

The Anti-Semitic Intention of *The Ring of the Nibelung*:
An Evaluation of Jewish Culture and Wagner's Dwarven Characters

Through his own notes and letters, the anti-Semitic beliefs of composer Richard Wagner are both articulate and vehement. Almost all interpretations of his character come from these writings, but insight into his compositions reveals that his personal holdings are manifest there as well. The works of Wagner are orchestrated to be seen through a perspective consistent with his personal prejudices against Jews. The purpose of this essay is to draw from *the Ring of the Nibelung*, a plausible allegory of the prejudices held against Jewish culture (of historical and social pertinence) as embodied in Wagner's dwarven characters, Alberich and Mime. Intentionally excluded is application of music theory, while examined are Wagner's previous drafts, notes and letters. Evidence from outside sources is collaborated with the text and stage directions found in Andrew Porter's English translation of *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

The root of anti-Semitism is believed theological, stemming from the statement made by the Jewish rabble demanding Jesus' death: "His blood be on us and on our children," Mt 27: 25. It was however, not the Jews of the Old and New Testament from which European prejudices emerged, but rather from those living in Europe at the time of the Holy Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine. Many found a curious and necessary place in society as doctors and moneylenders, the latter due to the prohibitions

against usury leveled at Christians by the Church. The common Jewish names that begin with “Gelt,” or “Gold” in its English form, probably trace back to these times when gold and precious jewels were bartered as money. Thus, the premise of anti-Semitism shifted from a theological pretense to the notion of “hating the one to whom you owe.” The conception of a generalized race, cold, passionless, and consumed with greed, was easily classified by the prominent physical features exhibited by Jewish lineage. The theory, first developed in Germany, that people of the Aryan stock are superior in physique and character to all those of Semitic stock was used to justify the civil and religious persecution of Jews during Hitler’s Holocaust. The archaic idea of physiognomy, that certain physical characteristics distinguish moral beliefs and persona, is therefore what has perpetuated anti-Semitism as a commonly held misconception that all Jewish people are definitive of the money-lending class they exemplified in Europe. It was Wagner’s argument that the Jews, through their prominence in banking institutions and the growing publishing industry, were non-Germans who exerted an unprecedented influence on the modern world in general and on the theatrical and musical institutions of Europe in particular. He regarded them as endowed with a host of the very ‘non-German’ traits he had associated with post-Hellenic culture in *‘Die Kunst und die Revolution’*: avarice, egotism, lovelessness, immorality, a carnal nature, and an ability to mimic (though imperfectly) the society in and from which they lived. (Marc A. Weiner *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995:52))

German sociologist Eleanore Sterling argued that the Jews became a special target for hatred because their unhappy history mirrored the sufferings of mankind and their elimination symbolized the removal of mass misery. (Donald L. Niewyk. *The Jews in*

Weimar Germany. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980: 44) The conservative German Jewish theologian Hans-Joachim Schoeps has placed an emphasis on Jewish behavior as a source of antipathy noting that Hebrew religious tradition encouraged a narcissistic self-image and a tendency to self-isolation and indifference to Gentile sensibilities. (Niewy, 44)

The reoccurring setting of the Rhine in *The Ring of the Nibelung* is of crucial importance in understanding the Jewish threat to German culture, as widely accepted to be fundamental in German prejudices toward Jews. German literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mirrored a popular image of the Jews as greedy self-seekers who were capable of dishonorable deeds because they were without roots in Germanic soil. (Niewyk, 6) Thus, Germany's largest and most influential parties had declared its intention to "fight the multifarious and obtrusive Jewish influence that decomposes [their] people's life." (Niewyk, 7) The basis of this perceived threat was the infiltration of the Rhine river by Jewish merchants. By the end of the fourteenth century, Jewish centers along the Rhine included Cologne, Mainz, Speyer and Worms, and with continued founding of Jewish settlements the estimated number of Jews ranged from 20,000 to 50,000. (Ruth Gay. *The Jews of Germany: A Historical Portrait*. London: Yale University Press, 1992: 8-9) Though during the Holy Roman Empire the Jewish people were an asset, providing skilled labor and needed trades such as mercantilism, once Germany established itself as a nation, the overwhelming presence of a foreign culture whose persuasion was to keep itself separate both in religious beliefs and self-taught language was deemed an intimidating influence that was not originally spawned from

Germanic soil. The publisher Otto Wigand, in 1858 referred to the “racial antagonism between the children of Jacob who are of Asiatic descent, and the descendents of Teut and Hermann who have inhabited Europe from time immemorial, between the proud and tall, blond Aryan and the short, black-eyed, dark-haired Jew,” and he went on: “Races which differ to such degree, oppose each other instinctively and, against such opposition, reason and good sense are powerless.” If such instinctive opposition between individual Germans and individual Jews did indeed exist, it would have been a sheer impossibility for Jews to settle in Germany for any length of time at all, let alone throughout the centuries. (Hans Israel Bach. *The German Jew: A Synthesis of Judaism and Western Civilization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984: 128-29) Thus, clearly are defined the physical templates which Wagner uses to divide and classify the Volsungs from the Nibelungs, and the Rhine symbolizes a battlefield of Germanic soil, upon which Jewish culture had invaded.

His own patronage questionable, Wagner was obsessed with physical characteristics. He was the son either of the police actuary Friedrich Wagner, who died soon after his birth, or of his mother’s friend the painter, actor and poet Ludwig Geyer, whom she married in August 1814. The second, a Jew, was who Wagner believed to be his real father, since his own physical characteristics did not resemble Friedrich Wagner’s. This is believed to be the foundation of Wagner’s anti-Semitism. Wagner inherited his belief that the physical differences of Jews inherently and universally associates in them disagreeable moral persuasions and psyches from a host of traditions within German culture. In his world, the Jew’s difference was discerned in his

purportedly idiosyncratic corporeal signs, such as stature, voice, smell, hair, gait, gestures, sexuality and physiognomy. (Weiner, 8) While Richard Wagner lived decades before the birth of Nazism, his influence on the movement and especially on its leader was enormous. It is stated by Adolf Hitler in Volume 1 of *Mein Kampf*, that his infatuation with Wagner was derived from a performance of the opera *Parsifal*, which was his first at the age of twelve. The message of anti-Semitism was thus derived from its expression in an opera, rather than from Wagner's own writings, which did however strongly support this belief. It is to be expected, therefore, that the devaluation of Jewish culture must manifest itself in Wagner's works. In a tractate, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, first published in 1850 under a pseudonym in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Wagner wrote that Jewish music is bereft of all expression, characterized by coldness and indifference, triviality and nonsense. The Jew, he claimed, has no true passion to impel him to artistic creation. The Jewish composer, according to Wagner, makes a confused heap of the forms and styles of all ages and masters. In *Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik*, Wagner spoke of the "harmful influence of Jewry on the morality of the nation," adding that the subversive power of Jewry stands in contrast to the German psyche. The only influence of Judaism in artistic expression that was tolerable to Wagner was that it be held to ridicule and in contempt, and this belief manifests itself in the *Ring's* dwarven embodiment of Jewish culture.

On its most prevalent level, the *Ring of the Nibelung* is about the struggle of power in opposition to love. Power is signified by the gold protected by the Rhine-maidens, which can only be obtained by the renunciation of love; "He must pronounce a

curse on love,” and “must renounce all joys of love” (Richard Wagner. *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Trans. Andrew Porter. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977. *Rhinegold*, Scene I, p 15). The currency of power is understood to be gold, which may be accumulated by the intrinsic power of a ring fashioned from the initially claimed gold of the Rhinemaids. A speculative assessment concludes that the Rhinemaids gold is in no way different from the gold the Alberich commands his enslaved race to collect, but rather the items fashioned from the gold originally stolen from the Maids possesses its power by the conscious choice of its procurer to renounce love. Thus, greed is not ephemeral but rather engenders its own perpetuation through the initial choice. Wagner’s decision to utilize this medium no doubt relates to the before discussed importance of wealth to the culture of European Jews. The implication that arises is that Love is in direct opposition to power and greed, and that by choosing the latter over the first is to define Jewish moral beliefs. As presented, and in affiliation with common perceptions of Jewry, this is a choice that can only be made by a person of Jewish lineage. It identifies Alberich as cold and greedy, incapable of love beyond that for possession and power. Moreover, the gold must be stolen. The maids identify Alberich as a “robber” who must “seize from the rock [their] gold,” (Porter. *Rhinegold*, Scene I, p 16) and by so doing, distance him from moral consciousness. Furthermore, Alberich’s plans for the gold are equally devoid of morality, exemplifying ignorant greed and the unrivaled desire to exert power over all things:

Gold can be mined here,

And gold can be stored here,

Deep in Nibelheim's caves.

Then with my wealth

From the darkness I'll rise,

Rise and be master of all things;

The whole wide world

I'll buy for myself with the treasure! (Porter. Rhinegold, Scene 3, p 47)

This prediction is novel to the gods Loge and Wotan, to whom it is addressed, because they are of a superior race that needs no system of barter. The oaths on Wotan's spear suffice as contractual. Wagner's disapproval of Jewish prominence in banking institutions is incorporated into the Nibelung's inferior stature as a race from which he infers that they must scheme and create a monetary method of gaining power.

My golden grasp

will seize on you gods and destroy you!

Once I renounced all joys of love.

All those who live,

all shall renounce them!

Enchanted by gold

your greed for gold shall enslave you!

For first your men

shall yield to my might,

then your lovely women,

who despise me and jeer,
shall grant to Alberich's force
what love could not win! (Porter. *Rhinegold*, Scene III)

Jews, as Wagner perceived them, are morally inferior to their German neighbors, as the Nibelheim dwarves are inferior to the races beneath whom they live. It is not surprising therefore that Loge and Wotan must descend beneath the realm they inhabit to the caves in which this race hovers. In his essay *Versuch über Wagner*, Theodore W. Adorno puts forward the thesis that Alberich and Mime, at the deepest level are Jewish caricatures, describing Alberich as 'obsessed with gold, invisibly anonymous and quick to exploit others,' while Mime is described as 'shoulder-shrugging, garrulous and bubbling over with deceit.' This seemingly speculative claim is in fact an accurate interpretation. In the first draft of the *Ring* scenario in 1848, Wagner described the Nibelungs as beings who moved through the bowels of the earth like vermin in a dead body. It is an image which returns in Wagner's essay on *Das Judenthum in der Musik* of 1850, where Jews are again likened to vermin: 'only in real life can we, too, rediscover the spirit of art, not in its vermin-infested corpse.'" (Martin Van Amerongen. *Wagner: A Case History*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1984: 42-3) The gods, by the definitive and implied virtue of their race "far above [the dwarves] live, laugh and love" (Porter. *Rhinegold*, Scene 3, p 47). Incapable of virtues associated with species living in ascension from his cavernous depths, Alberich's only discourse in debasing superior races is through attempting to master monetary power with the intent that they will also succumb to the greed to which he is subject.

The commonality of these intentions is not singular to Alberich's persona, but implied as universally characteristic of the Nibelungs by the shared motives of his brother Mime. Mime is equally cunning, and indulges the same initiative of furthering his own gain to the extent of oppressing all those around him, including his brother. As he reveals to Loge, in forging the tarnhelm his intentions are to "keep one thing for [himself] and use the spell to free [him] from Alberich's power...by using the helm [he] might catch him. That ring – could [he] but seize it, then though [he's] forced now to serve him, when free, [he] could make [Alberich] [his] slave." (Porter. *The Rhinegold*, Scene III)

Wagner depicts that the need for power is self-consuming, and in a race naturally devoid of virtue, power can only be attained by his Jewish caricatures through the false pretense of treachery. Thus, Wagner collaborates the amoral view of greed established in his dwarven characters with the prominence of Jews in European banking.

Because Alberich and Mime are of the same race, they are viewed independently by various figures in the cycle of the *Ring* as possessing the features of the same lowly and slimy animal. With the allegory of the fish, Siegfried, on the other hand, automatically senses his affinity with a creature already associated in the audience's mind with unsullied, pure Nature. Indeed, it is the entrance of the foreign, toad-like Alberich into the golden and virginal waters of the fish-filled Rhine that brings about the demise of its purely natural state, and when Siegfried senses Mime's difference, there is an implication of natural antithesis as well. The fish is an exemplar of the shining, sunny

side of Nature, while the toad is a ground-dweller, a creature of the dark. (Weiner, 92)

No wonder Siegfried exclaims to the Nibelung:

Everything to me is dearer than you:

birds in branches

and fish in the brook-

all are dear to me,

far more than you. (Porter. *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene I)

Within the motivically consistent bestiary of the *Ring*, it is to a creature most like an eel, and quite unlike the gleaming, superior and seductively elegant fish, that the final Rhinemaiden, Flosshilde, likens Alberich to a toad, speaking specifically of his toad shape. It is therefore appropriate that when Alberich transforms himself into other animal shapes in the presence of Loge and Wotan in the Nibelheim scene, he chooses those creatures who are closest to his own nature: first the eel-like dragon and then the toad. The formulation of his toad-invoking spell echoes the description of his physical appearance by Flosshilde:

And your shape like a toad,

and the croak of your voice. (Porter. *The Rhinegold*, Scene I)

Wagner consistently illustrates the Nibelungs to be toad-like in their appearance. Both with the eel-like dragon and the toad, established are traits that may be attributed to

animals without beauty and exuding revulsion. They exist in slime and filth that are integral to their being. The bulbous eyes and large mouth of the toad, its feeble, webbed hands and tendency to exist in perpetual hiding are intentionally conveyed to the manner in which Wagner views the Jewish race. The dark pigmentation of a toad's skin and its protruding cranium liken themselves to the dark color and tendency toward baldness that many Jews exhibit. Aside from physiognomy, of crucial importance is the habitat of the Nibelungs in juxtaposition to that of the Volsungs; the Nibelungs are portrayed as existing outside of nature, almost shunned from coexistence with it. Act II, Scene II of *Siegfried* depicts a scenario in which Siegfried freely attempts communication with a bird, first by fashioning a reed as a flute, and then by blowing a melody on his horn. The intent is to show that Siegfried harmoniously coexists with nature and this premise is further elaborated on by his later attained ability to understand the language of birds after tasting Fafner's blood, and by the habitat in which he naturally exists: the surface of earth. In complete opposition to this is the region in which the Nibelungs live, Middle Earth. As Wotan and Loge descend into the earth's depths to confront Alberich in Scene III of *The Rhinegold*, no mention of any other species is made. Furthermore, Mime in Act I of *Siegfried* lives in a cave and ventures out only to collect food and for his deceptive plot to gain Fafner's gold. Thus, Mime takes from nature and contributes nothing. He is therefore an outsider to nature rather than a species in its conception. Siegfried on the other hand, enjoys playing with nature's animals and is most comfortable outside, rather than in Mime's cave. This is why Mime is threatened by Siegfried bringing a bear to his dwelling, rather than by the danger that such an animal imposes toward him.

A definitive Jewish mother, Mime is as unlike his foster child as he could be. He is sly and adept at the craft of dissembling, attempts to use the boy as a means of furthering his own gain, is cowardly and even paranoiac, and is imbued with physical features that, within the spectrum of the stereotypical corporeal iconographies of race in the nineteenth century, characterize him as diametrically opposed to the young superman. That the Volsung-as-German hero is the opposite of the Nibelung-as-Jew is suggested in *'Das Judentum in der Musik'* when Wagner writes that 'we cannot imagine an antique or modern character, be it a hero or a lover, represented by a Jew on stage, without in the process sensing the inappropriateness – to the point of comedy – of such an idea' (GS 13: 11-12) Siegfried himself repeatedly draws attention to the difference between his physiology and that of his foster parent and in so doing underscores Wagner's belief in the indelible appearance, in the corporeal encoding, of racial difference. This belief surfaces most vehemently when Siegfried scorns Mime for claiming to be his parent(s), and the basis for his anger toward and hatred of Mime are founded on the obvious physical differences between the two. As previously stated, to Siegfried Wagner associates the graceful and shimmering beauty of a fish, but to Mime and all other Nibelungs (it was by tricking Alberich into changing himself into a toad that Wotan and Loge were able to seize the ring from him) Wagner establishes the grotesque comparison of a toad, a creature associated with slime, burrowing in mud, and manifest imperfections in its skin. The overwhelming dissimilarities between the two creatures transfers its validity to the contrast between a Volsung and a Nibelung, and this antithesis gives

justification to the loathing and contempt with which Siegfried instinctually views a member of a detestable and inferior race.

And there in the stream

I saw my face –

It wasn't like yours,

Not in the least,

No more than a toad

Resembles a fish.

No fish had a toad for a father! (Porter. *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene I)

A point that is not to be overlooked is that another reason for Siegfried's anger is that he has caught Mime in a lie. Primarily, this makes manifest within Mime's character the inherent capacity for treachery and the drive to deceive for personal gain. In this case it is an elaborate plan to command the ring himself, returning to the premise of an individual exemplifying the greed exemplifying his race. Wagner intentionally shows this detriment in both Alberich and Mime to make it an established criteria found in all Nibelungs. Also, by allowing Mime's deception to be easily deduced by the natural reasoning of his hero Siegfried, Wagner shows the insult Mime makes toward Siegfried's intelligence, which he naturally possesses as a virtue of his superior race. Thus, the Nibelungs are belittled by their own ignorance in believing that they are capable of deceiving a noble and virtuous race.

He who recognizes his difference from others also recognizes his ties to those who are not different, who are like him. In '*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*' Wagner states explicitly: "That which should be distinguished must necessarily have that from which it is to distinguish itself. He who wants to be completely himself must first recognize what he is; this he recognizes however first in the difference from that which he is not: if he wanted to separate himself from that which is different from himself, he would not be anything different, and thus no longer something recognizable." Recognition, then, serves not simply to establish one's own identity but to do so through a process of exclusion. The Self 'knows' itself by sensing its ties with its community and by discerning its difference from those who are foreign. (Weiner, 45) Again, Wagner emphasizes the deductive and instinctual reasoning he credits to Siegfried.

Though its mythological influence and surface theme of love in opposition to power define *The Ring of the Nibelung* as a classic and integral story that perpetuates itself in its attempt to define the nature of man, Wagner has intentionally incorporated his personal prejudices against Jewish culture and made his opera a political statement of the German perceived threat of Jewish infiltration of Germanic soil. Accordingly, Alberich and Mime, Wagner's personifications of the Jewish race which he views with animosity, are portrayed as a contemptible force that can only fail in the opposition of German virtue. Ascribed to the Nibelungs are all characteristics that German prejudice condemns in Judaism. Therefore, in depth exploration of *The Ring of the Nibelung* can only find a skewed, if not subliminal theme that is the virtue of the Germanic race over the portrayed threat of Jewish existence.