Roger’s Labours: The Resonance of Psyche and Eros in *Outlander*

Dori Koehler, Ph.D.

**Slide One – Title with theme**

**Slide Two**

What I’m On About Today

If it’s true that myths and archetypes are alive and well and (as Barbra Streisand once said in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*) “living in my apartment,” then it’s also true that the material which constellates them is found in stories, most notably the stories that hook the soul of a culture and become wildly influential as mytho-cultural icons. These mythic icons are often present in the stories of popular culture. A popular story reaches into the collective soul, creating a shared narrative experience and allowing poignant symbols to rise.

With that in mind, let’s talk about Diana Gabaldon’s mind blowing series, *Outlander*. Any of you who know me, know that I’ve been obsessed with the alchemical power of this story for several years. I’ve written several blogs about this topic. To date, I’ve discussed the resonance of the myths of Eleusis, Jung’s concept of the sacred marriage, and the significance of this series as an erotic epic. Today I want to talk about how I see the resonance of the myth of Psyche and Eros alive in this story. What we see in *Outlander* is not a narrative retelling of the myth, but a living mosaic of the motifs related to it. And when myths are constellated, humans engage.

**Slide Three**

Let’s start with a pretty significant question: Who cares? Why is this series culturally relevant? Because stories are portals through which we actualize our lives. The more I study this particular one, the more I’m convinced it’s relevant because it occupies the mythic space of epic, a tradition central to human history with psychological heft that is currently (let’s just say) not appreciated as it should be, even though its everywhere in contemporary popular culture. Film franchises, book series’, video games, television series’ – all of these currently fulfil our need for epic.

*Outlander* has two main arms, the books and the television series. The main book series clocks in at over 6,500 pages. It spans literal time and space as there are eight books and 2 more in the wind. Book one (Outlander) was published in 1991 and book 8 (Written in my Own Heart’s Blood) in 2014. This New York Times best-selling series has sold 30 million + copies and been published in 42 countries.

The television series, championed as a huge success for Starz, is ostensibly responsible for bringing Starz to the table with industry heavy hitters. (Most notably, by creating a comparison between it and *Game of Thrones*.) Season 5 is currently in production with the promise of at least 6 seasons and possibly more. There have been People’s Choice Awards, Saturn Awards, Golden Globe and Emmy nominations and so many, MANY accolades/critiques for the way this series has tackled themes related to everything from the female gaze, PTSD, sexual violence/consent, war, genocide (Scots by the English), masculinity, sacrifice, honor, the horrors of American slavery, representation of this continent’s Native people, and the complexities that birthed the American Revolution. It’s presence on social media is unrivaled. I’m not exaggerating when I say that *Outlander* has the most passionate fandom in culture to date, second arguably only to *Star Wars*. It’s huge. For brevity and clarity though, I will stick to the particulars of the television series.

The series is also mythically epic, spanning some 30 years across two continents and the islands the “West Indies.” It focuses on two central relationships: Jamie and Claire Fraser – the sacred marriage from whom all other aspects of the story flow, and Roger and Brianna MacKenzie – the daughter and son-in-law of Jamie and Claire whose connection is equally deep if more easily shaken, at least early on. It features time travel, the presence of the paranormal, and most important for our purposes today, a kaleidoscopic presence of archetypal characters that rise to be viewed like messages from a Magic 8 Ball. But UNLIKE epics of the past these heroes are in the service to erotic love. They show the beauty of erotic connection as it grows and develops over the course of a lifetime. It continues the tradition of epic as narrative healer through a powerful dose of erotic narrative.

**Slide 4 –**

***A Short Primer on Psyche and Eros if necessary. Ask if it’s necessary. And look at the time.*** *The myth of Psyche and Eros can be found in The Golden Ass, a 2nd century novel by a writer named Apuleius – the only novel written in Latin to have survived in its entirety. It’s the story of a character named Lucius who in desiring to become a shape shifter, turns himself into a donkey before going on a journey to connect with Isis (a goddesses ruling over love, beauty, sexuality, and magic). This story comes about 1/3 of the way through the novel a tale within a tale, reminding us how important storytelling is to psychological transformation and wholeness. It tells the story of a young human woman, Psyche, who is cursed by Aphrodite to be sacrificed because humans have begun to worship her beauty. Aphrodite sends her son Eros to sacrifice Psyche to a monster. But Eros falls in love with her at first sight. Instead, he takes her home and marries her in secret – the only proviso being that she cannot see him. Psyche is convinced by her sisters that she MUST see him – that she must know what she is wed to.*

*Armed with a knife and lamp (symbols of knowledge) she goes to find Eros. When she comes across him, she sees the most beautiful man she has ever seen. As she admires him, she leans forward to gaze on him and a drop of oil falls out of his lamp. The burn wakes him and he flies away. Injured and betrayed, Eros flies home to his mother who sends a now pregnant Psyche out on a quest to fulfill four labors which, once completed allow her to reunite with Eros. She completes these labors and returns to Eros. Happy times. The end.*

This myth (the myth that explores the relationship between Love and the Soul or (etymologically speaking) the connection between the cosmic force that creates desire and the cosmic essence that creates breath is one of the most commonly analyzed myths in Depth Psychology. Freud to Jung to von Franz, to Campbell, and Hillman – the entire community has thoughts on it. These thoughts often feature discussion of gendered dichotomies. Although this kind of language can but useful, I find it more useful to take a nonbinary approach to the discussion of symbols and allow the energy to rise the way it manifests organically in characters. When we codify the stories we tell by gender, we restrict the mythic experience of the story, because archetypes transcend physical limitations; mythic roles shapeshift depending on the way characters relate to the archetypal energies they inhabit.

In *The Myth of Analysis*, James Hillman talks about the work of creativity as the work of the soul. When a story is alive with archetypal energy, it becomes a narrative cauldron that nurtures an alchemical process. This process is by nature erotic. It is driven by an impulse to create life. Roger is captivated by Brianna. BUT he is also initially captivated by his overwhelming experience of passion. To him, she is Eros. And if she is Eros, then he becomes Psyche. He tells himself a story – he creates a life for them – and kind of by accident, he doesn’t include her in the creation of the story. This is why projections are dangerous. They fascinate us and hold us within the confines of a myth. They become myopic. They stunt our growth.

**Slide 5 Projection**

As part of her narrative style, Diana Gabaldon uses what she calls “the rule of three” – this is tapping an archetypal narrative and layering it multiple times. As her character travel through the cyclical structure of the narrative, they relive that mythic dynamic, with each subsequent experience becoming more intense than the one before. This is the narrative path of Roger and Brianna. Until he is able to see through the projection he has created, (that is, until he does the labors of Psyche), their relationship remains stunted in conflict of his own making. This is present in three central motifs of the myth: the erotic gaze, the burn of betrayal, and the separation that triggers Psyche to complete Aphrodite’s labors.

**Slide 6 First Encounter**

The myth is activated the moment Roger sees Brianna for the first time in episode 213, Dragonfly in Amber. He’s grieving the loss of the only father he’s ever known, a liminal state which makes him particularly vulnerable to projection.

**Slide 7 First Encounter** (clip)

When Brianna flies home to Boston, he’s broken hearted. In season 3, he becomes convinced (like a dog with a bone) that if he helps Claire find her lost love Jamie, Brianna will love him back. He keeps trying to return to her, but it just doesn’t work in the way he expects – Brianna doesn’t respond with the certainty he expects.

**Slide 8 Second Encounter**

A second encounter with the myth occurs in episode 403, The False Bride when Roger flies to Boston to go attend a Scottish festival.

They meet at the airport (I know, wings, flying) and cannot take their eyes off each other. As they drive to North Carolina, (to a paradise on a mountaintop) they banter playfully. Brianna gazes back, telling him that “you’re pretty, even though you have ketchup on your cheek.” They attend the Scottish festival and he sings to her (a talent that was previously hidden). She’s captivated, and she invites him into her room, opening both of them up for an erotic encounter.

Convinced they are living the same story; he offers a question to Brianna (will you marry me). She hears his passionate pleas “I want you Brianna. I cannot say it anymore plainly than that… I want to have a home with you.” But she says no. She’s not ready. She has reservations that have nothing to do with him. But he can’t see that. He flies off the handle quipping “if you don’t care enough to marry me, then I don’t care enough to have you in my bed…” Ultimately, Brianna shows up at the ritual calling of the clans to try to explain that she needs more time. But their relationship has sustained an erotic burn that won’t be easily healed, and after a thwarted attempt to communicate, Brianna disappears.

**Slide 9 Third Encounter**

A third encounter with this myth is present in episode 408 (Willmington) when Roger and Briannas are reunited in 18th century North Carolina.

They gaze on each other with palpable adoration. She tells him she loves him, and they rush to be alone. They handfast in secret, not taking their eyes off each other the entire time, have a deeply intimate encounter, and then fight again almost immediately. This happens because Brianna learns that Roger withheld important information about her mother. Brianna quips, “you just wanted me to be happy so I’d marry you” and he replies “yes, pardon me for wanting you to be my wife, which, by the way ye are now, so perhaps you should listen to me.” At this point, they separate and begin their long, traumatic journey back to each other.

**Slide 10 The story of the Idiot Hut, or how Roger finally sees through his projection**

**Slide 11 The story of the Idiot Hut, or how Roger finally sees through his projection**

(clip) Ultimately, it isn’t until after months of living in the realness of the “idiot hut” that Roger finally comes to realize how much of what has happened Is his own fault. And for a minute, he thinks he doesn’t want it. Then he gets away. And as he does, as he hears the cries of his friend, he says to himself “There’s nothing you can do. Don’t be an idiot. Be smart. For once in your stupid idiotic life, be smart…” But he returns to end the suffering of his priest friend. What he learns is that true erotic connection will bring pain as often as it brings joy. But he knows what he wants. He realizes that he no longer wants to fight the inevitable messiness of true connection.

**Slide 12 Roger has learned who he really wants to be**

He submits to it, even if it means returning to the idiot hut. When he is rescued by Jamie and Claire and confronted with the facts of what has happened (Brianna’s rape, her pregnancy, and having to stay in the 18th century), he is forced to reflect more deeply than he has at any other time in the story. He chooses his desire to create life. He chooses Eros.

**Slide 13 Re-Visioning Connection**

He returns with the hard-won knowledge of who he really is, what he wants, and how he wants to love, and although Brianna’s story has gone another way, taken an equally painful turn, she makes the same choice.

**Slide 14 The End? Nope.**

Is this the end? Nope. It only gets messier and more painful from here on in for our poor Roger. So, I’ll end with the same question: why is this psychologically relevant? It’s relevant because figuring out our shit never goes out of style. Learning how to connect – with our own desires, with the messy process of falling in love with our own souls and with the labor of intimacy never goes out of style. And guess what: the lesson that comes from Roger and the tale of the idiot hut is that it’s not going to be what you think it’s going to be. It won’t be the story you’ve told yourself. And it’s not going to end where you think it’s going to end. But, as Brené Brown tells us in her recent Netflix special, life’s only worth it if we get into the arena and start allowing love to knock us down. That is the resonance of the myth of Psyche and Eros in *Outlander*. Roger Mac’s love for Brianna teaches us that true intimacy requires a willingness to engage the labors of Psyche -- it requires that we learn to make peace with our time in the idiot hut.

**Slide 15 You might want to read…**