medusa and Athena. Medusa is the dark sister-side of Athena, the goddess with the “manly mind” aligned with the patriarchy just as Rachel is with the (unexamined by her) patriarchal ends of Neolution. Athena has “pushed all the frightened, violated parts of herself away, wrapped them in dangerous barriers, and buried them”; she conceals her “ugly, writhing, bottled up fury.” Denial of this Medusa side makes her weak when her “feminine power” is most needed; she must claim and own the power of her hurt, as Athena does when she incorporates the Medusa head into her breastplate, over her heart, and becomes “virgin and monster in one, clad in the feminine tokens of wisdom” (Frankel 137-141).

¹⁴ In the comic book *Orphan Black*, little Rachel is taken straight from the funeral of Ethan and Susan to Dyad by Leekie, and shown into what looks like nearly the same room: “This is weird. Regular people live in houses. [...] Is it like a cage then? Or some sort of lab?”

told, sometimes. [*Looking straight at the mirror:*] Don't they. [*In this significant multi-layered shot, Rachel is talking to Sarah, and knows she is on the other side of the mirror, but also looking straight at herself, and at the same time obstructing Sarah's view of Kira.*] ("By Means Which Have Never Yet Been Tried," 2.10)

Kira has had several opportunities and cues to ask Rachel "what ails her" but, traumatized and distrustful, and perhaps warned off by Rachel's stone-cold exterior, she does not. Interestingly, in this two-episode arc, three other people *do* ask Rachel how she is doing—but their questions do not cure her pain because they are asked by people who are associated with Dyad and who have been more or less complicit in wounding her. In the aftermath of Leekie's death, Marion Bowles (Michelle Forbes) of Topside, the organizational layer above Dyad, asks "How are you, Rachel? Besides bereft." But it's impersonal, and nearly as insubstantial as the air-kiss greeting they share (2.9). Rachel also says "I'm fine" on the phone to Dr. Nealon (Tom McCamus), but her voice is full of annoyance and insincerity (2.9). So a question arises: would Rachel have been ready to respond if innocent outsider Kira *had* asked the right question? Likely not. The Fisher King character must be as ready to receive and answer the question as the Quester is to ask it (see Mitchell and Vidrine). Rachel may be wounded and brittle—she obsessively watches videos from her childhood, indulges in sado-masochistic sex, and drinks gin by the bottle—but she is not yet at the nadir of her fortunes.

The third iteration of the Question, though, after her conversation with Kira, shakes Rachel to the core, and wounds her even further rather than healing her. Her foster father, Ethan Duncan, now her prisoner as she tries to get the keys to his cloning process from him, asks:

ETHAN: Do you recall, Rachel—not the memory, but the feeling—how much we loved you?

RACHEL: The reason I watch these tapes so often is because I don't remember that at . . . [*She breaks off as Duncan collapses; he has taken poison rather than give up his secrets to Dyad.*] What have you done? What have you done?

ETHAN: Poor, poor Rachel—my poor, poor Rachel . . .

RACHEL: You can't leave me! You can't leave me again!

ETHAN: I'm afraid you don't deserve me anymore. (2.10)

Rachel is left at the end of this episode with a pencil embedded in one eye, thanks to Sarah, and over the next several seasons, must overcome aphasia and partial paralysis and adjust to an advanced bionic prosthetic eye. During this time, alliances change and shift and other threats arise and are overcome; Rachel

is sometimes an uneasy ally, and sometimes an enemy. Kira spends most of season three in hiding with Cal in Iceland, and much of season four in a safe house under a comic book store. What is interesting here is a major shift in Kira as a person. Starting season five at about eight years old, she has begun showing some signs of preadolescent independence and frustration with being kept out of the loop and moved from place to place with no say of her own in the matter.

KIRA AND RACHEL II: SEEING BETTER WITH ONE EYE THAN TWO

In the fifth season, there is once more a campaign by Rachel to have Kira come into Dyad to be studied for her unique genetic traits. Rachel has had what appears to be a total change of personality after meeting the charismatic P.T. Westmorland, who has “made her feel whole” and given her a sense of what the purpose of her life is. She is willing to let Sarah, Siobhan, Felix, and Kira continue to live independently at their house in Toronto—Kira can even go back to her old school—but she lays out conditions to Sarah: “We’d like to study her. It will barely affect your lives. Regularly scheduled visits. A low-impact, non-invasive study [...] of her unique physiology. She’s special, we both know that” (“Clutch of Greed,” 5.2).

But Siobhan has a plan already, and they begin plotting to “kidnap”—their term—Kira. Kira is delighted to be returning to school, and says to Sarah on the way in, “And don’t worry about me today after school with Auntie Rachel.” “Hey, hey, no no no, we don’t call her Auntie.” “But it’s different now.” But she knows immediately when Sarah, dressed as Rachel, picks her up at the classroom door. Kira starts to balk: “Mum, are you sure this is a good idea?” The elaborate ruse comes to disaster, though, as one of the clones, M.K., is murdered simultaneously with the final hand-off:

SARAH: You and I, we’re going to go in this van here.

KIRA: [*yelling*] No! I want to go to school! [...] [*She cries out*] M.K.’s . . . dead! [*Siobhan turns to Sarah, speculatively. When Sarah hugs Kira, she pulls away.*] She’s dead!

SARAH: You can’t know that! [*Sarah picks Kira up bodily to try to shove her in the van.*]

KIRA: I don’t feel her anymore! [...] I want to know why I’m like this, and I don’t want to go with you!!! [*Kira shouts, bracing her feet against the van’s running board. Sarah is aghast—somehow astonished that her daughter takes after her, has her own mind and agenda and knows what she wants.*] [...]

SIOBHAN: She wants to know why she’s like this. We can’t run from it any longer. (“Clutch of Greed,” 5.2)

Rachel comes to Mrs. S's house to pick up Kira that evening. Kira refuses to say goodbye to Sarah, walking straight towards a smiling Rachel, who puts her arm around her with a triumphant glance back at Sarah. "I know it's been a sad day, but we're going to take such good care of you." Kira finally looks back as she gets in the car, but Rachel slams the door shut ("Clutch of Greed," 5.2).

Over the next few episodes, we see the tension continuing between Sarah and Kira. Kira meets with Rachel several times, happy for the opportunity to learn more about herself; Sarah resents their growing closeness. A theme playing out across several relationships during this sequence is the mother-daughter bond; "Your daughter is struggling on the threshold of what it means to become you," as one character observes ("Let the Children and Childbearers Toil," 5.4), and this is true for many of them. A visit to Helena, hiding in a convent during the late stages of her pregnancy and now somewhat of a wise shamanic figure, helps clarify Sarah's thinking:

HELENA: Sit, sestra. I think your heart is heavy.
SARAH: I can't give Kira what she wants. [...]
HELENA: She's an old soul. We should share our horrors with her.
SARAH: God, I don't want her dealing with what we do.
HELENA: But she will have to, you know this. (5.4)

On her return to Toronto, Sarah and Siobhan start bringing Kira deeper into the circle of the so-called "Clone Club," sharing some of the truth with her and finding ways in which she can be an active participant in their quest. Sarah imparts some of her own special skill set to Kira:

SARAH: Kira wants to be in on the action.
KIRA: I'm going to be a hustler, too. [...]
SARAH: Yeah. We're finding a way to be safe, right, little tricks, and then maybe even gain Rachel's trust.
SIOBHAN: Well, that IS the hustle, isn't it? How do you go about doing that? How do you gain someone's trust?
KIRA: [*cheerfully*] You have to figure out what they want first, and then give it to them, without them realizing it.
SIOBHAN: And what is it that Rachel really wants? ("Ease for Idle Millionaires," 5.5)

In this sequence there are parallels with how Parzival is taught about being a knight: if Kira is to be a hustler she must learn to hide her true feelings and motives, and always keep up a false front as an innocent child so the hustle isn't suspected. "If I have to, I'll hustle Rachel," she says with a chuckle in the next

episode (“Manacled Slim Wrists,” 5.6). It is a false way of relating to the world, like Parzival’s artificial chivalry.

Kira is taken to Dyad with the excuse that she needs to have a sleep study done, but the true plan is to start her on hormone treatments and harvest her eggs for the development of a new clone line. There is another parallel with Parzival here; Kira, armed with some knowledge about what is going on and how to interact with the Grail-queen, Rachel, resolutely returns to the castle of Dyad. She is determined to learn what she can, “hustling” Rachel if she has to, and get the information out to Sarah and Mrs. S, but something else happens there instead. There is an important interaction between Kira and Rachel late one night in her office:

KIRA: Um, I have a present for you. It’s a friendship bracelet. [*Kira hands Rachel a bright blue bracelet, braided from embroidery floss and beads.*]

RACHEL: That’s very sweet. I made one of these, when I was your age, for a friend at summer camp. [*One wonders when she was allowed such an unmonitored experience in her childhood.*]

KIRA: Are you guys still friends?

RACHEL: No. [*The mask is again firmly in place as she walks away, toying with the bracelet.*]

KIRA: [*sadly*] My mom moved me around too much to keep friends too. [*Rachel touches Kira’s hair as she passes; Kira is sent off to bed. Rachel almost absent-mindedly puts the bracelet on while discussing clone Cosima’s whereabouts with her assistant Frontenac; the slender blue cord is a sharp contrast to her sophisticated black dress, severe haircut, and bulky gold watch.*] (“Gag or Throttle,” 5.7)

Given the “hustle” motif, one have to wonder if the bracelet was a calculated ploy to give Rachel something she wants, without her realizing it. Or is it straight from Kira’s heart, a lady giving her knight a talisman to wear into battle? Rachel always strictly controls her outward appearance and how she presents herself to the world, careful to project an image of wealth and power, but hiding her woundedness behind an icy mask. She rarely wears anything but black and white or other neutral colors, but we will never see Rachel without this handmade braid of startling blue on her wrist for the rest of the series, so to her it is deeply important, whatever Kira’s motive might have been.

Rachel comes to the realization, in this episode, that her illusion of power and control has been a lie, that she has been “hustled” all her life by Dyad, Neolution, Leekie, Westmorland, and others, and is still being monitored and manipulated and lied to even now. Is there anyone at all she can trust? Like the Fisher King, she is “suspended between [...] two states, awaiting [...] some key or catalyst to bring about the necessary change” (Gilson). As she last took Kira

to Dyad, Mrs. S said to her, presciently, "Rachel. Look at me. There will come a day when you need us" (5.6).

In episode 5.7, "Gag or Throttle," we come to that day and to Kira's proper Parzival question. We are almost subliminally set up to expect a reference to Arthurian material at the beginning of the episode, when Leekie, in a flashback, makes the claim that "Understanding the human genome and the environmental impact on genes is the holy grail of life extension." For Rachel, the discovery that Westmorland had been tapping into her prosthetic eye and seeing whatever she sees—and can punish her with a zap of electric voltage—is nearly the final straw in a day of frustrations, humiliations, and revelations; ironically, her eyes are now opened to her true position within Neolution and Dyad.

Knowing now that her every movement has been observed since she was given the bionic eye (at the beginning of season three, for us), she heads to her viewing room with a bottle of gin and watches the video of herself playing in the leaves with her adoptive parents over and over again. Westmorland calls, sensing that she is in a dangerous mood, but in response to his query about her health—again, a false question from someone who has caused her pain—she says: "When I was a child at Dyad, I was so naïve. I asked Leekie if I could call him 'dad.' Isn't that funny?" Westmorland calls her his daughter, and claims to have shared all his secrets with her—but she knows now that he is lying. Rachel makes sure he sees that she's drinking, finishing the bottle. Mr. Frontenac brings Kira to the room.

KIRA: *[looking at Rachel, whose drunkenness and fragility are obvious]* Are you okay? *[Rachel snuffles a bit and turns to her but does not answer.]*

KIRA: *[with true concern in her voice]* Who hurt you? *[The Parzival question—"What ails thee, auntie?"—is honest, straightforward, from the heart—there is no "hustle" in Kira's eyes. Her sensitivity to the pain of her clone-aunts overrides any other agenda, and "hustling" is not authentic to her nature (as Campbell might put it). This is a very specific question, unlike the one she asked Helena ("What happened to you?"). Kira can see that Rachel's pain has been caused by the actions of other people over the years.]*

RACHEL: *[at first taken by surprise, but then bends down and says, with controlled passion]* All of them. *[Her face is now determined, jaw set, her eyes bright with unshed tears. This is the turning point Rachel has been working up to; this is moment where she makes the crucial decision to break with Neolution and ally with her sisters. But with her every movement still observed by Westmorland, she must be very careful for a little while longer.]*

KIRA: [*draws in a breath—she knows this is a significant moment, but not what Rachel is going to do about it—and they keep eye contact a moment more till Frontenac interrupts and says the doctors are ready.*]

RACHEL: I will give the sedative. I was the one who brought Kira to Dyad. [*She pushes Kira down clumsily into her chair.*] I will be the last face she sees here. (“Gag or Throttle,” 5.7)

Rachel returns to her office to prepare the sedative, and receives an email and a call from Sarah, revealing the information that Westmorland is a fraud, not 170 years old at all, but someone named Mathieson who faked his own death and assumed Westmorland’s identity as a figurehead for Neolution. “We’re all frauds,” Rachel responds as Sarah pleads for Kira’s return. She knows quite well that Mathieson is witnessing this interaction.

RACHEL: [*bringing the sedative-laced orange juice in to Kira*] Drink.

KIRA: Did you hate being studied when you were my age? [*Kira is afraid; the atmosphere surrounding this “test” is somehow different, more menacing, and Rachel is tense and on edge.*]

RACHEL: I don’t remember.

KIRA: Did you get used to it?

RACHEL: Yes. [*But when she turns back to Kira, she instead sees herself at the same age. Shaken by Kira’s questions, by the revelations of the day, by the bottle of gin she’s drunk, she asks her own younger self a Parzival question:*] Why don’t you run?

YOUNG RACHEL: [*shakes her head*] Where would I go? (“Gag or Throttle,” 5.7)

This is Kira’s last significant action in the show; the audience does not see her again until the party for Helena’s babies, weeks later. But Rachel’s plan is already in motion. Typing by touch on her phone, she arranges for Sarah and her allies to come and take Kira away, reveals Mathieson’s fraud to the Neolution board via email, and then, after another healthy, numbing swig of gin, breaks her glass and uses it to gouge out the bionic eye.

From here on Rachel is in hiding from Neolution and instrumental in bringing the organization down with her insider knowledge. She is firmly on the side of her sisters and trying to figure out a new life for herself. In her last poignant scene, she makes amends by providing the names of all the surviving Leda clones around the world so they can be cured. But her sisters cannot fully accept her as a friend yet, after all the damage she has caused them, and she knows this; she must go off alone to discover who she is now. In a way *she* has taken on the role of a questing Grail knight here, seeking her redemption—she

has found a Grail full of self-knowledge that will require contemplation before she can return to the world.¹⁵

WHAT IS THE GRAIL? WHO SERVES THE GRAIL, AND WHOM DOES THE GRAIL SERVE?

After all of this, though, what in fact *is* the Grail in *Orphan Black*? Is it, as Leekie claims, unlocking the human genome and therefore gaining the secret to extending life ("Gag or Throttle," 5.6)? For Mathieson, the Grail is the self-healing LIN28A gene found in the children of Sarah and Helena that he will stop at nothing to obtain. But we have seen that Neolution's obsessive drive to extend the individual's life, taken to its logical conclusion, leads to a sterile waste land of their own creation; using the Grail for this sort of purpose will backfire.

Is the Grail of the series the cure which will heal the built-in autoimmune genetic limiters on the clones? It is too late for the male clones; it is in keeping with the waste land theme that their built-in sterility, weaponized to spread the autoimmune disease to every woman with whom they have sexual intercourse, destroyed their own brain tissue over time as well. Finding the genetic therapy will not, alas, restore the lost fertility of the Ledas, but will allow them to live out their lives and to be fertile in other ways than biological motherhood—and Rachel's list will allow all of them to be cured.

For the women at the heart of this story, the ultimate Grail they seek is their right to self-determination, to create their community of mutual support free of corporate ownership and control, to have autonomy over their own reproductive choices and raise their children in peace and safety: to live the "fantasy" of "a normal life," to be "out of this shit," as Sarah so frequently and forcefully says (Rushing 163). But for the patriarchal forces arrayed against them, it is a fight over the grail/womb itself, the feminine life-giving capability that they quest to seize and control for their own purposes.

The Dyad Institute is certainly like a Grail Castle; while it sits in plain sight in downtown Toronto, the gleaming modern glass and metal structure is mysteriously connected to an older, fortress-like stone building with deep, dirt-floored basements. The Institute, like the Grail Castle, is a "peculiar combination of hiddenness, hospitality, and mystery"—and like the Grail Castle, it is "haunt[ed] by strange, inexplicable entities driven by their own independent purposes and unknown powers" (Shogren 407). Access to it is strictly controlled and can be denied at any time, but it is where Kira must go to first, fail to ask,

¹⁵ Frankel's *From Girl to Goddess* offers another story that resonates with this sequence of events. The Buddhist nun Subhā, troubled by a suitor who would not take no for an answer, ripped out one of the eyes which the man had admired so poetically and handed it to him. (The Buddha restored her eye to her, fortunately.) "Maimed by herself or others, she is no longer a sex object to be brutalized or threatened," but "buried in the sheltering femininity of the dark forest, she regains a fragment of herself" (Frankel 100-101).

and later, succeed in asking Rachel the vital question that saves her. Benjamin Shogren sees this constellation of characteristics as aligning the Grail Castle with “both the maternal and erotic Feminine qualities” (408), but here those qualities are exploited and perverted to suit the aims of Neolution. However, the Dyad Institute is also the one place where the cure can be found and created.

The Fisher King reigning over a sterile land is also a multivalent symbol in *Orphan Black*; there are many Fisher King figures in this story, taking out their woundedness on others, even if we limit it just to those who interact with Kira. Wounded kings like P.T. Westmorland and Ethan Duncan and complicit queens like Susan Duncan and Virginia Coady create the initial waste land; wounded princesses, like Helena and Rachel, perpetuate it by preying on their sisters.¹⁶ Creating connection, as Kira does, by reminding them of their common humanity, cures their impairments if they can be cured; but Westmorland and Coady in their exultant sociopathy are never cured, and neither of the Duncans survives to salvage what they can or make amends.

As Swinscow puts it, “[o]nly those who are ill and recognise themselves to be so search for the cure”; the healing Question, then, as asked by Wolfram’s Parzival and by Kira, leads the sufferer to recognize and name his or her suffering, to understand the cause and therefore turn towards the cure. For Helena, just having her pain recognized by Kira is a great help, but the question does not pinpoint its root cause and she has far to go before she can become whole. For Rachel, Kira asks who specifically caused her pain, but Rachel’s initial answer is to lash out at everyone: “All of them.” Her actions afterwards, however, demonstrate that she is capable of figuring out exactly who hurt her and how—and realizing that her clone-sisters are her true family, not her enemies. Here we might note another parallel with Wolfram’s *Parzival*; in the final chapters of the framing story, Parzival and his pagan half-brother Feirefiz fight, each unaware of the other’s identity, and the author laments: “One may say ‘they’ were fighting if one wants to speak of them as two, but they are indeed only one, for ‘my brother and I,’ that is one flesh, just as good man and good wife” (Murphy 120).¹⁷ As clones, the sisters are truly one flesh and stronger together.

At its deepest psychological level, Wolfram’s Question theme is about compassion from another person unlocking a sterile stasis and healing a

¹⁶ Aldous Leekie, Henrik Johannsen, and Evie Cho might be included in this list as well. Even the sites of wounds throughout the series—Sarah stabbing Helena in the belly with a piece of rebar, Bonnie shooting Mark in the thigh, Helena “inseminating” Henrik, Sarah’s wounding of Rachel resulting in her permanent limp, Rachel stabbing Susan in the belly and Sarah in her upper thigh (causing Sarah to limp just like Rachel)—reinforce the theme of wounds relating to potency and fertility.

¹⁷ Murphy quotes the translation by Helen Mustard.

sickness that is "psychological and spiritual [...] based on insecurity and vacillation" (Murphy 134). But some will not admit to sickness and are resistant to all healing. When we get to the very core of the forces opposing the community of young women and their allies on *Orphan Black*, we find a selfish old man frightened to death of dying, who has therefore cut himself off from honest relationships with others and created a wasteland of deceit and manipulation around himself—aided and abetted, of course, by those who share his fear, his greed, and his hope of conquering time and living forever. Like the Anfortas of Wolfram's *Parzival*, he is "in love with Prideful Arrogance" (Murphy 135), guilty of the "ancient sin of auto-idolatry" (138) or, in more modern terms, "hypertrophic individualism" (Tanner 129). The only end game possible, if this sin is followed to its logical conclusion, is one lone wounded figure crouching atop a sterile pile of the world's material wealth.

Let us contrast this bleak vision with the joyful dance of the extended family we see towards the end of the final episode of *Orphan Black*: sisters, mothers, children, fathers, partners, friends, genetically related or not, fertile or not, at peace or not, mourning a missing member of the group or not, "an affirmation of both difference and solidarity" like those we have seen before in this show (Rushing 161). All are freely gathered, supporting each other in their troubles and doubts, to celebrate the new lives born to one of their members. The community reaches out to cure sisters around the world it has not even met yet; in time, Rachel might be healed enough to join them. Here is the Waste Land redeemed and real-world service to the healing feminine principle of the Grail: the community as an embodiment of the symbolic bearer of the Grail in Wolfram, Repanse de Schoye, "Overflowing Happiness" (Murphy 17).



(Image by Howard Pyle)

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