

# *Parsifal – Last but not Least*

By Peter Bassett

*Parsifal* had the longest gestation period of any of Wagner's works, longer even than *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner was thirty-two when he first recognized the dramatic possibilities of Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth century romance, *Parzival*. He was sixty-eight before these possibilities were realized. *Parsifal* is the product of a lifetime's thought and experience, and Wagner fully expected it to be his last work.

In his autobiography, he describes how, in 1845 whilst on a rest cure at Marienbad in Bohemia, he had selected a copy of Wolfram's work, and also the anonymous epic of *Lohengrin*, and set out for the surrounding forest, to read and contemplate. The opera *Lohengrin* was the immediate result, being completed within a few years. A tumultuous period then followed, involving revolution and exile, five years of rethinking the theoretical principles of opera, and then work on his Nibelung drama, which soon began to grow to unexpected proportions.

That might have been the end of *Parsifal*, were it not for a spring day in 1857. Together with his first wife Minna, Wagner had moved to a cottage on the estate of Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck on the outskirts of Zurich. There, shortly after Easter, he was encouraged by the beauty and tranquillity of his surroundings to think of the Good Friday references in Wolfram's story, and the world's 'new beginning' through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. At once, he sketched out an entire drama in three acts.

The spirit that moved Wagner on that spring day in 1857 was eventually enshrined in the Good Friday scene in Act Three of *Parsifal*. The scene involves Gurnemanz chastising Parsifal for being armed on such a holy day – an incident taken straight from Wolfram. Then, when Parsifal comments on the beauty of the meadow, the old knight replies that he is witnessing the magic of Good Friday when, by the Saviour's loving sacrifice, humanity had been redeemed and nature too had regained its innocence.

When Wagner first sketched out his three-act drama, its completion was still twenty-five years away, about as long a period as that between the first sketch for a Nibelung drama and the completion of *Götterdämmerung*. The *Ring* narrative underwent extensive changes over that time, but *Parsifal*'s salient features hardly changed at all. The 1857 sketch is now lost, but in August 1865, at the request of King Ludwig, Wagner prepared a lengthy and detailed prose draft, much of it in direct speech quite close to the language of the finished libretto. For example, in the 1865 draft of the seduction scene between Kundry and Parsifal, Kundry says: "So it was my kiss that made you see clearly? Oh, fool! Embrace me now in love, so you shall be this very day God himself. Take me only for one hour to your heart, and let me then be damned for eternity!" The language of the finished poem, written in 1877, is more singable, but there is no doubt that its content had been determined twelve years earlier.

There were no narrative changes of importance between the 1865 draft and the finished poem, other than in the means by which Klingsor acquired the Holy Spear, and (thankfully) a decision not to have Titirel sit up in his coffin at the end and bless the assembled company! Some of the names were spelt differently and Parsifal's mother's name was changed from Schmerzeleide (Pain's Sorrow) to Herzeleide (Heart's Sorrow). However, in all material respects, the narrative content of *Parsifal* belongs to the mid 1860s at the latest and, more than likely, to the late 1850s. Only the finished poem and the music belong to the late 1870s.

Wagner was quite deliberate in not wanting to rush the creation of *Parsifal*. In 1860, after completing *Tristan und Isolde* but before starting on *Die Meistersinger*, he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: "Parzival is again very much coming to life in me; all the time I see it more and more clearly; when one day it is all finally ripe in me, the bringing of this poem into the world will be for me an extreme pleasure. But between now and then a good few years may have to pass...I shall put it off as long as I can, and concern myself with it only when it forces me to."

A good few years did indeed pass; twenty-one to be precise.

From Wolfram, Wagner took many details concerning the Grail and the knights who guard it. What exactly is the Grail?

Wolfram tells of a host of angels bringing it into the world: "A host of angels left [the Grail] on the earth" he says, "and then flew away up over the stars.... since then baptised men have had the task of guarding it, and with such chaste discipline that those who are called to the service of the grail are always noble men." This vision of the delivery of the Grail to humanity and the return of the angelic host to heaven provided the basis for the orchestral prelude to *Lohengrin*.

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Burgundian knight Robert de Boron described the Grail as the cup of the Last Supper, in which drops of Christ's blood had been collected by Joseph of Arimathea at the time of the crucifixion. Robert was the first author to give the Grail an explicitly Christian dimension. Wagner follows Robert's version in this regard, specifically describing the Grail in the 1865 draft as 'the crystal cup the Saviour once drank from at the Last Supper and gave to his disciples to drink from. In it Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood shed from the spear-wound of the Saviour on the cross.' This is the source of all the references in *Parsifal* to the Saviour's blood, and the union of cup and spear. But in the earliest accounts, the Grail was just a serving dish or, in Wolfram's version, a magic stone that had fallen from heaven. Wolfram tells us: "The Knights of the Grail live from a stone of the purest kind. If you do not know it, it shall be named to you. It is called *lapsit exillis*. This stone is also known as the Grail".

Even before the Grail was given its Christian gloss, it was described as possessing miraculous powers, including the ability to provide all kinds of food and drink and to extend the life of those who gazed on it. Its prototypes in fact were the magic cauldrons and cornucopias of pagan antiquity, and the alchemist stones of the east. The name of the alchemist stone was also *lapsit exillis*.

The Grail came to symbolize divine power at work in the world, and it was but a simple step to link it to the body and blood of Christ present in the Eucharist. The medieval church was happy to encourage this as a means of propagating the doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body in the sacrament. Some of the later Grail stories were probably invented by Cistercian monks, but the Grail is not mentioned in any ecclesiastical tradition – which is hardly surprising since its origins are more pagan than Christian.

What about the symbolism of the Holy Spear? Its origin too lies in the medieval romances, although it was not always identified with the spear that wounded Christ on the Cross, the so-called spear of Longinus, found by the Crusaders at Antioch in 1098. Wagner introduced this connection to provide a focus for Parsifal's quest. A Holy Spear did feature in some legends, and a Holy Lance formed part of the Holy Roman and then Austro-Hungarian Imperial regalia for a thousand years. This lance, now in the Imperial and Ecclesiastical Treasury in Vienna, actually dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but in the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was identified as the spear with which Longinus had pierced Christ's side, and to its power was credited Otto the Great's victory over the Hungarians in 955. Otto, son of Henry the Fowler (König Heinrich of *Lohengrin*) is buried at Magdeburg, where Wagner was Theatre Music Director from 1834 to 1836.

In Wolfram's *Parzival*, a lance with blood flowing from its tip is regularly displayed as a reminder of Anfortas' wound and of the country's descent into famine and despair. From time to time this lance is laid against the wound to relieve the king's pain. Again, this has its origins in pagan Celtic symbolism. In one French account called *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, an immaculate Galahad heals the Maimed King with blood flowing from the tip of a spear given to him by Christ himself. All of these stories are medieval concoctions, for the spear to which passing reference is made in St John's Gospel was an ordinary soldier's weapon for which no special claims are made in the Bible, either before or after the crucifixion.

The drama is set in the domain and castle of the Grail. According to the stage directions, the scenery is like that of the northern mountains of Christian Spain. Later, we move to the

magician Klingsor's enchanted castle on the southern slopes of the same mountains, facing Moorish (ie Muslim) Spain. When, in Act Two, Kundry attempts to seduce Parsifal, she is described as wearing a light, exotic, veil-like robe of Arabian style. These details reflect the fact that the original romances were written at the time of the Crusades, when Christian Europe was coming to grips with alien influences from the Middle East and beyond.

Wagner describes the costumes of the Grail Knights as resembling those of the Knights Templar, the famous religious/military order founded during the Crusades. In medieval accounts, the Grail Knights were often thought of as the spiritual equivalent of the Templars, and the Grail castle as a kind of heavenly Jerusalem. Wolfram calls the Grail Knights 'Templars', but distinguishes them from their earthly cousins by giving them the emblem of a dove rather than a cross – a detail that Wagner also adopted.

In the hall of the Grail, the Knights share a 'meal of love' of bread and wine.

Some people are offended by what they think is an enactment of the sacrament of Holy Communion on stage. Others are appalled by what they regard as the substitution of religiosity for theatre. Friedrich Nietzsche, the anti-clerical son of a protestant clergyman jumped to the wrong conclusion and accused Wagner of being 'a decaying and despairing decadent, sinking down helpless and broken before the Christian cross'.

Such zeal is misplaced, on both counts. What we see is *not* Holy Communion but a dramatization of the magical qualities of the Grail as described in the medieval romances. Bearing in mind that Wolfram's 'Grail' is not the cup of the Last Supper but a magic stone, consider how he describes its role within the castle of Munsalvaesche (Monsalvat), as witnessed by Parzival. The Queen enters, he says, carrying the Grail on a cloth of emerald silk. It is set before Amfortas, and then a hundred tables are brought in and set before the knights. Whatever food is desired, the Grail provides it: hot and cold, new and old, cultivated and wild; and whatever drink is preferred – white wine, mulberry or red – flows miraculously into the knights' cups.

Now, if we substitute the cup of the Last Supper for the magic stone, we have, in essence, what Wagner puts before us. He spells it out in his 1865 draft. The Knights enter in grave and solemn procession and take their places at laid tables stretching in three groups from front to rear. Amfortas is borne in on a litter, and in front of him a knight bears a shrine covered with a purple velvet cloth (as distinct from emerald green in Wolfram's version). In due course, Amfortas elevates the Grail and twilight descends on the hall. When it becomes light again, we find that the tables have been provided with wine and bread, which the knights eat amidst singing that celebrates holy brotherly love.

So, it is the Grail itself that delivers the food and drink in conformity with the legend.

The miraculous and spontaneous appearance of food on groups of tables is not an easy thing to achieve on stage. In the final version of the poem, Amfortas simply raises the Grail to bless baskets of bread and flagons of wine, which are then distributed by squires to the knights at their feast tables. The directions don't specify how the baskets and flagons get there in the first place – presumably through the agency of the Grail. If they are just carried in, like the elements in a Communion Service, one can see how an audience might draw the wrong conclusions.

Wolfram confirms the Grail's Christian associations by stating that its powers are renewed each Good Friday by a dove that descends from heaven, bearing a sacramental wafer in its beak, which it lays on the stone. This is the origin of the final stage direction in Wagner's *Parsifal*, according to which (on Good Friday) a white dove descends and hovers over Parsifal's head.

Parsifal hears the voice of the ancient Titurel who is kept alive only by the Grail's regular unveiling. This idea too is taken from the medieval sources, in which it is said that a person would not die for a week after gazing on the Grail. Life could be prolonged indefinitely this

way and, in Wolfram's version, Parzival catches a glimpse, in a room beyond, of the most beautiful old man he has ever seen, whiter than hoar-frost.

On the other hand, every time the wounded Amfortas uncovers the Grail (as he must as Grail king) he suffers extreme agony from the wound, the fruit of his desire, which bleeds afresh. Amfortas too is a character taken from medieval sources: the Maimed King or the Fisher King, called Anfortas, a name derived from the old French word for 'infirmity'.

So, the Grail is an actor in its own right. For Titirel, this miraculous, heavenly object is a giver of life; for Amfortas it is a source of humiliation, mortification and suffering, and for the knights it is a provider of physical and spiritual sustenance.

Klingsor, the sorcerer, also has his origins in Wolfram's story. Clinschor, as he is called there, had also suffered castration, although not (as in the opera) by his own hand.

If Wolfram's courtly epic had been the starting point for *Parsifal*, other – rather surprising - influences were to shape its ultimate meaning.

Central to Wagner's intellectual evolution in the 1850s was his response to the writings of the contemporary German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. These made a huge impression on him when he encountered them while working on *Die Walküre*, and they continued to influence his thinking and his art for the rest of his life. Almost immediately, he was inspired to write a brief sketch for *Tristan und Isolde*, which unfortunately is now lost but which formed the basis of the subsequent drama.

Schopenhauer, following in the footsteps of Kant, wrote of the illusory nature of the world as we perceive it, with its inevitable frustration and pain - equated in *Tristan und Isolde* with the all-deceiving 'day'. As human beings, we can only have an incomplete *perception* of reality, brought to us via our senses and mental faculties. Beyond that *perception* of reality is the reality itself ('the thing-in-itself'), which we do not and cannot know directly. 'Night' in *Tristan und Isolde* is not the realm of ignorance but that of timeless reality. It symbolizes the true but inaccessible being of what we perceive as the world of phenomena.

Schopenhauer would say that the only possible remedy for our unhappiness is to renounce the illusory world – the world of 'day'. In *Parsifal*, renunciation doesn't mean asceticism but renunciation of the world of *apparent* reality in order to glimpse *true* reality beyond. Parsifal penetrates the veil of illusion almost by accident, through his guileless pity for the sufferings of Amfortas. It is his compassion that makes him wise. And what exactly is the wisdom that he brings to the community of the Grail? It is the realization that, at some deep level, we are all one and undifferentiated, which is *why* we can share the sufferings of others and, indeed of all creatures. As early as 1858, Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: "nothing touches me seriously, save in so far as it awakens in me fellow-feeling, that is, fellow suffering. This compassion I recognize as the strongest feature of my moral being, and presumably it is also the fountain-head of my art."

Many of Schopenhauer's ideas are in sympathy with Hinduism and Buddhism, for which Wagner too had a high regard during the last three decades of his life. In the years after 1854, Wagner read Buddhist and Brahmanic material, including Burnhof's 'Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism', Colebrooke's 'Essay on the Vedas' and the *Upanishads*.

Schopenhauer was extravagant in his praise of the *Upanishads*, those mystical treatises written in Sanscrit between 800 and 400 BC. He praised them especially for their recognition that our senses are only able to grasp a representation of the world, and that this representation is like a veil between the subject and the hidden world of timeless reality.

For most of his life, Schopenhauer read a few pages of the *Upanishads* in translation each night before going to sleep, and of them he wrote: 'It is the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death.' It is hardly surprising then that Wagner too came under the spell of these ancient writings.

The poem of *Tristan und Isolde* is laced with allusions to the *Upanishads* and we find vivid expression of this in Isolde's final vision, in which the once-living Tristan is translated into waves, clouds, scents, sounds, and finally the 'immensity of the world-breath'. The Sanskrit word *Atman* – meaning 'breath' or 'soul' - is often used in conjunction with truth, infinity and the supreme deity – something beyond comprehension. And *Atman* is related etymologically to the German word for breath, *Atem*.

In the love duet in Act Two of *Tristan*, when the lovers sing, "then I myself am the world", they are giving utterance to the metaphysical visions of the *Upanishads*. Schopenhauer quotes one of his favourite passages: "I am all these creatures, and besides me there is no other being" to illustrate how someone contemplating nature necessarily draws nature into himself, transcending individuality and joining with the sublime. How well this fits Gurnemanz's mystical observations on Good Friday, when he draws even the humblest things in nature - the grasses and flowers of the meadow - into a greater reality: "Thus all creation gives thanks...now that nature, absolved from sin, today gains its day of innocence". In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck in 1858 about the suffering endured by animals, Wagner wrote: "And so if there is any purpose in all this suffering it can only be the awakening of pity in man, who thus takes up the animal's failed existence into himself, and, by perceiving the error of all existence, becomes the redeemer of the world. This interpretation will become clearer to you some day from the third act of *Parzival*, which takes place on Good Friday morning."

In the diary that he called 'The Brown Book', Wagner jotted down some correlations between Hindu/Buddhist concepts, dramatic imagery and modes of expression. '*Nirvana*' – the blowing out of the fires of delusion and attachment - the extinction of self – he likened to truth and night. '*Brahma*' – the world soul – he likened to music and twilight. '*Samsara*' – the deceits of a worldly life, the agitation of selfishness – he likened to poetry and day.

The identification of truth and ultimate reality with night, and selfishness and illusion with day is, of course, at the heart of *Tristan und Isolde*. Interestingly too, Wagner equated *nirvana* with 'untroubled, pure harmony' - and who can doubt the harmonic responsiveness of both *Tristan* and *Parsifal* to dramatic necessity. Think of the contrast between Klingsor's agitated chromaticism and the serene diatonic music associated with the Grail or Faith or Good Friday, or the ending of the whole work - surely the most sublime in all opera.

In May 1856, Wagner sketched out a proposed Buddhist music drama, *Die Sieger*, (The Victors), based on a story he found in Burnhof's book. *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the Buddha, one of whose titles was Jina – 'the Victor'. His victory was over the forces of attachment that perpetuate the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Wagner referred to the prospect of completing *Die Sieger* as 'a labour of especial love' – those were his words. He had been attracted to the story for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its theme of reincarnation which he saw as an ideal vehicle for his compositional technique of emotional reminiscence. 'Only music' he said, 'can convey the mysteries of reincarnation'.

In an extraordinary confession to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner wrote: "Only thoughtful acceptance of the idea of transmigration of souls has been able to show me the consoling point at which all in the end converge at an equal height of redemption after their differing paths through life, which in time have run divided alongside one another, but which outside time come together in full understanding."

It is worth noting that shortly after Wagner wrote the sketch for *Die Sieger* in 1856, he changed the text of *Götterdämmerung* to give it a Buddhist ending. He wrote the first prose sketch for *Parsifal* in the following April, and then a prose scenario for *Tristan* in the August. So, *Die Sieger*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan* and the ending of *Götterdämmerung* all have a lot in common: they are heavily influenced by Schopenhauerean and Hindu/Buddhist ideas.

Wagner's ideas for the unfinished *Die Sieger* make fascinating reading and throw important light on *Parsifal*. The main characters are the historical Buddha (also called Shakyamuni) his cousin and closest disciple Ananda, and the maiden Prakriti, who belongs to the Chandala class of untouchables. The Chandalas are outside the Hindu caste system, living beyond

village precincts and performing the most menial tasks. We can think of Prakriti as a precursor of Kundry. The Brahmins, the highest caste, despise the Chandalas. We might compare the Brahmins with the 'chosen caste' of Grail Knights, who are so quick to disparage Kundry who lives outside the castle wall in thorns and thickets.

In his sketch, Wagner provides a brief outline of the work's main elements:

The Buddha is on his last journey. Ananda is given water from the well by Prakriti [compare Kundry's offer of water to Parsifal]. She is in turmoil over her love for Ananda who, consequently, is in great consternation. Prakriti goes to the Buddha under a tree at the city's gate, to plead for union with Ananda. The Buddha asks if she is willing to accept the constraints of such a union. A dialogue ensues with both apparently at cross-purposes. Prakriti speaks in terms of her passion [compare the Act Two Kundry/Parsifal scene]. She sinks horrified and sobbing to the ground when she hears at last that she must share Ananda's vow of chastity [again, consider the Kundry/Parsifal scene].

Ananda is attacked by the Brahmins, who criticize the Buddha's dealings with a Chandala girl [compare the angry Grail Knights' attack on Amfortas]. The Buddha denounces the caste system. He tells of Prakriti's previous incarnation in which she had been the daughter of a haughty Brahmin. A Chandala leader had asked the Brahmin for her hand in marriage to his son, who had fallen in love with her. In pride and arrogance the daughter had refused to return the young man's love and had mocked him [compare Kundry's mockery of the Saviour in her former life]. Therefore, Prakriti had had to expiate that sin by being reborn as a Chandala herself and suffering the torments of a hopeless love [remember Kundry's plight, condemned to seek the Saviour she had mocked from world to world].

Finally, in expiation of her past and in order to achieve full acceptance amongst the followers of the Buddha, Prakriti declares that she is prepared to share Ananda's vow of chastity [compare the penitent Kundry in Act Three]. Ananda welcomes her as his sister regardless of her caste [compare Parsifal's baptism of Kundry]. The Buddha gives his last teachings [Just as Parsifal gives his final benediction in the closing scene] and departs to the place of his redemption [which of course, in Buddhist terms, is death and the achievement of *nirvana* – no further rebirth].

When one recognizes the extent to which *Die Sieger* overlaps with *Parsifal*, the latter takes on a whole new significance. The Buddha had drawn no distinction on grounds of race or caste, attracted followers from all backgrounds and regarded all living beings as fellow sufferers in the endless cycle of existence.

As the Buddha offered salvation to Prakriti, so Parsifal has no qualms in offering baptism to the wretched and despised Kundry. Far from upholding a system based on exclusivity, Parsifal, the Innocent Fool, having won enlightenment through compassion, establishes a new order based on fellow suffering.

For many years, Wagner intended to work on *Die Sieger* after he had finished *Parsifal*, and it was only in 1882 that a combination of exhaustion and realism led him to abandon the idea for good. He also felt that he would be duplicating much of what had been said in *Parsifal*.

Wolfram's account makes reference to the young Parzival using his bow and arrow to kill birds whose songs had attracted his attention – and then weeping over what he had done. Obviously, this is intended to convey Parzival's tenderness of heart, although there is no suggestion that his momentary remorse stopped him from doing it again, and again. In the scene with the swan in Act One of *Parsifal*, the boy admits with pride to being able to hit anything that flies (*à la* Wolfram) but Wagner looks elsewhere for inspiration for the remainder of the scene. A collection of Buddhist legends dating from the first century AD contains the story of a wounded swan. The story is a recollection by the Buddha of a childhood experience in which a swan suddenly dropped from the sky and writhed on the ground in front of him in great pain; it had been hit by an arrow. The young Siddhartha (as the prince who became the Buddha was then called) pulled the arrow out and was caring for the bird when his cousin ran in excitedly, clutching his bow and arrows. The cousin ran towards the swan to claim it but

Siddhartha stopped him, much to the boy's annoyance. The cousin then received a lecture on the need for compassion and its role in easing the suffering of all beings.

An almost identical event takes place in Act One of *Parsifal*. A wounded swan falls to the ground and a knight draws an arrow from its breast. Parsifal is brought before Gurnemanz clutching his bow and arrows. He joyfully admits to his skill in hitting the swan in flight. Gurnemanz then impresses upon him the heartless nature of his action, and does so with such poignant effect that the remorseful Parsifal breaks his bow and hurls his arrows away. In this way he learns his first lesson in compassion – a lesson wonderfully evoked by the music.

Again, amongst the legends of the Buddha is the story of Mara, the tempter figure. Mara had used his armies and seductive daughters to try to defeat Siddhartha before he had achieved enlightenment, saying to his followers: "Look over there at that sage, clad in the armour of determination, with truth and spiritual virtue as his weapons.... So far he has not won the eye of full knowledge and is within my influence." But, continues the legend, Mara, his army and his daughters were defeated and fled in all directions – 'their rocks, logs and trees scattered everywhere'.

Parsifal, in the course of his wandering, encounters Klingsor with his knights and beguiling flower maidens. Klingsor says to Kundry: "Now today we have the most dangerous to meet; the shield of foolishness protects him.' The connections between Wagner's text and the Mara legend are clear. Parsifal overcomes the knights, resists the maidens, and recovers the holy spear when Klingsor hurls it at him. Miraculously, the spear remains poised above Parsifal's head. In the Buddhist legend, it was not a spear but a discus (some say a thunderbolt) that was thrown by Mara at the meditating Siddhartha. This missile was transformed into a canopy of flowers that remained suspended over the Buddha's head. Klingsor, like Mara, is defeated and, according to the stage directions, the castle sinks 'as if by an earthquake', and the garden withers to a desert.

Mara and his cohorts personify the destructive forces that lead to reincarnation - the suffering of many lives and many deaths. Siddhartha finds the way to end this cycle and thus overcomes Mara and all that he represents. Similarly, Klingsor and his cohorts personify the forces that lead to Kundry's reincarnation and *her* suffering of many lives and many deaths. Parsifal redeems Kundry from this fate by showing her the way to end the cycle of reincarnation for, as Klingsor had told her: "He that rejects you will set you free".

The scene between Parsifal and Kundry is the acme of operatic seductions. The beguiling, caressing line of Kundry's voice and the fragrant, intoxicating orchestration predate by decades Richard Strauss's soprano writing, for which they were models. Kundry, aided by Klingsor's magic, is obviously an expert in the seductive arts, and there are some wonderfully Freudian aspects to the seduction, which was of course drafted when Freud was just a small boy. Kundry awakens memories of his past, explaining that she had known him even before his birth and had given him the name chosen by his dying father. Then she strikes at his self-esteem by revealing how his mother, Herzeleide, had died, waiting for his return – 'sorrow broke her heart, and 'Heart's Sorrow' died.'

Predictably, Parsifal, is mortified by his own insensitivity. Stricken with guilt, he accuses himself of his sweet mother's murder. If only he could make amends! Kundry offers a way, for she brings (from his mother of course) a farewell kiss. Parsifal is intensely vulnerable. Their lips meet in a long kiss. Then he reacts with a gesture of utmost terror, clutching his heart as if trying to master an agonising pain. In a loud voice he cries out 'Amfortas! The wound! The wound!'

Some critics have suggested that Parsifal's rejection of Kundry reflects his lack of interest in the female sex but this is clearly not the case, for he describes in almost voyeuristic detail his inner vision of the seduction of Amfortas and is obviously experiencing passion because, as he says, 'everything trembles, quakes and quivers in sinful desire'.

In due course, Kundry says that, having laughed at the Saviour, she longs for redemption. Parsifal is just the one to provide it, and one hour is all that it will take! He replies that after

one hour together they would both be damned for evermore. Her redemption, for which he has been sent, comes from a very different source.

Then Parsifal asks to be shown the way to Amfortas, and Kundry erupts with fury and with a venom that suggests it is really Klingsor's voice that we are hearing through her: 'Let the fallen one perish ... he fell by his own spear!' This is hardly the Kundry who, in Act One, brought healing balsam from Arabia for Amfortas.

But the story doesn't end there. Kundry has been released from her suffering by the triumph of compassion over desire. It only remains for her to be reconciled to the one she had mocked in that former life. This is the point we have reached when the curtain rises on Act Three and the Good Friday meadow, which, of course, is where it all began.

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