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He Scars of Yggdrasill: A Comparative Study of the Conflict Between Selected Familial Relationships and the Will to Power in Richard Wagner's Der Ring Des Nibelungen

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The Scars of Yggdrasil:

A Comparative Study of the Conflict Between Selected Familial

Relationships and the Will to Power in Richard Wagner's

Der Ring des Nibelungen

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the conflict between power, politics and family relationships in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Selected familial relationships between characters will be analyzed using various methods, including Jungian analysis, comparative mythology and musical analysis. The project will attempt to show that interpretations of the Ring have not given enough attention to the tension and paradoxes inherent in family relationships in Wagner's tetralogy and will provide for a more human understanding of the cycle.

INTRODUCTION

“Axe-time, sword-time, shields are sundered, wind-time, wolf-time, ere the world falls.”¹

This quote from the Icelandic *Edda*, the source poetry for much of Teutonic myth, describes accurately the aura of great events that surround Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Richard Wagner had a great belief in the power of myth. He believed that myth was timeless and the conflicts that myth highlighted would be applicable to any age or situation. Part of what makes myth attractive to those who wish to interpret their own times is in the inherent flexibility of myth.

The most obvious difficulty in pursuing research about *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is the sheer size of the work itself. The four operas span sixteen to seventeen hours of stage time, and historically the writing of the work took up the larger part of Wagner’s professional life. To facilitate understanding I suggest reading one of the published synopses of the Ring.² Wagner wrote the poem *Siegfried’s Tod* (what we now think of as *Götterdämmerung*) first and expanded the poem backwards to create the other three operas. The music, in contrast, was written in performance order. This fact makes the identification of style and period more difficult than in other composers’ works.

Although it is difficult to take on such a large subject in such a short format, it is necessary. Richard Wagner believed in changing the world of art by incorporating all of the art forms into the music drama equally. This combining all of the art forms is called *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

To discuss Wagner’s work requires a breadth of inquiry from art to politics, and from myth to philosophy. He sought to create a new myth for the modern man.

Much of the scholarship devoted to Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* has focused on political interpretations. It is easy to see why socio-political criticism has taken center stage in our attempts to understand Wagner’s epic. Wagner himself was very active politically, both by means of the pen and in person, as in the aborted Dresden revolution. In Saxony in the year 1849 there was a violent uprising against the

¹ Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, *Edda, a Collection of Essays* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 62.

² For readers unfamiliar with the plot of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the author suggests reading one of the many published synopses of the cycle, such as Gustav Kobbe’s *The New Complete Opera Book*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976.

government that called for greater personal freedoms and a unified German state. Wagner played an active role, and after the rebellion was crushed, he had to flee to Switzerland.

The first and perhaps most important large scale critique of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to appear in English was George Bernard Shaw's Marxist interpretation, "The Perfect Wagnerite". Shaw sees Alberich, for example, as driving his brother Mime into slavery, like a robber baron. Other famous critiques, from post-modernist, feminist, and Jungian perspectives, are worthy of study and will be cited in this work.

"they never see him, any more than the victims of our 'dangerous trades' ever see the shareholders whose power is nevertheless everywhere..."³

So Shaw wrote of Alberich, as he used the Nibelungs to wrest the gold from the mines of Nibelheim. It is not the purpose of this paper to prove Shaw or any other critique right or wrong, but to use their work as a springboard to a slightly different point of view.

Richard Wagner used the 13th-century *Nibelungen Lied* as the basis for his epic work. This study, however, will refer most often to the older sources for the Nibelung story, the 11th-century *Edda* from Iceland. The stories that make up the *Edda* are much older than the 11th century, when they were compiled by a Christian convert named Snorri Sturleson. Using the *Edda* for comparative purposes will help show the timeless nature of myth. Also, the blunt, crisp text of the *Edda* is a contrast to the turgid prose of Wagner.

Other interpretations will be used in this comparative study. Jungian archetypes, postmodernism and comparative mythologies such as in the works of Robert Donington, Joseph Campbell, Mary Cicora and Jean Shinoda Bolen are central to the comparative analysis in this paper, which will focus on the family relationships in Wagner's music drama. The purpose of this project is to investigate the conflict and confluence of family and power within specific relationships in Wagner's Ring. The familial conflict nature of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* has not been explored in quite this manner. By focusing on family relationships, we can better understand the deconstruction of the cycle as it takes place.

³ Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite* (New York: Brentano's, 1929), 10.

The father/daughter relationship, as seen in Wotan/Brünnhilde, has the contrasts of Love and Control, Pride and Envy, Earnestness and Rebellion. The father/son relationship type has three examples in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The Wotan/Siegfried and Alberich/Hagen relationships are two sides of the same coin, as is explicit in the text of the operas. The Wotan/Siegmond relationship is more complex and deserves closer attention than it has received. The symbolic nature of the roles that the characters play will be explored, as well as musical and philosophical meaning in the family relationships. It is evident that there will be some overlap of material and analysis as the relationships and the narrative intertwine. Although every attempt to maintain chronological order will be made, in a work as self-referential as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* it is not always possible.

It is important to use psychoanalytic tools to study the creations of Wagner in order to understand the deeper meanings. It might seem that we are taking a twentieth-century approach to a nineteenth-century work, but that is only partially true. We must remember that Wagner was deeply interested in philosophy, both its history and its modern advancements. One can make a case that nineteenth-century philosophy and early psychiatric models have the same roots.

The methodology of this project will be to examine a number of the important relationships in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* using a variety of approaches to understand the impact of power on family ties. Each selected relationship will undergo the same steps of analysis to facilitate clarity in the project. The relationships outlined above will be explored from the perspective of comparative mythology, psychoanalytic theory, musical setting and textual relationship to the original Icelandic poems that were the source for the *Nibelungen Lied*, the *Edda*.

One of the difficult things to follow in this epic is the amount of important information that is not acted out on stage, but merely explained by a third party at a later date. The most important of these left hand events is Wotan's cutting a branch of the world tree, Yggdrasill to create his symbol of power, the spear sometimes called Gungnir. Wotan used the spear to bind contracts by carving the runes he learned at the well of wisdom on the weapon. These runes cemented his power by binding others into treaties with him by force of law. When Wotan took the branch from the world tree, it left a

wound that would not heal. The tree began to fade and the water in the well began to run dry. All this takes place long before *Das Rheingold*, yet is only explained by the Norns in the prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, the final installment of Wagner's epic work. The theme of nature being distorted by political action is present throughout the entire work. But it is the premise of this project that the conflict within familial relationships is as important a mover of events as the political action.

The original sin of Wotan's cutting of the world tree Yggdrasill for his spear before *Das Rheingold* begins is the black root of corruption that runs through the entire work. The world tree connects all of creation in one family. This sin is partially hidden in the Ring, and like many of the true problems any family has it is not spoken of. All of the family conflict one can see in the Ring (Father against Daughter, Husband against Wife, Father against Son) can be seen in the context of Wotan's symbol of worldly power ripped out of the tree of life. The stress between the individuals' power role and their familial role is in the forefront throughout *Der Ring des Nibelungen* for the viewer who is looking for it. The pathologies created by poor decisions are carried down from generation to generation, like the abused son who becomes the abusive father. The destruction of the world and Valhalla at the end of the cycle can be seen in context of that very tension. The hermeneutics of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* are a study of the family and its failures.

CHAPTER I

THINKING OUTSIDE THE RING-WOTAN'S GREAT IDEA

In this chapter we will explore the Great Idea, the plan Wotan conceives of at the end of *Das Rheingold* to retake the ring without breaking his own oaths. We will also investigate Wotan's mindset and actions in carrying out his plan.

"To Kurnugi land of no return, Ishtar daughter of Sin was to go, To the dark house, to the house which those who enter cannot leave."⁴

This passage from Mesopotamian myth, describing Ishtar (or Innana) descending into the underworld, has universal resonance. The idea of going down into peril or death to gain wisdom, often in the form of a resurrection, is a common one in mythology. The person or god making the descent is searching for something outside the ordinary consciousness, necessitating a walk into the dark side of the ego. To leave the maya, the illusory outer world, and try to find something new and greater is dangerous indeed. Often this is portrayed as a feminine event, either the searcher or what is being searched for. Near the end of *Das Rheingold*, Wotan prepares to go down into the earth to seek out the ancient earth goddess Erda.

"Wagner's Erda is an omniscient goddess slumbering in the earth,...however the theme of the sleeping earth mother goes back to even older sources."⁵

Following the prophecy of Erda and the murder of Fasolt, Wotan stands at a crossroads. Erda had told Wotan shortly before this moment in *Das Rheingold* that to keep the magic ring was to bring the end of all things. He has reached a moment of triumph, but the future looks dim for those who understand. Wotan's great fortress, Valhall, is his and the goddess of youth Freia has been freed of her bondage to the giants. The destructive ring is in the hands of the giant Fafner, who does not intend world domination.⁶ It would seem, here at the end of *Das Rheingold*, that the sky-god has come through as the winner of the narrative. However, as the one who carves the runes, Wotan understands what the other gods, particularly Fricka, do not. Wotan understands that he is trapped. What he has given, the ring, he cannot take back. Yet to leave the ultimate

⁴ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 155.

⁵ Susanne Vill, "Aspects of Erda: Mythical sources and operatic treatment of the Character in Wagner's Ring," *Wagner* Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2002): 18.

⁶ Kobbe, 271, 272.

weapon in the hands of the murderous but stupid Fafner creates the risk of having the ring come back to Alberich. Therefore, Wotan needs a plan that goes outside of his binding promises. It is the shocking appearance of Erda, with her dire prophecies that has started Wotan down this road. Her warning of the end of all things, “*das Ende*,” if Wotan keeps the ring forces Wotan to plot further.

Why would Wotan choose to recount the activity of the day leading up to the great idea? It is to reeducate the audience in the necessity of his actions. Without the impetus of an external threat the gods can merely cross the rainbow bridge and rule happily ever after. The retelling of the story of *Das Rheingold* in this short allegory cements Wotan in his role of leader and confronter of problems. Dramatically, the recapitulation of events clears the tension, and allows for focus on the real problem that will be highlighted soon by the cries of the Rhine maidens.

“...Wotan receives a sudden inspiration. In the stage directions, Wagner describes the god as struck by a “great idea”. At that precise moment, the sword motif is heard for the first time...”⁷

(See musical example 1 in Appendix B.)

Consider for a moment that the “Great Idea” is perhaps the happiest moment of the entire Ring for Wotan. He has come through the trials of Nibelheim and dealt with the giants. Wotan’s castle stands gleaming before him and what do his thoughts turn to? He plots to gain more power by breeding heroes. Wotan is at his best when plotting manipulation of others in the abstract, rather than dealing with them face to face. It is an interesting look into the thought processes of Wotan.

“Psychologically, ‘Loge’ is no longer an outside influence but is instead a devious way of thinking Wotan does himself.”⁸

Like a crooked lawyer Wotan tries to find a loophole in the laws cut into his own symbol of power. It is admirable however, that Wotan constantly rejects what Herz⁹ calls the “Donner approach”: just smash what is bothering you with your hammer. Twice during *Das Rheingold* Wotan restrains Donner from bloodshed, trying to find a way out with

⁷ Jeffrey L. Buller, “The Messianic hero in Wagner’s Ring,” *The opera quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter 1995-1996): 22.

⁸ Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., *Ring of Power: The Abandoned Child, the Authoritarian Father, and the Disempowered Feminine: A Jungian Understanding of Wagner’s Ring Cycle* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 64.

⁹ Joachim Herz, “The figure and fate of Wotan in Wagner’s Ring”, *Wagner* Vol. 15, No. 2 (May 1994):91.

words rather than blows. This diplomatic approach is in direct opposition to the old stories, where Donner's hammer falls, and giants die without a word from the all-father.

Wotan needs a way around his "original sin," the cutting of the world tree, Yggdrasil, for his spear. The forging of the ring and the crimes committed for it can be seen as extensions of the first felony. The treaties written on the spear he illegally cut from the tree, binds Wotan to the world in an unhealthy manner. Today we would call Wotan's relationship with the world he says he rules a codependent one.

To go on a wisdom-seeking journey is an accepted part of occult lore. Sometimes called a walk-about, the journey is supposed to result in a deepening of self-awareness. The transformed person then comes back to his original place and shares the new wisdom.

"There is the figure, furthermore, of Othin (Woden, Wotan), self-crucified on the World Ash as an offering to himself, to gain the occult wisdom of those runes."¹⁰

One of Wotan's incarnations is that of the wise hermit. He plays this part in the land of men frequently, traveling as an old man, the Wanderer. This is Wotan's objective, "scientific" pose, but it is still a pose. Wotan merely uses the guise to get what he wants. The wise man archetype is easily recognizable in Jung, a seeker of hidden knowledge, with a dark shadow, usually magic, around him. When Wotan wants to descend to Erda, to gain that Wala's knowledge, he is thinking in that incarnation, ruthless and single-minded. Erda, the earth mother, represents ancient wisdom. Her daughters, the three Norns who spin out the thread of fate, tell the unknown things the audience needs to understand in *Götterdämmerung*.

"...and this primeval force of creation links her with Gaia from the Greek mythology, with which Wagner was very familiar."¹¹

Wotan, who hung himself on the world tree and gave up one of his eyes for wisdom, wants to descend to earth and learn from Erda. Wotan wishes to transform that with which he comes in contact, resulting in the Valkyries. By intending to make the encounter with Erda a sexual one, which results in the birth of the shield maidens, as well as a mystical one, Wotan wishes to regain control over what has gone out of control.

¹⁰ Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 111.

¹¹ Vill, 20.

In the third act of *Siegfried* Wotan calls up Erda from the earth to question her.¹² His song and spell are one in the same. The cry of “wake, wake you witch, awaken” three times foreshadows the triple “schläfts du mein Sohn?” of Alberich to Hagen. The spell song works, and Erda rises from sleep but does not understand what is happening. The world has changed, her child Brünnhilde has been cast out of divinity and she does not recognize the Wanderer as Wotan. That Erda cannot see the sky god, her former lover, for what he is suggests that he is not what he was. Wotan’s power and authority seem to have deserted him. Erda cannot answer Wotan’s questions so he sends her back to sleep in the earth, the “endless sleep” of death.

“What happened to master of the universe?...In fact, one might argue that the Nibelungs curse always works a lot better than the power of the ring ever does.”¹³

Does the ring actually work as advertised, or has Wotan endangered the whole world for a hoax? In *Das Rheingold* Alberich the Nibelung renounces love to gain the power to forge a world dominating ring. Later in the same opera, Alberich curses the ring itself after Wotan forcibly takes it from him. The act of rejecting love that Alberich makes in forging the ring seems like alchemy, a striving for a philosopher’s stone that is always out of reach. Wotan, though he believes in both the ring and its curse, decides to go outside the rules to try to win. This circumvention recalls the apocryphal story of the Gordian knot. In ancient times in the near east it was a knot that no man could untie. Alexander the great was passing through this unnamed area on his way to conquest and a wise man presented him the knot for challenge. Alexander looked at the knot, drew his sword and cut it in half. This linear thinking worked for Alexander, but brought tragedy for Wotan.

Wotan sees his children as property. They are expected to fulfill his wishes, like soldiers. Wotan’s children fall into the category, in his mind, of things that can be used to his advantage. Wotan is somewhat blind to all relationships. He sees others as tools like his spear or castle, following his orders to further his power.

Wotan is deluding himself when he believes his great idea will solve the problems he himself has set into motion. There is a pattern in Wotan’s behavior of self-delusion.

¹² Kobbe, 297.

¹³ Robert Cumbow, “The ring is a fraud: self, totem and myth in Der Ring des Nibelungen,” *The opera quarterly* USA Vol. I/1 (Spring 1983): 113.

The construction of Valhall, with the price being Freia, is a prime example. Wotan deludes himself that Loge will fix the problem he has created. When Wotan cut the world tree for his ruling symbol, he believed his new world of laws would replace the old, natural one. Wotan's final acceptance of doom for the gods is understandable, the odds eventually become too much. But his cutting down of the world tree to provide kindling for the burning of Valhall is not understandable, it is madness and suicide.

The Rhine maidens, nature's creatures, beg for Wotan to return the Rheingold to them at the end of the first opera. Wotan scorns them and tells Loge to silence them. Once again, Wotan has rejected nature's plan for the gamble of his imposing own will. He believes his will, the great idea, will save the world from the danger of the ring. That the natural world might not ever be the same does not concern Wotan; only his own power and glory do.

Wotan's power role is an important one. As chief of the gods he is responsible for the Aesir's safety and by extension the well-being of the world. Therefore no act that secures Wotan's power can be wrong by his logic. Wotan believes that he is making the world a better place with his bindings, even though they wound nature itself. He believes his castle, spear, and eventually his children all serve to safeguard his power, which must be preserved by any means necessary.

In his familial roles there is no way to view Wotan other than as a disaster. He commits adultery, not once but many times. Wotan seeks out the lonely mountain tops, and roams the world of men, partially to be away from his wife Fricka. It is a behavior that is pathetic in men, but unforgivable for this god. As a father he fails each and every one of his children. His twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, are forced to lead harsh lives and die anonymously to further his ambitions. Wotan's valkyrie children by the earth goddess Erda become merely foot soldiers in his war against Alberich and are punished severely when they commit insubordination. Finally, Wotan's grandson, the hero Siegfried, is left alone in the enemy camp, manipulated and killed, all for the sky god's unworkable plan. These judgements of Wotan may seem stern, but however good his intentions, the results of Wotan's actions are always disaster for those closest to him.

The Great Idea, Wotan's conception of creating a race of independent heroes to regain the ring for him, is both brilliant and fatally flawed. Wotan cannot create

independent beings that also serve his will. It is that inability to see others as separate from him, rather than tools to be used, that dooms Wotan's Great Idea.

CHAPTER II

WOTAN AND BRÜNNHILDE: LOVE, DEATH AND THE ELUSIVENESS OF POWER

If, as many scholars agree, Wotan is the central character in the Ring then it follows that the Wotan-Brünnhilde relationship is the most important in the work. Wotan is lord over the Aesir, the sky-gods, and supposedly lord over the earth below as well. Brünnhilde, his daughter and shield maiden, is a demi-god and his favorite among the valkyries, who escort fallen warriors to their reward in Valhall. The relationship between them is complex, and encompasses several conflicting roles. As Father and Daughter they share joy, a secret alliance against Wotan's wife Fricka, and a not so subtle sexual attraction. Brünnhilde, the *Wunschmaid*, is the confidant that Wotan is lacking in a wife. As God and Demi-God they share the masculine pleasures of War as *Heervater* and shield maid. As two sides of the same Ego they share the Great Idea, though they participate in it unequally.

The contrast in the amount of time that Wotan gives to his son and grandson, Siegmund and Siegfried, with that that he devotes to Brünnhilde, could not be greater. Wotan only appears with Siegmund in *Die Walküre* at the moment of his son's death. Furthermore, he only shares one scene with his grandson in *Siegfried*, the confrontation before Brünnhilde's rock. Conversely, Wotan sings his lengthiest and most important music directly to Brünnhilde, the fateful scene in Act II as well as the *Abschied* at the end of the *Die Walküre*.¹⁴ Wotan shows feelings and thoughts to one of his feminine alter-egos, Brünnhilde, that he would not reveal to his masculine extensions, the two heroes Siegmund and Siegfried. Even much of the action Brünnhilde takes in *Götterämmerung* can be seen as directed at an absent Wotan. The fact that development of the characters' relationship, both in dramatic and symbolic ways, can take place in the absence of one party speaks to the psychological tie they share.

The relationship between Brünnhilde and Wotan is complex. They share a father/ daughter bond as well as a chain of command, mixed with sex and divine ordination. The place of the gods in the universe of the Ring is perhaps the hardest thing to pin down in Wagner. We learn that the gods live above the earth, and that Wotan rules

¹⁴ Kobbe, 284, 289.

the world through his treaties and prowess at war. But Wotan seems little able to affect the world outside of personal contact with other beings, most of whom are somehow related to him. Although the concept of synchronicity is an important one to this study of Wotan, he does not seem to be able to affect the world in a way in which we would imagine a god to do.

Certainly it is necessary to compare the sky god Wotan with his Greek predecessor Zeus. That Wagner was an admirer of Hellenistic culture and drama is without question. Wagner took some of the aspects of Greek myth that were conducive to drama and replanted them in Norse soil. Wotan the philanderer and Fricka the nagging wife are direct copies of Zeus and Hera.

Brünnhilde, Wagner's Athena, also takes some of her admirable traits from the Greek mythology. Athena, virgin mother of Erichthonius, has a messianic quality to her, much more serious than the rest of the pantheon.

“Born fully grown and fully armed from the brain of Zeus, she is the feminine incarnation of male wisdom. She is the closest Greek myth came to a second person of the Trinity...”¹⁵

Outside of Bacchus, the most fun god to worship, Athena was the most popular of the Greek gods. It is easy to understand why. The Greek tales are full of the gods' lying, cheating and stealing their way to power or revenge. In contrast, Athena is a model of stability. Athena merely is, never growing old or losing her virginity, seemingly above the all too human activities of the rest of the pantheon. Athena's stability would attract many a worshiper seeking something higher. Also, her legendary gift to the people of her city, the olive tree, was matched by no other god. By equating his warrior maiden Brünnhilde with the dignified Athena Wagner add another dimension to this complex character.

“The mountaintop as a symbolic location represents the mental realm of the mind and the religious realm of transcendence with its emphasis on the spirit.”¹⁶

By hiding on the mountaintop in the second act of *Die Walküre*, Wotan is maintaining appearances as the chief of the sky gods.¹⁷ The deconstructive nature of the ring and its curse are already taking affect, and Wotan is losing power and influence.

¹⁵ M. Owen Lee, *Athena Sings: Wagner and the Greeks* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 39.

¹⁶ Bolen, 228.

¹⁷ Kobbe, 282.

Fricka has chided him for dabbling with the humans, on the middle earth as it were. Here on the mountain, Wotan is still a god, at least until his wife Fricka begins to exert her will. When Fricka forces Wotan to accept her judgement in the matter of the incestuous twins she undermines his authority as supreme leader.

The conflict between Wotan's will and Brünnhilde's compassion can be seen on a number of levels. To Wotan, Brünnhilde is an extension of his own ego, not a separate person. She loves the Wälsung, the family clan of Siegmund and Sieglinde, just as he does, and she loathes Fricka's meddling like any hero worshiping daughter. Thus, the valkyrie Brünnhilde can be seen as Wotan's anima, his hidden feminine self. If this is true however, there is a conflict within the anima. The girl who wants to obey her father's orders struggles against a more mature woman who acts out of compassion. This struggle is part of Brünnhilde's maturation process.

“Wotan's monologue is really an exercise in hermeneutics...During the course of his monologue Wotan either explicitly or implicitly interprets the words of the Wala and Alberich.”¹⁸

Following his unsuccessful confrontation with Fricka in *Die Walküre*, during which Wotan is forced to swear to Siegmund's death, Wotan pours out his feelings to Brünnhilde. Wotan is caught, once again, by his own oaths, with little choice but to take the punishment Fricka has prescribed for him. Wotan has to demand of Brünnhilde the death of Siegmund. Wotan explains to Brünnhilde the depth of the predicament that he is in, relaying Erda's dark prophecy of the ring to her. In *Das Rheingold* Erda appears telling Wotan that the entire world will end if he does not give up the ring. The first sign of the god's Schopenhauerian desire for self-destruction comes in the moments he cries out “*das Ende*”, echoing the same words in the warning given by Erda.

The philosopher Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was an influence on Wagner in his writing of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Of most importance to this work is Schopenhauer's philosophy of the negation of will or desire which leads to a kind of self-destruction.¹⁹

“Wotan is apparently suffering from ontological uncertainty. Psychologists would probably diagnose Wotan as suffering from the imposter syndrome. He is playing a role that he is not entirely suited for.”²⁰

¹⁸ Mary A. Cicora, *Mythology as Metaphor: Romantic Irony, Critical Theory, and Wagner's Ring* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1957), 137.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, “Arthur Schopenhauer,” <http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schopenhauer>.

²⁰ Cicora, 137.

After such complete abasement, for a god, before his daughter, Wotan is given an opportunity to resume his power role when Brünnhilde suggests defying him in the matter of the Wälsung. Wotan responds with fury, warning Brünnhilde that his wrath could, “lay waste to the world”. Confused by the seeming conflict in both her father and herself, Brünnhilde prepares to destroy Siegmund.

Part of the disquieting nature of Wotan’s outburst, his longing for the end of all things, is how little he really cares for the world and its creatures. Even the destruction of the Aesir, his own race of gods, does not seem to bother him as much as simply not getting his way. Wotan is not able to separate his will from the life and will of others.²¹ Therefore he sees the frustration of his desire as tantamount to the end of the world.

When Wotan says to Brünnhilde that when he speaks to her it is like speaking to himself, it seems a tender moment of fatherly care. Upon closer examination however, it reveals something disturbing. Part of the formative process of an ego is going through the stage of realizing that other beings exist separately from you. Wotan, like many tyrants, has not gone through this maturing process. He believes that his will is Brünnhilde’s will because he cannot imagine it otherwise. This lack of personal differentiation can happen at the most intimate level among adults. For instance, at times we can understand that our enemies have “will”, but fail to comprehend that our spouses’ desires may be different from our own.

“One need only compare the tortuous self-examination conducted by Wotan during his monologue in Act Two of *Die Walküre* with the ‘primordial state.. which... hardly yet thinks in concepts and in which it is itself still poetry’ of the more natural... sections of the drama.”²²

The Brynhilde of the *Edda* is a power mad woman who slays with impunity.

“Brynhild, you were Budli’s daughter, born to the worst luck in the world, you have deceived the children of Giuki and destroyed their good dwelling-places.”²³

This older Brynhilde is sexually powerful, capable of enjoying violent revenge on another woman over a lover. Wagner needed that name, with the feminine power associated with it, but he did not want the baggage that came with it. So, Wagner made his Brünnhilde a virgin, waiting for a knight to claim her. Even without her godhood later in the cycle, Brünnhilde resembles Jung’s archetype of the child-god, who

²¹ Kobbe, 284.

²² Mark Berry, “Wagner’s idea of power in the Ring,” *Wagner* Vol. 19, No. 2 (May 1998): 49.

²³ Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996),192.

represents rebirth, resurrection and salvation. The child-god also represents a certain purity, therefore Wagner's remaking Brünnhilde as a virgin.

If Brünnhilde is one of the hidden feminine sides of Wotan then when she rebels it is truly like a case of dementia for the god. His own sensitive side has thwarted him, and Wotan is not happy about it. His love for the Wälsung has been transferred to Brünnhilde, with consequences neither of them can foresee. Wotan believes that Brünnhilde is his extended will, when in fact she is more Siegmund's enantiodramia, with his compassion rather than her father's will to power.

“When Brünnhilde wants to refuse Wotan's command to abandon Siegmund, whom she has learned to love, ...this is a moment of choice that is echoed in real life.”²⁴

The *Abschied*, “*Leb' wohl*”, in the last scene of *Die Walküre* is one of Wagner's most celebrated moments in music. Although the admiration for the music is justified, we should look closely at the meaning of the monologue. As punishment for her disobedience, Wotan has decreed that Brünnhilde will lose her divinity and be left sleeping for a mortal man to claim her. Wotan has accepted Brünnhilde's plea to surround her with fire in her helpless slumber to keep away the base and cowardly. This “boon” that he grants gives Wotan the veneer of fatherly love at this last moment.

Once again, Wotan has allowed his ego as god of gods to trump the healthiness of his relationships with family. By putting the valkyrie down he retains the authority of his commands. But Wotan loses his daughter and closest confidant. This is a clear case of Wotan choosing the artificial over the natural. The natural father would punish but forgive; Wotan cannot, for to forgive would jeopardize his rigid universe of laws. There is certainly a conflict between the seriousness of the situation and Wagner's beautiful music, particularly in the second section of the monologue, “*der Augen leuchtendes Paar*”, Wotan sings of Brünnhilde's eyes, and the light and love they have shown him. (See musical example 2 in Appendix B.)

After Brünnhilde is laid to rest, Wotan calls up Loge, the god of fire, to surround the rock with magic fire.²⁵ Having someone to give orders to brings Wotan back to the seat of authority, and his music returns to the square angular expressions after the vulnerable,

²⁴ Bolen, 68.

²⁵ Kobbe, 289.

linear music he has had. Leaving Brünnhilde sexually vulnerable to any hero who comes along is truly cruel, but the music Wotan sings while doing so is sublime.

Part of the tension of the last half of the opera is the audience's surprise at the full weight of Wotan's wrath. Although Wotan warned Brünnhilde of his anger's power in the first monologue, it is still a shock. That anger cannot be attributed solely to the disappointment of a father who has been disobeyed. Neither can the commander/soldier relationship bear the weight of Wotan's judgment. Only in the context of a jilted lover can Wotan's fury be properly explained. There is a subtext of romantic love between Wotan and Brünnhilde throughout the opera. Although Brünnhilde spoke of her love for the Walsung, until she chose Siegmund's life over Wotan's will it and she were not taken seriously by the god. Memory and divinity taken away, surrounded by the inferno, Brünnhilde suffers a symbolic death for her infidelity.

“When Wagner himself was a little child, ... the fires of Loki were a very real terror to all except persons of exceptional force of character and intrepidity of thought.”²⁶

Wotan's extreme actions towards Brünnhilde can be understood within the context of sexual jealousy. And it is with the understanding of Brünnhilde's love for Siegmund that the fairy tale resurrection scene begins to make sense.

“Like the transference, the counter-transference...creates a mystical or unconscious identity with the object. Thus transference and counter-transference...create abnormal and untenable relationships which aim at their own destruction.”²⁷

Does Brünnhilde's release from magical sleep by Siegfried make her any more free than when she was shield-maiden to Wotan? No, she is truly less free. The quote above of Jung is applicable to this situation. Basically, it says that you see what you want to see, and when you do not know what you want, as in the case of both Brünnhilde and Siegfried here, misunderstanding and disaster can occur.

“The universally popular mythological theme known to folklore scholarship as *infant exile and return* carries...the inherent suggestion of a destiny unfolding.”²⁸

The idea that a hidden king is waiting to return, to lead the people to a new age, is a myth that Wagner was wise to tap into. From the Arthur legends to the modern myth of

²⁶ Shaw, 45.

²⁷ C.G. Jung, *Dreams* (New York: MJF Books, 1974), 59.

²⁸ Campbell, 193.

the Priori of Sion, the average person is excited by the idea of a king concealed. Siegfried, hidden in the forest, orphaned, is such an archetypal king/hero.

In *Siegfried* Wotan travels the earth disguised as the Wanderer.²⁹ The Wanderer is an observer, supposedly not participating in events. The role of the Wanderer recalls Wotan hanging on the world tree and sacrificing an eye to gain wisdom. One of the older stories is that Woden sacrificed that eye to teach the rune magic (writing) to humans, like Prometheus and his fire. The observer is to gather wisdom and knowledge, without being entangled in politics and events. This guise is one that Wotan likes, pretending to be above the world.

The Wanderer has an air of bravado about him in all the scenes in which he appears. The Wanderer plays at omniscience, attempting to intimidate those who would threaten his position: the *Nibelung* brothers Mime and Alberich, and Erda, the earth goddess.

Synchronicity is the Jungian concept of indirect interdependences. One way to understand this concept is to think of the world as being all water, and our movements create ripples that affect others, both in and out of our sight. Much of the action that takes place in the Ring has synchronistic effects. These synchronistic events are often made clear by the *Leitmotiv* system. A *Leitmotiv* is a musical idea that represents a person, object or idea in Wagner's music dramas. When a character thinks or speaks of another, the musical motive associated with the other character often sounds in the orchestra, creating a musical fabric in which the listener believes that every action affects every character, regardless of physical presence. This concept of synchronicity shows the dark, occult tinged side of Jungian theory, which is perhaps why it fits so well with the German Romantic ideals.

The Wanderer, even though he tries to be aloof, deeply yet indirectly affects the fate of Brünnhilde and the world. By warning Mime in *Siegfried* that his head is forfeit to the one who can reforge the sword Nothung, Wotan prods Mime into attempted assassination on the young hero Siegfried. Mime is Alberich's brother, ironically stuck with the task of raising the one born to defeat his brother's plan. After Wotan wins the riddle game, Mime's life is Wotan's to take, yet he does not, leaving the dwarf Mime to

²⁹ Kobbe, 293.

guide the hero to Fafner's cave preserving his own threadbare objectivity. Fafner, the surviving giant from *Das Rheingold*, has transformed into a dragon to guard the magic ring. Once again, Wotan cannot resist meddling with his creations, his sons, thereby dooming them.

“Recognizing the phenomenal world for what it is –an evil illusion characterized...and the Will to Power-she rejects this world by renouncing both the ring of power and life itself.”³⁰

Brünnhilde, from the time of her awakening by Siegfried up to the immolation scene in *Götterdämmerung*, lives in a fog. It is an eerie parallel to the life of Hagen, the half-breed son of Alberich, that she lives completely manipulated by the people and events around her until she decides to take her own life. Even though Brünnhilde protests her treatment by Siegmund and the Gibichung court, she cannot affect any of the decisions that are to be made.

“Originally-in the prose draft of 1848-the tragic fate of Siegfried and Brünnhilde was intended as expiation for the sins of the gods, particularly Wotan's, and to insure that human freedom determine the future.”³¹

It is explicit in the text of the Ring that Valhall burns with the world tree Yggdrasil as tinder. The Rhein overflows, the gods fall, and the Gibichung castle collapses.³² That much is understood. But it is also understood that there are survivors gathered on stage at the end, like Noah emerging from the ark after the waters receded. It is the reverse of the sacrifice of Jesus, the son of God, for man's sins. The destruction of the gods by Brünnhilde's act of free will expunges the gods' sins against man and the world.

Syzygy is the Jungian term for the unification of the anima and animus, taking our broken unconscious and mending the parts. Syzygy seems to be inspired by oriental tradition, such as finding nirvana, the internal goal always out of reach. The ecstatic nature of Brünnhilde's immolation scene lends credence to a non-western interpretation of the end of the Ring. The mandala, in this case the ring, is no longer needed to focus the attention on the sins of the gods, for they have been paid for. The opposites have come together, (Jung's principle of entropy), and the need for conflict is over. Within Jung's

³⁰ Warren Darcy, “The metaphysics of annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the Ring,” *Music theory spectrum: The journal of the society for Music Theory* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1994): 7.

³¹ Hermann Danuser, “Musical manifestations of the end in Wagner and in post-Wagnerian Weltanschauungsmusik,” *19th –century music* Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 74.

³² Kobbe, 315.

principal of entropy a decrease of energy must take place. In the Ring it is represented by the higher, (the gods) to the lower (mankind) place of action.

“Moreover, Siegfried alone (man by himself) is not the complete human being, he is merely the half; it is only along with Brünnhilde that he becomes the redeemer.”³³

Certainly, in her power role as valkyrie, Brünnhilde is a failure. She disobeys direct orders from her chief, and takes action to hide from the repercussions. When the punishment is announced, she argues, not as a soldier but as a daughter.

In her family roles Brünnhilde is much more successful. She has the closest relationship to Wotan, even if it is a narcissistic one, of any character in the cycle. Her love and empathy for Siegmund drive her to try to save him, as well as to save Sieglinde and her unborn child. Under the torment of the Gibichungs, with her untrue husband before her, Brünnhilde holds fast to love. After the death of the hero Siegfried, only Brünnhilde sees the way out of the circle that is the ring and the damaged family relationships. Only through destruction and a new beginning can love be redeemed.

“The end of the gods, which was inevitable from the start, is actually a self-fulfilling prophecy insofar as Wotan wills it.”³⁴

³³ Albert Goldmand and Evert Sprinchorn, *Wagner on Music and Drama* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), 291.

³⁴ Cicora, 146.

CHAPTER III

WOTAN AND SIEGMUND-ARCHETYPES OF DESPAIR

If the Wotan-Brünnhilde relationship is the most important of the cycle then Wotan's relationship with another of his children, Siegmund, is the most mysterious. Wolf, another one of Wotan's many guises, has descended to Midgard, the world of men, and fathers twins with an un-named mortal woman. Living in the wild, the children Siegmund and Sieglinde have little contact with the outside world of men, but by all accounts their brief childhood was a happy one.

The young Siegmund is raised in an idealized world. Siegmund grew up a child of the forest, with his hero/father by his side. The child is given the attributes of both primitive man, wild and free, and civilized man within a stable household. The image of a happy boy-child, being guided through manly pursuits by a capable father figure is universally attractive. Wolf and wolf-cub are a Romantic ideal, the noble savage. Wagner was not immune to the prejudices of his times.

Siegmund, in recounting the story of his life to Hunding in the first act of *Die Walküre*, tells of returning from a hunt with his father to find their house burned by enemies.³⁵ Like Hunding's home, the wolf lair was constructed around a large tree, this time an oak. This sheltering tree, now burned to dust, is an avatar of the world tree. Where Wotan meddles, the natural world dies. Siegmund's mother lies dead at the scene. This loss, though she does not have a name, is very important to understanding Siegmund's complex. Even though Siegmund and his son Siegfried both suffer greatly in their upbringing, Siegmund knew his mother. Siegmund's empathy for the feminine, as he shows time and again later in the opera, shows his absent mother's hand.

Without the guidance of Wolf his father, and with no mother or sister to turn to, Siegmund lived by instinct. Wotan believed that the struggles of life alone would make his hero stronger, in a Nietzschean fashion.

Part of the inherent flaw in the great idea is Wotan's obsession with things, rather than with people and relationships. In his mind he sees the boy as the wielder of his magic sword instead of as his beloved son. At the moment of the Great Idea in *Das Rheingold* it is the sword and its *Leitmotiv* that are important, not the child that will be

³⁵ Kobbe, 277.

born. Wotan's spear, castle, sword and the cursed ring all are more important to him than his extended family.

Like Yggdrassill, Hunding's house tree represents the natural order. That order is a brutal one with Sieglinde as slave to her husband/master Hunding. The capriciousness of nature as well as its beauty is represented in Wagner's work. The sword, like a time bomb in a wall, has been planted by Wotan to destroy Hunding's world. Remember also that Siegmund sings of his house tree, burned and destroyed like his mother. His mother gone, Siegmund the empathetic needs to find that missing feminine side.

“The mother is superior to the son, but the sister is his equal. ...The anima now becomes a life-giving factor...”³⁶

Wagner wrote of the explanation that Wotan gives Fricka about the Wälzung lovers in the second act of *Die Walküre* as being the most important conversation in the cycle. During this argument Wotan attempts to explain the Great Idea, the reason for his fathering Siegmund and Sieglinde. Fricka cannot see past her own portfolio as minister of marriage, and wife to an unfaithful husband, to grasp what Wotan is trying to accomplish. Fricka is guardian of tradition and Wotan feels he must go outside the traditions to create his heroes.

Having lost his mother, Siegmund desperately needs a feminine figure in his life. He stumbles from battle to battle, always an outsider, with no one to tutor him on the ways of the world. Siegmund might be a “pure fool” like Parsifal, but he is a dangerous fool. Siegmund, like his future son, slays on instinct. Having slain Hunding's kinsman at the wedding party, his own life is forfeit, yet Siegmund seems resigned to his fate, like an animal that has been hunted too long. Siegmund the hunted, doomed man never loses his empathy, perhaps his true heroic trait.

As is shown by Siegmund's storming of the wedding party, which earns him a death wish from Hunding, the young hero does not understand or respect society's rules. Like the adultery that spawned him, and the incest he will commit, Siegmund is not truly part of the world of civilized men.

“Raised as Wolf-cub, he did not absorb societal attitudes and expectations, and he is instead guided purely by his feelings and instincts.”³⁷

³⁶ Jung, 147.

³⁷ Bolen, 70.

As has been seen, Siegmund has led a very hard life. All of the things he did not know he was looking for, he found in Sieglinde. The dim memories of an idealized childhood Siegmund can now recapture in his sister. In his aria, “*Winterstürme*,” Siegmund compares himself to the storms of winter that have blown open the doors of the house, transformed into the breezes of spring. The language of death, rebirth and sexual awakening are all here. Wagner’s language of nature is again presented in the music here. (See musical example 3 in Appendix B.)

The beauty of the music of “*Winterstürme*” belies the harsh realities that Siegmund has faced, and once again show him as more than a hero.

The anima is Jung’s term for the undiscovered, feminine side of a man’s psyche. Alternately, the animus is the masculine version of that missing part in a woman. These ignored aspects of character cause internal conflict, and manifest themselves in troublesome ways.

“As if to emphasize the feminine principle, which is often symbolized by the moon, Siegmund and Sieglinde see one another when the doors open suddenly, letting in the bright light of a full moon.”³⁸

Siegmund has found his anima in Sieglinde. Sieglinde’s animus comes out when she puts the potion in Hunding’s drink. To take such a bold action, against her abuser, is a testament to the well of untapped strength in Sieglinde. It is not a bold statement to say that ignoring the talent and ability of the women present is part of the grand tragedy in Wagner’s cycle. Both Sieglinde and later Brünnhilde are treated as merely women, rather than strong partners that can help transform situations.

The drink with the sleeping potion in it that Sieglinde prepares for Hunding is often viewed as a typical operatic convention, like a forged letter or disguised lover. Upon closer examination, the night drink of Hunding is an integral part of the plot of the Ring. The struggle between what is fated to be and what a person wills is on display at this moment.

“Like Fafner in *Siegfried*, Hunding in *Die Walküre* cannot rouse himself from sleep even as his fate is being decided around him.”³⁹

³⁸ Bolen, 71.

³⁹ Buller, 7.

The act of sleeping and its relationship to death and transfiguration abound in the ring cycle. Wotan, Erda, Hunding, Fafner, Siegmund, Sieglinde, and Brünnhilde all sleep during the cycle. Dreams and interpretation of dreams are part of the narrative that suggests the action takes place on more than the physical level.

In choosing free will, Siegmund has doomed himself. By going outside what has been decreed, Siegmund sets up his own destruction. It is ironic that in the moment when Siegmund breaks with his father's will, he is most like him. Wotan's doom resembles his son's on a larger scale. Wotan's gave his predilection for a teleological process to his sons, and both of them used it to defy him.

Siegmund has done the paradoxical. He has both lived up to and rejected his father's expectation. Wotan wanted to breed a race of heroes who had free will above all. Yet he wanted these heroes to fulfill his own political need, the return of the ring to Wotan.

“Described in psychological terms, Siegmund is a man who above all is loyal to the feminine principle, which values love and relatedness more than law of power.”⁴⁰

This statement by Bolen perhaps says more about Bolen than it does about Siegmund. At times Bolen seems to equate anything positive with the feminine and anything negative with the masculine. However, there is truth to her observation of Siegmund's loyalty to Sieglinde. Siegmund rejects paradise for the woman he knows and loves, even unto death. After threatening to kill Sieglinde in her sleep to avoid the fate decreed by Wotan, Siegmund is convinced by the valkyrie to fight Hunding with her protection. The love that Siegmund has for Sieglinde has moved Brünnhilde to fight her animus, Wotan, and shield the illicit lovers. When Sieglinde awakes after the valkyrie exits she recounts a horrible dream, the destruction of her childhood home and the death of her mother. This dream is both memory and prophecy, preparing her for the annihilation of her new family, husband and brother/lover.

“When memories of traumatic childhood events emerge, they do so vividly. Women who have been victims of trauma act like Sieglinde.”⁴¹

Wagner was an admirer of Jesus and considered him a great revolutionary, he once began a stage play on the subject. Many of Wagner's protagonists take on a

⁴⁰ Bolen, 71.

⁴¹ Bolen, 74.

messianic role, sacrificing themselves for the benefit of others. The idea that one death could mean redemption for others' sins resonated with Wagner and appears in many of his music dramas.

“Themes of death and redemption figured prominently in most of Wagner’s music dramas; yet he considered death as only part of the life process...”⁴²

Siegmund’s death is not a heroic one on the face of it. Wotan appears suddenly, like a storm, and shatters the sword Nothung on his spear. Unarmed, Siegmund is run through by Hunding’s spear, gives out a death sigh, and dies.⁴³ The suddenness of the hero’s death is shocking. There is no final aria, gasped out to a sobbing Sieglinde. There is only a grunt, then nothing. The anti-climactic, small death of Hunding only emphasizes the realness of the situation. The death scenes of the two Wälsung heroes, Siegmund’s in *Die Walküre* and his son Siegfried’s in *Götterdämmerung*, couldn’t be more different.

Both Siegmund and Sieglinde are redeemed by the surprising actions of Brünnhilde. After the death of Siegmund, Brünnhilde takes the pregnant Sieglinde and flees Wotan’s fury. Although she is naïve to think that her sister valkyries would shield her, or that she could get away, her courage in defying Wotan is admirable.

Brünnhilde chooses free will and dooms herself. Like many a family, Wotan and his children repeat the same mistakes over and over. Wotan does not learn from the wounding of the world tree by his own hand, and refuses to contemplate returning the gold to the state of nature it came from. Brünnhilde, like Siegmund, is an emotional open book, and even though they are the most sympathetic characters in the cycle, both are manipulated cruelly. Siegfried, Wotan’s other hero descendant, is a crude, blustering sociopath, too blind to understand either true love or true hate.

What does it mean that Sieglinde flees, gives birth in secret and dies? Brünnhilde believes that the pregnant girl will not survive Wotan’s wrath. Is there an overtone of genocide against the Wälsungs? Yes, it seems unspoken but true that Fricka’s death warrant for Siegmund included Sieglinde and the unlawful child. Looking forward to Wotan’s first despairing monologue, it is easy to conclude that the Schopenhauerian

⁴² Alan David Aberbach, *The Ideas of Richard Wagner: An Examination and Analysis of His Major Aesthetic, Political, Economic, Social and Religious Thought* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 316.

⁴³ Kobbe, 287.

influence transfers self-destruction into familial destruction. While Siegmund failed at his assigned role as hero, it was not for lack of effort. The odds were stacked against him.

As a traditional son Siegmund failed his father, Wotan. By rejecting the will of the father for the softer prize of love, Siegmund committed the classical sin of lack of stoutness in a hero. As a brother, it is hard to judge Siegmund. To Wagner's audience, and to today's, the incest is not forgivable on a literal level. Wagner, however, seemed to be trying for a union on a different level, a purity of spirit rather than of blood, that resulted in the unlikely offspring, Siegfried. As a lover, Siegmund triumphed. He rejected the pleasures of heaven to stay beside his true love.

CHAPTER IV

WOTAN AND SIEGFRIED-THE KILLING OF THE KING

In this chapter we will explore the relationship between Siegfried and his grandfather Wotan. Theirs is a relationship that primarily takes place through the principals' interaction with third parties. The two only meet face to face once, in the final confrontation before Brünnhilde's rock in *Siegfried*. Like an estranged father, Wotan is forced to seek information about his offspring from others. As family members that do not really talk to one another, Wotan and Siegfried are doomed to misunderstand one another.

It was understood in Europe in Wagner's time that inbreeding among nobility had negative consequences. However, the old ideas of magnifying a bloodline by incest or close marriage seem an appropriate way to sire a great mythological hero. Wagner seems to take the virgin birth mythmaking of the Christianity he rejected and turn it upside down, making the pagan, incestuous birth divine. It is hard not to pity the fate of poor Sieglinde, who only had one partial night of happiness in her tormented life. She was used, literally, as nothing more than an incubator for the narrative.

Siegfried's upbringing accounts for much of his later behavior. Siegfried's childhood has the "into the crucible" quality of his father's life, only more so. It is difficult to imagine how rough and cruel Siegfried's early life must have been. He has no father or mother, stuck in a cave in the woods with an ugly dwarf as a guardian. Mime, brother of Alberich, had the unfortunate duty of raising the wild boy.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Siegfried on the stage is the lack of empathy he produces in an audience. The fact that Siegfried has no conscience, a prerequisite for a Nietzschean superman, makes the observer uncomfortable. Conniving Mime, who plots against the young hero, seems a sympathetic character, put upon by this blond beast. Truly, Siegfried has an animal-like approach to his relationships. His treatment of Mime, however well-deserved, is bullying and brutal.⁴⁴ It is astounding, looking back at the personal temperaments of his parents, Siegmund and Sieglinde, that their son would turn out nothing like them. The incestuous pair were full of compassion and love, traits

⁴⁴ Kobbe, 292, 293.

noticeably absent from their progeny. In this way, perhaps, Siegfried is Wotan's child, an amoral tool striving for glory.

The Siegfried of the old stories is quite a different one than in Wagner's version. True, in both the *Edda* and the *Nibelungen Lied* Sigurd/Siegfried is a mighty hero and there is contact with the powerful Brynhild. However, there was no love between the two and the personality of Siegfried is quite different in the sources. The *Edda's* Siegfried is boastful, deceitful and fully conscious. Wagner's Siegfried is "guiltless," a sacrifice for the sins of others.

"There are no good marriages or happy families in classical mythology. Sons and daughters either bask in approval when they are obedient extensions of their father's will or are sacrificed, rejected..."⁴⁵

Siegfried has been bred to do the job his grandfather could not, take back the ring. The qualities of his upbringing-harsh environment, no parents, and an enemy for a guardian-are tailor made for creating one of Nietzsche's "blond beasts". Although he does not seem to suffer living in two worlds like Hagen, human and dwarf, Siegfried is still a half-breed, in a social sense.

The riddle scene is a staple of mythology, usually establishing the mental prowess of a protagonist. The riddle scene in the Ring, though derived from the standard mythological ones, seems to have a deeper purpose. Wotan, in his worldly disguise as the Wanderer, appears at Mime's forest home.⁴⁶ Wotan challenges his crabby host to a riddle contest, betting his head if he loses.

Wotan, like any political animal, has a number of masks that he uses in public. Jung called these masks persona, and like a self-fulfilling prophecy they can overtake the primary personality. One of Wotan's personas is that of the Wanderer, the wise old man who travels the world seeking knowledge. It is true that Wotan seeks knowledge, as in his hanging on the tree or his descent to Erda. It is also true that Wotan usually has ulterior motives for his actions as the Wanderer, and this time is no exception.

Wotan, in wagering his head in the game, shows his arrogance and condescension. He knows that Mime, the lowly dwarf, cannot defeat a god in a game of wits. So what is Wotan's purpose here? It is threefold. First, the Wanderer seeks

⁴⁵ Bolen, 1.

⁴⁶ Kobbe, 293.

knowledge of Siegfried. Having left the child to his own devices, he is curious about the boy's progress. Second, he is warning Mime. Wotan is aware of the threat the Nibelungs pose to Siegfried, and although he is unable to directly intervene, Mime is not sure of that. Third, Wotan wants news of the sword, Nothung. It is Nothung that will enable Siegfried to defeat the dragon Fafner, and ultimately defeat Wotan himself. Wotan as the Wanderer seems to have lost most of his human empathy, which he showed at times in the previous operas. There is a blunt bravado, a cold condescension that hangs over all of his music. (See musical example 4 in Appendix B.)

The answers to Mime's riddles are designed to take the audience back to the reasons for the narrative. By bringing up the three races, Nibelung, Aesir and Riesen, Wagner cleverly focuses the audience's attention back on the ring and the struggle for it. However, the answers Wotan gives are a little puzzling as they seem to describe what was, rather than what is at the time of this confrontation. If Fafner and Fasolt were the last of the giants as has been stated, then with their deaths the race is extinct and does not walk the broad back of the earth. Also, it is debatable whether or not Wotan still rules by the point of his spear as the cycle devolves, he seems more and more powerless. Truly, by the time of the final confrontation with his grandson, Wotan seems like the old man that Siegfried later calls him, rather than chief of the gods.

“...but Wotan knows this is not so...What he is offering here is a bowdlerized version of his biography as bedtime reading for...would be heroes.”⁴⁷

The confrontation between Wotan and Alberich outside Fafner's cave is a strange sight to say the least.⁴⁸ Both of them want the hidden ring, yet neither can take it. Wotan is constrained by oath from seizing the ring, Alberich is thwarted by weakness. Each has sired a son/grandson to do the dirty work for him. Wotan's false bravado and Alberich's crabby impatience are both for show and have little to do with what is really happening in this scene. See musical example 5 in Appendix B.

“Despite his earlier stated intent to Erda, Wotan does not voluntarily relinquish his power...A narcissistic father also becomes an internalized obstacle that prevents a son or daughter from succeeding...”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Joachim Herz, “The figure and fate of Wotan in Wagner's Ring,” *Wagner* Vol. 15, No. 2 (May 1994): 91.

⁴⁸ Kobbe, 295.

⁴⁹ Bolen, 124.

The violent confrontation between Wotan and Siegfried before Brünnhilde's rock is a moment of tragedy that is unnecessary to Siegfried, yet integral to the larger picture and Wotan's development. Isn't this what Wotan wanted when he brought Loge's fire to surround the sleeping maid? Only a great Walsung hero could brave the fires and take the prize. Yet Wotan seems unable to keep from meddling.

Wotan surely knows by this point, after his confession to the Wala Erda, that he cannot bar the hero's path. It is easy to see his decision to face Siegfried as part of the Schopenhauerian fatalism we have already seen, and that is part of the equation. But we should also take into account Wotan's unspoken sexual attraction for his daughter, that jealousy helps bring him to this un-winnable fight.

By metaphorically killing the king and defeating his father in battle, Siegfried now leaves behind childish things. He moves into the world of men, where his father cannot protect him from either women or the connivance of an enemy. The overtones of sexual maturity in Siegfried are obvious. He had to defeat the father who was preventing him from fully becoming a man.

Stories of the brave hero rescuing the helpless maid, or waking her from magical sleep have an air of sexual conquest about them. Siegfried going through the flames to collect his prize Brünnhilde is no exception. Although there is no overt sexual action it is implied in such a "rescue," especially when the maiden immediately falls in love with her rescuer. The immediate love that Brünnhilde feels for the hero Siegfried is difficult to explain. Yes, Brünnhilde says she loved him before he was born, and that is true, but that was not a passionate love. Her blindness to Siegfried's flaws, which will lead everyone to doom, is necessary for the plot and explainable only by her transformation from valkyrie to human woman. Her magic sleep, like a death, has cleared her of knowledge and wisdom.

"Siegfried himself comes amazingly close to fulfilling Hegel's concept of the world-historical figure, the hero who, heeding only inner necessity, unwittingly assists the dialectical process of history."⁵⁰

What Darcey is saying with this quote is that Siegfried unwittingly moves the forces of history towards an unseen conclusion. It is like a Chamberlain in Munich, in

⁵⁰ Darcey, 2-3.

ignorance laying the groundwork for the capitulation that leads to World War II.

Siegfried has no real understanding of the ring, or the forces around him, only his own desire to triumph over obstacles.

What great irony that Siegfried and Brünnhilde seal their love with the cursed ring. A relic, forged in magic by the renunciation of love is to be their symbol of undying love. Later when the potion-blinded Siegfried comes to claim Brünnhilde for Gunther he physically takes the love token from her. By stealing what has been stolen, Siegfried can be seen to bring the curse onto himself.

Why does the beloved Siegfried leave Brünnhilde's side for adventure in the first place? He has love for the first time in his life, and no foe nearby, so one would think he could be at peace. But his Wälsung blood, the part of him that is truly Wotan, will not rest and so he sets out in search of action. Wotan's warning to Brünnhilde, that she would be left behind to tend the hearth, has come true.

In the moment before he gets his memory back, Siegfried tells the *Waldvogel* story to the Gibichung men, recalling nature as true and honest. It is a rather blunt irony for Wagner that Siegfried would be telling the story of how he was warned of Mime's betrayal just as Hagen prepares to slay him. Only when Hagen's spear has struck its fatal blow does Siegfried seem to understand as the second magic drink takes hold. As he dies he sees only Brünnhilde, and the life of love he could have had.

Siegfried was a partial success in his power role, the hero. He reforged the sword Nothung, slew the dragon, took the ring and claimed the maid. These accomplishments by this maladjusted orphan are not to be looked down upon. In many ways, Siegfried did live up to his father's expectations by supplanting him. Yet, he still fell at the hands of his congenital enemy, Hagen.

Siegfried's true failings were of a personal nature, and led to familial disaster. Is the sociopath born or made? Siegfried was both born and made, bred to be a fearless hero, but with no model for compassion nearby. That he loved Brünnhilde at all is, in this interpretation, a minor miracle. Lust would be understandable in such an animalistic character, but Siegfried does love the former valkyrie, in spite of his past amoral behavior. As in much of Wagner's writing the redemptive power of love has a divine or

supernatural aura. Siegfried's emotional blindness made him vulnerable to the machinations of the Gibichungs and led directly to his downfall.

CHAPTER V

BORN OF HATE-ALBERICH, HAGEN AND THE TRANSFIGURATION OF SCHWARZEALBE

“Finally, we should do honour to our name—we are not called the ‘*tiusche Volk*’ (deceptive people) for nothing...”⁵¹

To characterize a villain is perhaps the most difficult thing to do well in drama. It is quite hard to avoid the clichés and trappings of evil, but the writer who can do so can create a memorable character. Hagen, though he is evil, treacherous, and murderous does have reasons for being so, as well as an admirable trait or two. Hagen is loyal to his father, Alberich, who wants nothing more than revenge against the gods and his cursed ring back in his hands. Hagen works faithfully to those ends. Unlike most characters in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Hagen does not undergo a change of personality as the plot progresses. He stays constant to his own character, in a classical dramatic sense.

“...and in doing so shows how it is Wagner’s own invention,...The ring itself,...has no actual prototype in the sources.”⁵²

Like the villain Hagen and heroine Brünnhilde there is no direct counterpart in the *Edda* for the driving, mechanical reason for the action, the ring itself. Although a ring does appear in the *Nibelungenlied* it does not have the world destroying powers attributed to Wagner’s ring. These examples of Wagner extrapolating and inventing show Wagner’s desire to create a new mythology out of the old.

Although a Hagen character does not appear directly in the older *Edda*, he does exist in the *Nibelungenlied*. Half-dwarf, as in Wagner, Hagen is portrayed as a fierce warrior. He is not, however, evil in the old stories. So why did Wagner choose the half-breed warrior as his foil for Siegfried? As with his need for a strong female character in Brünnhilde, Wagner needed a powerful antagonist for the mighty Siegfried.

“The circle is also, traditionally, a lunar symbol, reflecting not only the shape of the moon...the circular progress of the moon’s own ‘life-journey’ from darkness, through birth, fullness and deterioration.”⁵³

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 178.

⁵² Cicora, 93.

⁵³ Cumbow, 120.

What Cumbow is saying is that the Manichean nature of Siegfried and Hagen can also be seen on a larger scale. The journey, of the moon or a person, goes through phases of existence, which represent stages of personal growth. As the children and tools of the main protagonist/antagonist, Siegfried and Hagen are stuck in their own phases.

“(Hagen)...is portrayed as so antithetical to Wotan’s ‘great idea’ that he might be regarded as the cycle’s antimessianic hero, a mirror image of Siegmund.”⁵⁴

Half brother to Gunther, Hagen is high in the Gibichung ranks and is as deeply involved in their tribal politics as Wotan is in the machinations of the Aesir. Groups, although widely talked about, do not have much stage time in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The Gibichung soldiers are the only “group” to have traditional opera chorus roles.

When Hagen sings his dark monologue “*Hier sitz ich zur wacht*” the Gibichung hall is empty. Like Iago in *Othello*, Hagen needs to explain his particular brand of evil. From the opening bars of the aria it is clear that being the shadow twin to the hero Siegfried is the most important point. After the heavily accented diminished fifth interval in the low brass, a distorted version of Siegfried’s horn call is heard. (See musical example 6 in Appendix B.) The combination of the two is ominous indeed. Above the two distorted themes is a syncopated triple meter pattern, one that Alberich robbed and twisted from the Rhine maidens. The triplet figuration that throughout the ring represents nature is now again nature polluted. Hagen’s steady, slow, musical rhythm amidst a great deal of musical complexity suggests his words’ inevitability. Hagen will have revenge and he will have the ring, no matter the number of obstacles in his way. (See musical example #7 in Appendix B.)

“Above all, the melody that had accompanied the words “*Ihr freien Söhne, frohe Gesellen*” that melody expressing an unrestrainedly mocking scorn touched with a superior irony...must retain its character.”⁵⁵

The passage described in this quote has another layer of bitterness. The syncopated melody is a transmutation of the Rhine maidens theme. (See musical example 8 in Appendix B.)

⁵⁴ Jeffrey L. Buller, “The Messianic hero in Wagner’s Ring,” *The opera quarterly* Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 1996-1997): 28.

⁵⁵ Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’: An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983),124.

“insects are, in a certain sense, natural somnambulists...they have the feeling that they must perform a certain action, without knowing exactly why.”⁵⁶

Even leaving aside the duet with his father, Hagen has an air of the sleepwalker around him. The Gibichung men describe him as grim and old. Hagen himself claims his blood runs slow and cold, preventing him from participating in the blood oath between Gunther and Siegfried. The half-Nibelung lives in a demi-world of dream and pre-ordained events. Hagen corresponds in certain ways to the Jungian archetype of shadow. Although the shadow archetype is not necessarily evil, it represents hidden things. The shadow of ourselves knows what is to be and why, and has no conscience. Hagen hides things, from both the Gibichungs and Siegfried, creating a chain of unfortunate events.

“What is more, Alberich’s relationship with Hagen bears a striking similarity to Wotan’s relationship with his own children. In *Götterdämmerung*, Alberich calls Hagen a “hero”, the same word that Wotan used repeatedly in reference to Siegmund.”⁵⁷

The duet between Hagen and Alberich in the second act of *Götterdämmerung* is perhaps the most mystical, internal scene in the ring. While Hagen sleeps, he is standing guard over the Gibichung hall, the moon reveals Alberich, ready to question his son.⁵⁸ Three times during the duet Alberich sings to Hagen, “*schläfts du mein Sohn?*” (are you sleeping my son?). The number three has a feel of ritual to it in this case. Is this duet “real” or does it take place entirely inside Hagen’s head? It seems more a case of delusion than a genuine father/son conversation. If you accept that premise, then Hagen being able to ape his father’s wishes and mannerism internally is a testament to the childhood brainwashing that must have taken place. Hagen maintains his “slow blooded” air while Alberich is agitated, hot for revenge.

What of Hagen’s mother? Although Hagen shares a mother with Gunther, it is obvious that Gunther is the real Gibichung and Hagen is the bastard half-breed. Alberich and Wotan, the opposing fathers in this quadrangle, have much in common. They both manipulate others without conscience for their own ends. Both Siegfried and Hagen share a motherless condition. The primary difference between the two is that Siegfried was conceived in love, between brother and sister, and Hagen was conceived in hate. It

⁵⁶ Richard Wagner, *Art and Politics* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 13.

⁵⁷ Buller, 28.

⁵⁸ Kobbe, 306.

is notable that the only spoken text in the entire epic is Hagen's "*Zurück vom Ring!*", go back from the ring, as he descends into the Rhein, completing the circle his father began deep in those waters.

"The contest between patriarchs, between bourgeois and aristocrat, gives rise to the need for generativity. Siegfried and Hagen will continue to act on the wills of their fathers."⁵⁹

In his power role as the one who takes revenge against the gods, Hagen is a success. He slays Siegfried, but not before undoing Siegfried's amnesia. Hagen enjoys not only Siegfried's physical pain but his brief mental anguish as well. As the anti-hero who takes back the ring. Hagen fails due to the intervention of Brünnhilde.

Hagen has two familial roles; son to Alberich and kinsman to the Gibichungs. Hagen uses the Gibichungs, manipulating their desire for power and stability to aid in his revenge. He does not take the family tie seriously. As a son, bred for revenge, Hagen succeeds, trying to do everything his father wanted.

It is interesting that of all the major characters only Hagen stays true to both roles in his life. Although he fails to regain the ring, and treacherously stabs Siegfried in the back, it is difficult not to have some admiration for his consistency.

⁵⁹ Mark Poster, "What does Wotan want: Ambivalent feminism in Wagner's Ring," *New German Critique* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Spring-Summer 1991): 137.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the symbolism of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a study of the failure of family relationships. As has been shown in this project, the conflict between family duties and political duties is a stressor that colors every character in the cycle. The comparison with other mythologies as well as the source material, *The Edda*, shows the deep respect Wagner had for the power of myth, as well as his willingness to evolve. By using more modern terminology of psychoanalytic theory and feminist deconstruction we unearth contemporary ideas in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Wotan's relationship with Brünnhilde is truly complex. She is his soldier, daughter, and love interest. When Brünnhilde defies Wotan's orders she introduces a human element of compassion not seen in the cycle until that point.

“But by disowning Brünnhilde he is creating the free person he thought he could not create, one who will destroy him and Valhalla.”⁶⁰

The synochratic effect of putting down Brünnhilde in magic sleep cannot be underestimated. By leaving his daughter vulnerable to conquest in this manner Wotan struck a blow on the membrane of his own world of laws. That blow resonates, echoing the inevitability of his own doom. Brünnhilde's redemption of love, the *Lieberlösung*, by her own death closes the circle. Without her selfless act, the gods and man would be doomed to repeat their struggles again and again.

This text has been quite hard on Wotan, the doomed god. Any project that uses modern relationship interpretation on such a figure would reveal a harsh character by today's standards. The many emotive thoughts of Wotan, for the most part delivered in music rather than text, were not part of this study. Also, a more positive view of the Great Idea and Wotan's intentions, such as in the following quote, were not explored.

“Here, once more, we see Wotan's greatness... Only when the ring has been returned to the Rhine will he end his own life.”⁶¹

The relationship between Wotan and the two heroes is typical of that of a powerful man and his sons. There is no personal interaction in the relationship, only expectations of greatness. Neither Siegmund nor Siegfried truly succeed at their roles as

⁶⁰ Poster, 138.

⁶¹ Herz, 93.

heroes, but Siegmund, surprisingly for his background, shows true human compassion and free will. The amoral, bloodthirsty nature of the portrayal of the hero Siegfried has bothered many a critic. One could hope that Siegfried learns from his mistakes in the moments before he dies, but there is not much evidence of it.

“The farther the tetralogy progresses, the more powerful becomes the force of memory...”⁶²

The self-referential nature of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, where characters are often recounting things that have happened, reinforces the mythological aspects of the cycle. Although the constant back and forth of the plot makes interpretation difficult, the circular effect feels familial, and aids in the symbolism.

The affront to nature that Wotan commits by wounding the world tree, Yggdrassill, and by extension wounding the family, is the binding thread of the entire *Ring*. This hidden secret, only revealed by the Norns in the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, is the most important event related to the cycle. Yet like many sins of the family this sin is hidden away, not to be talked about or confronted.

“The incomparable thing about the mythos is that it is true for all time, and its content how close so ever its compression is inexhaustible throughout the ages.”⁶³

Wagner felt strongly about the power of myth and its ability to help bind a people together through a common set of stories.

Some of the newer ideas discussed in this project included the Jungian concepts of anima, animus and syzygy. Anima and animus respectively are hidden masculine and feminine sides. Many of the characters in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* can be seen as struggling with or searching for their hidden side. Syzygy is the term for the unification of these opposite poles, a nirvana so to speak. The unification with Siegfried that Brünnhilde seeks by her self-immolation can be seen as an attempt to achieve syzygy. The redemption of love from the vicious cycle of the ring and its curse, so explicit in the score, is also part of this universal reunification.

“because when you’re dealing with something as ambitious and expansive as *Der Ring*...every subject leads into every other. Indeed you might look at the *Ring* as Wagner’s attempt to include everything.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Wagner, 90.

⁶⁴ Cumbow, 107.

One of the more common complaints about the progression of the tetralogy is that Wagner began it using *Gesamtkunstwerk* with *Das Rheingold* and devolved into something resembling Italian opera by *Götterdämmerung*. In the final opera the dying tenor is given an aria, and the lead soprano something like a mad scene. Structurally it looks more like Bellini than Wagner. This lack of internal consistency serves an important purpose in the cycle. By bringing the drama down to human levels, Wagner forces us to focus more and more on the relationships, husband and wife, father and son, rather than the grand plans of the gods.

APPENDIX A

YGGDRASSILL ILLUSTRATED: A FAMILY TREE

The Gods (Aesir)

Wotan(Wolf, Wanderer, All-Father)

Fricka

Froh, Donner, Freia

Loge(demi-god)

Valkyries

Brünnhilde, Waltraute and
Seven others

The Norns(3)

Giants

Fasolt, Fafner(Dragon)

Rhine maidens

Woglinde, Wellgunde, Flosshilde

Nibelungen

Mime, Alberich

Erda(earth goddess, not Aesir)

Hunding(human, Sieglinde's husband)

The Wälsung(human clan)

Siegmund, Sieglinde, Siegfried

The Gibichung(human clan)

Gunther, Gutrune, Hagen(half-breed)

MATED PAIRS AND OFFSPRING

Fricka----Wotan

Wotan----(Walsung woman)

Wotan----Erda

^

^

Sigmund----Sieglinde----Hunding

TheValkyries

^

Siegfried

Alberich----(human woman)----(human man)

^

^

Hagen

Gunther, Gutrune

APPENDIX B

1.

WOTAN

So gruss' ich die

sehr energisch

ff *ff* *p*

Das Rheingold, Scene 4

2.

WOTAN

Der Au - gen leuch - ten des Paar, das oft ich la - chelnd ge

pp

Die Walküre, Act III Scene 3

3.

SIEGM

Win - ter - stur - me wi - chen dem Won - ne - mond, in mil - dem Lich - te leuch - tet der

pp

Die Walküre, Act I Scene 3

4.

MIME

tens mein Haupt?

WANDERER Ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha! Der Wit-zig-ste bist du un-ter den Wei-sen;

p *molto cresc...* *f* *dim.*

Siegfried, Act I Scene 2

5.

ALBERICH

WANDERER

Ausser dir beg-errt er ein-zig das Gold lein um den Ring? Und den noch ge-wann' ich ihn nicht?

f *p* *p*

Siegfried, Act II Scene 1

HAGEN

6. *Segr gemassigt und etwas zogernd.*

Hier sitz' ich zur

dim. *piu p*

Götterdämung, Act II Scene 2

HAGEN

7.

Gi - bich's Soh - ne we - liet der Wind, auf Wer - ben fahrt er da -

p

Götterdämung, Act II Scene 2

HAGEN

8.

Ihr frei - - - en Soh - - - ne

pp

Götterdämung, Act II Scene 2

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