

Viscum Album—Magical Plant of Complexity and Paradox

Part II: The Symbolic Realm of Mistletoe

Jane Tara Cicchetti¹

¹United States

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Address for correspondence Jane Tara Cicchetti, CCH, 26 Springwood Drive, Asheville North Carolina 28805, United States 828-628-6715
www.janecicchetti.com

Abstract

Keywords

- ▶ Viscum album
- ▶ Myth
- ▶ Aeneas and the Golden Bough
- ▶ The death of Baldr
- ▶ C.G. Jung
- ▶ Cancer
- ▶ Shadow brother
- ▶ Key to the psyche
- ▶ Danger and denial
- ▶ Dreams

This article explores myths associated with mistletoe for the purpose of revealing the hidden meaning of the little understood remedy, *Viscum album*. The role of myth in expressing unconscious processes is described. The author brings to light the parallel between what is already known about the remedy and the themes of the myths, which include journeying into the depths of the psyche, immaturity and dependence, as well as the presence of a dangerous aspect of the psyche that Jung called the ‘shadow brother’. A case treated by mistletoe as well as indications and themes of *Viscum album* are included.

Part I of this article covers the ancient view of mistletoe, its natural history, along with Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophic perspective of the plant, and the homeopathic provings and clinical information available to us. I also described a dream proving that gave some hints about the essence *Viscum album*. Part II looks more deeply into myths associated with the mistletoe to see whether they reveal ideas that will lead toward a deeper understanding of *Viscum album* as a homeopathic remedy.

About Myth

Myth and other stories, such as fairy tales that are passed down through the ages, arise out of the imagination and give expression to unconscious processes.

Often, a myth will reveal a theme that is relevant to a society at a particular time, but many express a central idea that is universal to humanity at any age. There are also those that contain a universal theme and are related to the *zeitgeist*

of the time in which we live. Such are the following myths of the mistletoe.

In researching the mythology of mistletoe, there were not one but two myths that contain essential clues to understanding this paradoxical plant. As nothing is simple about *Viscum album*, it stands to reason that one myth would not cover the whole story. I suspect there is much more to be revealed. But for now, the two myths we will explore include *Aeneas and the Golden Bough* and the *Death of Balder*.

Aeneas and the Golden Bough

The mistletoe appears as the Golden Bough in Virgil’s epic poem, the ‘Aeneid’. In this famous passage, Virgil’s courageous hero Aeneas is told by his dead father that he must travel to the underworld to meet with him to retrieve knowledge of what the future holds for his people. But Aeneas must first consult with an oracle that will lead him to the land of the dead.

As it is not usual for someone to visit the land of the dead and return to the land of the living, the oracle tells him he must first find the Golden Bough, a sacred branch with golden leaves. This will lead him safely through the underworld and enable his return.

Aeneas begins his search for the golden branch that will serve as his guide. As he enters the forest, the number of trees and the difficulty of finding the right tree overwhelm him, but two doves lead him to an oak tree that holds the brilliant golden bough. He takes the branch and returns to the oracle and together they make their way into the underworld.

Once in the world of the dead, Aeneas sees many frightening sights, including the shades or ghosts of restless souls who have not received proper burial, the ghosts of dead babies and the terrifying world where horrible sinners live in eternal torture. Finally, he reaches Elysium where heroes go to rest, and finds his father. His father shows him the ghosts of the heroes who will be reincarnated and become the future heroes of the Roman Empire.

Having fulfilled their mission, with the help of the Golden Bough, Aeneas and the oracle return to the land of the living.^a

The Death of Baldur

Baldur, son of Odin and Frigga, was one of the most beautiful of the gods. Known as Baldur the Good, the god of light and beauty, he was admired by all in the kingdom of the gods.

One day this beautiful young god began to have terrible nightmares that prophesied his murder. This greatly concerned his mother. To protect her beloved son, she travelled near and far, asking all living things, to pledge to never harm her son. The earth, the plants, stones, metals, birds and beasts, as well as all creeping things and poisons agreed that they would never harm him.

The populous rejoiced, seeing that their beloved Baldur was safe. And, to honour his invincibility, they hurled swords, axes and stones at him. Everyone was delighted at the fact that nothing could touch him, except Loki, the shape-shifting god of evil and strife.

In the guise of an old woman, Loki went to visit Frigga at her home. There, he was able to get her to confide in him and reveal that, yes, all beings had agreed to never harm Baldur. That is except one little, weak, harmless plant, the mistletoe.

As soon as Loki heard this, he skittered away in search of the mistletoe. Finding the small plant growing in a tree, he cut a piece and made it into an arrow and returned to where the gods were honouring Baldur. He convinced a blind man to shoot the mistletoe arrow at Baldur. The arrow, rather than being magically deflected, pierced the young god through and through and he fell to the ground, lifeless.

The gods were stunned, horrified, and filled with grief. They all vowed to find the perpetrator of this terrible crime and bring him to justice. Frigga asked that, in return for all of her love and goodwill, someone would volunteer to journey to Hel and offer Hela, mistress of the underworld, a ransom to return Baldur to life.

^a Retold by the author from various sources.

Hermod, the brother of Baldur, agreed and rode Odin's magical eight-legged horse to Hela's palace in the underworld. Arriving at the palace, he found Baldur, seated at a place of honour in the great hall and appealed to Hela to allow Baldur to return to his homeland alive. He told her that all beings in the world love Baldur and are weeping at his demise.

Hela agreed to return him to life, but first, it must be proven that all beings grieve at his death. Therefore, she insisted, all beings in the world, both living and lifeless must weep for him. But if anyone spoke against him or refuses to weep for him, Baldur would remain with the dead in Hel.

Hermod returned bearing the news of what was to be done to save their beloved young god. On hearing the news, the gods sent messengers all over the world, begging everyone to weep for Baldur. All beings began to weep; all men, stones, plants, trees and metals wept. Except for one old hag (who many think may have been Loki in disguise) who refused saying: 'Let Hela keep her own'.

Therefore, Baldur was prevented from returning to life. With much grief and sorrow, the gods placed his beautiful body on a funeral pyre. All grieved after the death of Baldur and many again vowed to avenge his death.

The evil Loki, seeing how angry the gods were, fled to the mountains to hide. But Odin found him in his hiding place and, with an army of gods, came to take him prisoner. Loki changed himself into a salmon and hid among the stones in a nearby stream. The gods, knowing the shape shifter's way, took a fishing net and caught him. They tied him in chains and placed a serpent over his head, whose venom fell drop by drop onto Loki. The venom makes him scream and twist his body so violently that the whole earth shakes, creating what we now call earthquakes.^b

Relationship of the Myths to the Remedy

Journeying to the Depths of the Psyche

When we look at the stories, it is easy to get distracted by the outside events. But myth is describing an internal process going on within the psyche of an individual. Keeping this in mind, we see that both stories have a central theme of going underground, into the world of the dead. In the language of myth and dreams, journeying to the underground is symbolic of moving deep into the psyche to retrieve that, which has been locked in the unconscious, shadow energy.

Aeneas must visit this world to retrieve knowledge from his father. Although he sees many frightening things in this hell-like realm, he is successful in his journey and returns to earth with the help of the mistletoe. Aeneas makes the journey consciously. He seeks out the Sybil and she helps him find the mistletoe, which acts as a guide to assist him in his safe return.

Baldur, however, dies from the wound caused by the mistletoe, descends into the land of the dead and is unable to be retrieved. He is completely passive and dependent on the actions of his mother. His descent is his death. That which assists Aeneas in the form of the mistletoe is responsible for

^b Retold by the author from various sources.

Baldur's demise. If we are to relate this theme of going underground to the remedy, we can surmise that the remedy would be useful for an individual who must necessarily make this journey into his or her shadow and retrieve what is needed for their survival.

Immaturity and Dependence

As the mistletoe grows on a tree and is dependent on the tree, the individual who needs mistletoe is dependent on the mother. If the tree dies, the mistletoe dies; if the mother dies, often the man dies. Baldur represents the eternal child, the *puer aeternus*, who remains dependent on the mother. This is the child person, the one who refuses to grow up, the eternal Peter Pan. He has no roots in the world.

'The mistletoe, like Baldur, represents the child of the mother, the longed-for, revived life-force that flows from her. But separated from its host, the mistletoe dies.'^c

The individual needing *Viscum album* is unable to act in his or her best interest and is headed for destruction. But why would the mistletoe, which represents the qualities of Baldur, also serve as his executioner? Jung addresses just this question and further defines what the mother/tree represents within the psyche.

The Shadow becomes Fatal

'But, why should the mistletoe kill Baldur, since it is in a sense, his sister or brother? The lovely apparition of the *puer aeternus* is, alas, a form of illusion. In reality he is a parasite on the mother, a creature of her imagination, who only lives when rooted in the maternal body. In actual psychic experience the mother corresponds to the collective unconscious, and the son to consciousness, which fancies itself free but must ever again submit to the power of sleep and deadening unconsciousness. The mistletoe, however, represents the shadow brother'.^d

The *shadow brother*, according to Jung, is a split-off part of the unconscious that acts against the individual's will and overrides the ego. A well-developed ego that can relate to the contents of the unconscious without identifying with them is necessary for mature development. For full psychic unfolding, it is also necessary to respect and allow for the unconscious aspect of the psyche without being overwhelmed by its vastness. This is the balance of *logos* and *mythos*, masculine and feminine, necessary for a mature state of being.

The myth of *Aeneas and the Golden Bough* represents this mature state. Here, the hero has the strength, vitality and consciousness to utilise the life force of the mistletoe. He has the strength to allow it to act as a guide between his conscious awareness, *logos*, and *mythos*, the world of the collective unconscious. Therefore, he is able to travel into the unconscious depths of the psyche and return intact. On the other hand, the passive and dependent Baldur does not have 'the right stuff' and the mistletoe becomes the 'shadow brother'. That which in a mature individual acts as the connection

between the conscious state and the unconscious becomes the destructive shadow, that is, the *shadow brother*.

'The shadow becomes fatal when there is too little vitality or too little consciousness in the hero for him to complete his heroic task.'^e

Viscum album represents the inability to create balance between the ego and the unconscious between *logos* and *mythos*. Because the sense of self is not strong enough, rather than utilising the wisdom contained in the collective unconscious, the life force of the individual is held hostage by the deadening unconsciousness inherent within it.

A Very Dangerous Situation with Denial

Viscum album is a remedy for a person who is in a very dangerous situation, both emotionally and physically, and is in denial. We see Baldur being assailed by all kind of weapons and he and his community exalt in his invincibility. This is exceedingly unwise as danger and evil exists in the world. It is a denial of the shadow. There is a loss of contact with the polarities of good and evil, life and death, existent within life. The story tells us that denial exists not only in the individual but also in society at large. Such is the case with addictions, where the individual won't admit to their problem and their family and those around them enable them to continue this dangerous life style. We also see this dynamic in severe chronic disease, in which indiscriminately used toxic or ineffective treatments are making things worse, and there is the delusion that they will help.

A Case of Viscum Album

February 2006, a 54-year-old woman with history of ductal carcinoma that had become invasive.

Many homeopaths and other holistic therapists had previously treated her.

1997—lumpectomy. No lymph involvement. No radiation.

1999—recurrence in the same breast. Had mastectomy and chemotherapy.

She has had no recurrence, but she now feels unmotivated and undirected.

- Lack of clarity
- Feels untethered—'like a little satellite orbiting the earth'
- 'I need to excavate my interior—the foundation, even if the house falls down'
- Great fear of doing things wrong
- 'My life is about helping others'
- 'I've always been a conventional thinker'
- 'God seems judgmental and vindictive to me'
- 'Pleasure is not good, (my mother and grandmother were like that too)'
- Dream—'I'm a little satellite, untethered'

Her analysis: It was a nightmare. Then, when I was 30, I had hypnosis and I had a feeling that was like this dream. I was in

^c Jung CG. *Collected Works 5, Symbols of Transformation*, (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 1956) 258.

^d Jung CG. *Collected Works 5, Symbols of Transformation*, (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 1956) 259.

^e Jung CG. *Collected Works 5, Symbols of Transformation*, (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 1956) 259 (I have also included a review of the themes and a list of "consider remedy for". These should be placed as boxed inserts along with part 2).

the chair but I was floating, not in my body. Dream—outer space (a kind of emptiness). Not only floating, but in this void.

When asked what the dream means to her, she replies, 'Freedom comes to mind. I've always been a conventional thinker. During massage I can go into this space of floating nothingness. There's a void that is dark and scary and one that is warm and peaceful'.

A recurrent dream from childhood—'I am sick with a fever and I try to explain this to my mother but she couldn't understand.

My Analysis

The feeling is where do I belong to? Where do I fit in?

She is working very hard to find herself, but when she looks inward, all she sees is a void. This is the cause of great frustration to her.

Family History

Mother died age 91—congestive heart failure.

Father died age 77—emphysema; had heart murmur after rheumatic fever.

Childhood (My Summary)

She danced a lot and took dance and piano lessons.

'Dad was my favourite parent. He owned his own business. He was very likeable and gregarious'.

Mother—She describes her mom as sensible, matter of fact. 'Not a cookie baking, motherly, nurturing mom'.

First remedy given is *Conium maculatum* 200C one dose.

After the remedy she feels much better—more motivated and energised.

She is still looking for the right place to put that energy. She feels much lighter.

'I've had the experience of understanding "souls path". That self-deprecating voice is still there but not as loud'.

Remedy: *Conium maculatum* LM2 once a day.

She returns in 5 months. She is still dealing with the interior void, the relentless and futile searching.

The remedy given is *Lapis lazuli* 200C, which doesn't help.

Follow-up on July 2008

She has had a recurrence of the cancer. There is a large tumour in the right ovary and she has had a complete hysterectomy. After postsurgery recovery I retake the case and see that the central issue of not being able to reach her inner being has not been changed. All she perceives of her interior self is a void.

Repertorisation doesn't reveal any decisive remedy, but *Viscum album* comes up in the list. After researching the remedy, I decide on *Viscum album* 200C one dose.

Follow-up on May 2014

Six years since first dose of *Viscum album*, she has returned approximately once a year since that time. We repeat the remedy occasionally going from 200C to 10M. She has been very well and has felt satisfied in her goal of helping others. She's been working in hospice and seems very at ease with herself, confident and centred. She remains physically healthy. Her inner world feels full and rich to her, and there is no mention of an inner void.

The Remedy Picture of Viscum Album

The individual who will benefit from mistletoe is one who is incapable of reaching into their deepest essence. On the surface, this presents itself as frustration, and a feeling of separation from who they truly are. For the homeopath, this is also a frustrating situation as there are very few obvious symptoms and there is deep pathology, especially cancer. Seemingly well-indicated remedies work for a short while, followed by relapses. If one studies the case carefully, it becomes obvious that the essence of the problem has not been changed at all. The individual continues to suffer from a separation from his or her inner core. The feeling is as if the inner core only exists as a distant and unreachable possibility. In other cases, there is absolutely no ability or desire for true introspection.

Also, like the mistletoe, which grows far from the earth and is a parasite on a tree, the mistletoe subject is ungrounded, separated from the earth and totally dependent on the tree mother. The parasitic dependence of the plant on the tree can be likened to the psychic state of being overwhelmed by the mother complex. This results in the inability to mature as an individual. From a Jungian perspective it is the state of the *puer* (or *puella* in the case of a woman), the state of never growing up, the eternal Peter Pan, floating, flying from one idea to another, but never becoming grounded in the soul essence.

Even though large amounts of psychic energy are lost to the conscious mind, this energy still plays a powerful role in the life of the individual. It may become, as in the story of Baldur, the implement of death as it forms what Jung called the *shadow brother*.

The shadow brother may become a split-off separate self with qualities that are dangerous or even evil. Like the doppelganger, or evil double, this dangerous shadow self is capable of acts that can lead to destruction. The tendency for so many bright, creative and famous artists and musicians to self-destruct may be due to this phenomenon. Certainly not all these tragic cases are in need of *Viscum album*, but because their plight is often more public, it reveals much of the paradox inherent within those needing mistletoe.

Alexander McQueen, the brilliant fashion designer, comes to mind. Designer to celebrities, *infant terrible* of the fashion world, McQueen was described as a leading light of creativity in fashion. At age 40, he committed suicide by hanging himself, shocking the fashion and social world. What is particularly profound is that his suicide occurred only 9 days after the death of his mother and on the day of her funeral. Like the mistletoe that is dependent on the host tree for its sustenance, he could not live without his mother.

Whether the *Viscum album* state presents itself as the glamorous form of the self-destructive creative genius, or as more commonly seen, a state of stasis and weariness, the danger is still there. It is a precarious situation where the destructiveness can move inwards into deep malignant disease or outwards towards dangerous addictions, life-threatening, risky behaviour, and ultimately, suicide.

What is consistent, no matter what the superficial presentation, is that the state requiring mistletoe is one of ungrounded disconnection from the earthly environment and from the core

of the self. It is a life-threatening state of great suffering. However, as in the myth of *Aeneas and the Golden Bough*, Viscum album is a remedy that has the ability to alter this terrible state. It can be the key that unlocks entry into the psyche, helping the

individual retrieve previously buried creative forces and transition into a dynamic state of wholeness.

An overview of themes and symbols of Viscum album is given in ►Fig. 1. For possible indications, see ►Fig. 2.

<p>Hidden Nature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The essence of the remedy is hidden from the patient and the therapist - Unending maze of symptoms and ideas <p>Ungrounded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vertigo, light headed - Floating in air - No central core - Sky burial <p>Key to the Psyche</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening up access to the inner world, which was previously inaccessible - Gaining wisdom from crises <p>Immaturity and Dependence on the Mother</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Childishness - Puer/puella, Peter Pan - Floating and flying from one idea to another - Stunted 'metamorphosis' - Relapses after death or illness of the mother or mother surrogate <p>Denial of Danger</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A life threatening illness or addiction with denial - Passive attitude - Destructive behaviour - Family and societal denial of consequences to behaviours <p>The Shadow Brother</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Part of the unconscious splits-off and has a life of its own - The shadow becomes self-sabotaging and life threatening - Doppelganger/evil double - Destructive behaviour <p>Dreams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sky burial - Dangerous animals in deep water—crocodiles, snakes - Journeying under the earth - War, air attacks - Children in dangerous situations - Satellite orbiting the earth - Floating in a void

Fig. 1 Themes and symbols of Viscum album.

<p>Cancer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weakness and debility, loss of enthusiasm for life after chemotherapy or radiation - Loss of sense of self after chemotherapy or radiation - Difficulty making decisions about treatment <p>Rheumatic Complaints</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Looks like Rhus toxicodendron, Bryonia, Rhododendron and Spigelia - Rheumatic joint pain with vertigo - Asthma with gout or rheumatism <p>Neurologic Disease</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seizures, with grimaces, twitches, - Constant agitation, inability to sit still - Fine motor skill problems - Possibly ADHD - <i>Solanaceae, Cuprum metallicum, Agaricus, Zincum metallicum or Ignatia</i> (seem indicated but fail to work) <p>Cardiac Problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional aetiology - Rhythmic changes due to emotional stress <p>Addictions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alcoholism, drug addictions with denial - Inability for introspection - Relapses after illness or death of the mother

Fig. 2 Indications for Viscum album. ADHD, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.