

## **Conventions of Greek Drama in *Der Ring des Nibelungen***

Any drama in the western tradition must be in dialogue with Greek drama. The heritage of drama is inextricably linked to the great Greek playwrights, for whom drama truly took on the role it continues to play: to replicate life in its most hyperbolic form. Their aim, the union of all arts, was later adopted by Richard Wagner, through the notion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total art work. However, despite Wagner's very similar views as to the function of drama, *vis-à-vis* the Greeks, he had slightly more complicated opinions about drama's structure, and the conventions through which it should be carried out. In *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner makes something of a return to Greek conventions, but finds ways either to invert or amplify them. Many of these changes help to emphasize a key theme in Wagner's mature work: a shift from social consciousness to the consciousness of the individual.

### **I. *Deus ex machina***

The term *deus ex machina* ("god out of the machine") is often applied to any contrived resolution to a literary problem. In Greek drama, though, it must refer to a divine figure who, at a climactic moment, offers aid to one character (e.g. Helios in *Medea*) or counsel to settle an argument between two antagonized characters (e.g. Heracles in *Philoctetes*). Perhaps the example most applicable to Wagner's *Ring* is Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, in which Apollo creates a court to settle the argument between Orestes and the Furies, and manages to satisfy both. However, by virtue of creating that court, he essentially hands his law-making power off to the humans; as Athena states, "From this time on, the race of Aegeus / will forever uphold this judicial assembly" (Aeschylus 146, ll. 683-684). In effect, Apollo assures his own destruction, or at least a

significant diminishing in his own worth, so that he can bring humans into a higher plane that will rely on justice rather than revenge.

Wotan also assures his own destruction by intervening with the affairs of humans. However, in his case, it is unintentional. Wagner shifts the roles of the gods from their status in Greek drama; rather than making them stock, archetypal figures, he turns them into complicated beings whose desires move the plot forward. Wotan's desires are constantly at stake; it is an attempt to fulfill these desires (namely, to get the Ring) that motivates him to intervene in the human world in the first place. The inversion of the Greek paradigm occurs because Wotan's intervention resolves nothing. His three attempts to establish order, which correspond to the first three operas of the *Ring*, are the spear, Siegmund, and Siegfried. In each case, Wotan's plan is somehow disrupted, prompting further plot action. Only when Siegfried confronts human society without Wotan's help and is subsequently destroyed by it, does any sort of resolution occur. Unlike Apollo, Wotan may be characterized as a *deus in machinam*, a god who retreats *into* the machine after he has done his work in advancing humanity. In the end, Wotan's order fails because it is a means to further his own lust for power. Apollo's, on the other hand, succeeds since it is genuinely in the best interest of humanity. Humanity in *The Ring* is left to determine its own best interest, without a divine authority. This absence of divine resolution is absolutely crucial to a theme present in the *Ring* as well as many of Wagner's other mature operas: that the old must resign and give way to the new, but that neither old nor young will have any guarantee of being able to assert itself in the new world.

## II. The Chorus

The Greek chorus represents an *ethos*, a social consciousness that serves as a constant reminder of the moral and social issues at stake in the drama. At least in tragedy, it serves as a foil for the individual whose descent is portrayed. Characteristically, it is highly dynamic, but unlike the protagonist, it is able to survive disaster and exist in the same form to the end of the drama.

However, despite its seeming immortality, it is impotent to interfere with individuals, or for that matter, to act at all. Hegel points out this powerlessness as a means of standing in for the audience who witnesses the action:

“It is the commonalty in general, whose wisdom finds utterance in the Chorus of the Elders; in the powerlessness of this chorus the generality finds its representative, because the common people itself compose merely the positive and passive material for the individuality of the government confronting it. Lacking the power to negate and oppose, it is unable to hold together and keep within bounds the riches and varied fullness of divine life” (Hegel 292).

By both “commonalty” and “generality,” Hegel refers to the audience. This notion of being powerless to affect dramatic action, yet still judging it, has crucial implications for the audience as well as the chorus. It forces the audience to pass judgment as well, even if it cannot directly oppose. Moreover, by its very nature drama allows for continuous revelation, and the shift in judgment, so that the chorus can change its opinion in the middle of the action. “(The chorus in *Antigone*) makes itself felt as a dramatic force neither by taking a prominent part in the action nor by displaying any marked character, but rather by the veering of its sympathies” (Kitto 159). This is what gives the chorus its dynamism.

The Chorus of Vassals in *Götterdämmerung* is the only authentic chorus seen in the *Ring*. In creating it, Wagner uses the chorus as *ethos*, but alienates it from the audience, and takes away its dynamism. As soon as they appear on stage in Act III Scene 2, the vassals reveal themselves as custodians of the social mores of Gunther's society. First, they appear as defenders of military prowess: "We come with our weapons! ... Say what foe is near! / Who comes to fight?" (Wagner 289). The vassals are conscious of the role of honor in the society at large, and the importance of military force in maintaining that honor. Moreover, they act as agents of religious reverence, which is a key function of the Greek chorus. Hagen directs them to:

Take a boar as offering,  
kill it for Froh;  
and a goat in its prime  
strike it down for Donnor! (Wagner 290)

This is highly analogous to the *parados*, or choral entry song, in which the Greek chorus itself invokes one or more gods. This occurs in the *parados* from *Oedipus Tyrannus*:

Daughter of Zeus, I first call on you,  
Immortal Athena—  
And on the earth-holder, your sister  
Artemis, who is seated on her round throne (Sophocles 69, ll. 158-161)

However, Wagner avoids the quasi-religious overtones present for Sophocles, by virtue of his modern audience: a society that, if it believes in a God, hardly believes in such manifestations as Donner and Froh. Where Sophocles' chorus invokes religion, the audience's legitimate belief, Wagner's invokes myth. That is not to say Wagner is diminishing the importance of myth; far from it, but already there is an incongruity between chorus and audience by virtue of belief.

Wagner's audience knows the chorus is invoking entirely fantastic, mythical beings, while this is not the case for Sophocles. Thus, already within the religious sphere, the audience begins to be alienated from the chorus.

This alienation in *Götterdämmerung* is strengthened by the chorus's ethical stance, or lack thereof. The "veering of sympathies" Hegel mentions only occurs once, and very subtly: when Siegfried swears his honor on Hagen's spear. Before this, the vassals are vaguely skeptical of his intentions, and afterwards, they genuinely want to know more about him; but in neither case do they take a committal ethical stance toward Siegfried. For all of Hagen's attempts to set Siegfried up for condemnation in the social sphere, the vassals never truly pass judgment on Siegfried for dishonoring Brünnhilde. They try to prevent Hagen from killing Siegfried, but fail, and afterwards, they neither decry Hagen nor praise Siegfried; they simply bear his body away. The actual praising of the tragic hero after his demise, a role normally filled by the Greek chorus, falls on Brünnhilde. The effect of all this is to prevent the Chorus of Vassals, which as in Greek drama is an agent of social consciousness, from being a stand-in for the audience. Where, for the Greeks, the chorus's judgments are a means to sympathize with the protagonist, Wagner achieves sympathy through other means. When the chorus no longer serves as an agent of sympathy, its feelings are called into question, and in turn, the social consciousness is called into question. Although Siegfried is ultimately praised and Hagen is ultimately condemned, neither of this happens by virtue of the social order. Thus, the audience is left wondering what the point of the social order is, if things seem to be resolved by individual consciousnesses.

However, there is room in the *Ring* for an agent that picks up the slack where the *Götterdämmerung* chorus fails, something that tracks the audience's sympathies for individual characters, and provides an actual commentary on the action. This is achieved through music, or

more specifically, musical motives. Brian Magee sums up Wagner's theory for how motives perform the job of the chorus:

[Wagner] relates his proposed use of the orchestra to the function of the chorus in Greek drama. The chorus was never off stage, ... heightening significant moments, encouraging and rejoicing, remembering what the characters had forgotten or did not know, foretelling a future unknown to them, breaking out into lamentations or warnings, and drawing it all together in the end – all functions that could now be performed better by the symphony orchestra. If a musical motive were introduced in connection with a particular character, emotion, object or situation, its subsequent use would recall that original association to the listener's mind, and thus enable the orchestra to reminisce – and equally to look forward. (Magee 91)

Indeed, the work of remembrance and of commentary which is so characteristic of the Greek chorus is fulfilled by Wagner's motives. Although there are several significant scenes of exposition in the *Ring* in which the characters reminisce for themselves (Wotan in Act II of *Die Walküre*, Wotan in Act I of *Siegfried*, the Norns in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried in Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, and dozens of other minor ones), in each case they are prompted and moved forward by the musical motives. In effect, Wagner takes the call-and-response method used between the Greek chorus and the protagonist, e.g. Oedipus' exchange with the chorus on learning of Jocasta's death (Sophocles 116-118), and melds them. Instead of a distinct call and response, Wagner allows the audience to hear in continuum both the protagonist's conscious thought and the music's rejoinder. However, like the Greek chorus, the music is not dependent on the protagonist to operate. Each of the preludes in the *Ring* allows for the same

type of reminiscence which occurs while the Greek chorus is alone on stage. In particular, the prelude to *Siegfried* has the same effect as the choral entry song of Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*. Starting with the Nibelung theme, and culminating with the half-step power motive and the ring theme, the prelude's effect is to chronicle the rise of the Nibelungs, and Alberich's theft of power by repeating only three different musical phrases. Similarly, at the beginning of *The Libation Bearers*, the chorus sums up the action of the previous play *Agamemnon*, by way of a series of images: first screaming: "For all this life my heart has fed / on tortured cries of grief" (Aeschylus 70 ll. 26-27), then blood: "What can redeem blood once spilled?" (Aeschylus 71, l. 48), and lastly darkness: "for those who dwell in shadows, for the powerless shrouded by the night" (Aeschylus 71, ll. 64-65). In effect, Wagner's motives are a musical equivalent of these images, in the sense that each represents a simple, singular concept, but when united, they can provide a narrative of previous action.

However, Wagner's motives achieve something that the Greek chorus does not. Instead of representing a social consciousness, like the Greek chorus, or for that matter the Chorus of Vassals in *Götterdämmerung*, the motives usually represent the consciousness of an individual. Motives are typically associated with individuals, not groups. Even the motives representing the different races (gods, giants, dwarfs) eventually come to represent individuals (Wotan, Fafner, Alberich or Mime). That is not to say that motives cannot be composite, but when they are, they typically refer to a relationship between two people, e.g. the composite motive created from Siegmund's and Sieglinde's respective individual motives. Moreover, the composite is never entirely homogeneous; Sieglinde's theme can still be heard distinctly from Siegmund's. Unlike the chorus, in which it is impossible to make distinctions among individual members, the motives display consistent differentiation. This speaks to the importance of individual

consciousness in Wagner's work. Paradoxically, the music is external to the action, but brings out the characters' most intimately internal feelings, such that there are motives corresponding to a single emotion for a single character (Wotan's frustration, Siegfried's anger, etc.) The effect is that Wagner dwells on individual consciousness, and suggests that the will of the individual is somehow incongruous with that of society. Individuals can combine through love, but to try to create a stable social unit out of many individuals is an inevitable failure. This is why each of the protagonists: Wotan, Siegmund, Siegfried, and Brünnhilde, is brought down by his or her contact with a human society. To Wagner, the very notion of a chorus that represents a homogeneous society, and that can be in dialogue with the protagonist, is completely misguided. Rather, any commentary on the protagonist must be self-referential; the audience must see the individual's consciousness commenting on itself. This, perhaps even more so than any classical method of inducing *pathos*, allows the audience to identify with the protagonist, and sympathize with him.



### III. The Unities

The three unities of place, time, and action are often held as the be-all and end-all of dramatic convention in Ancient Greece. This belief is somewhat misguided, and it is more useful to view the unities as a rubric for dramatic criticism than an actual convention per se. All three were developed after the deaths of Euripides and Sophocles: the unities of action and time by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and the unity of place by Pierre Corneille in the 1660's (Hegel 10). They were not hard and fast rules. Aeschylus, for example, violates the unity of place through a scene change from Delphi to Athens in *Eumenides*, written two thousand years before there was even a term for it. However, the unities are useful tools, because they characterize distinct trends and tendencies in Greek drama. Moreover, they had a huge impact on the Classicist French drama of the early nineteenth century, to which Wagner was in some way responding. Thus, it is helpful to examine the ways in which Wagner uses the unities, whether by accepting them or getting around them.

The unity of place proposes simply that a drama should stay within the confines of a certain space, roughly equivalent to the space of a stage. Hegel refers to this as the “inalterability of one exclusive *locale* of the action proposed,” and points out that “the French in particular have deduced (the unity of place) from classic tragedy and the critique of Aristotle thereupon. As a matter of fact, Aristotle merely says that the duration of tragic action should not exceed at most the length of a day. He does not mention the unity of place at all” (Hegel 10). However, even though Aristotle did not notice the unity of place, most Greek dramas obey it. Exceptions include Sophocles' *Ajax* and Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, mentioned above. Apart from these, most Greek dramas take place entirely in some sort of distinct civic setting, in which the chorus forms either part of the populus or a governing council. Of course, the French classicists and the Elizabethans

changed this by having a series of different acts and scenes, each of which could be judged as a separate entity to be judged by the unity of place. However, in both *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner performs scene changes in mid-action, without even a pause in music. Moreover, with his meticulously detailed scenes, Wagner avoids what had been a problem with violating the unity of place. Hegel uses the example of Shakespeare, who violated the unity of place:

“In a theatrical representation, however, we must not put too great a strain on the imaginative faculty beyond the point which contradicts the ordinary vision of life. Shakespeare, for example, in whose tragedies and comedies there is a very frequent change of scene, had posts put up with notices attached to them indicating the particular scene or view. A device of this kind is a poor sort of affair, and can only impair the dramatic effect.” (Hegel 11)

Wagner solves the problem of imaginative strain by giving the audience an overtly elaborate scene, as opposed to the minimalist sets that characterized most drama from the Greeks up until the Elizabethan period. Wagner’s tendency is to go overboard with stage directions. The Valkyrie Rock scene, used in each opera except *Das Rheingold*, is described in meticulous detail: “On the right, a pinewood bounds the stage. On the left, the entrance to a cave which looks like a natural room; above it, the rock rises to its highest point. At the back the view is entirely open; rocks of various heights border a precipice” (Wagner 128). Moreover, he requests what is often impossible even in modern productions, from the flying cloudbanks on Valkyrie Rock (Wagner 128) to the “mighty flood” (Wagner 328) that occurs onstage at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. The combined effect of all of this is proto-cinematic, and enables the drama to have real spatial movement.

At least in the *Ring*, Wagner is somewhat more loyal to the unities of time and action than he is to the unity of place (this is not true of *Tristan und Isolde* or *Parsifal*). As was mentioned before, Aristotle's only requirement for the unity of time is that the drama take place within one day. However, for most Greek dramas, this can be specified to action that takes place in only as much time as the play itself requires. It is not totally unreasonable to accept that in two hours' time, Oedipus learns of his past and blinds himself, or that Antigone defies Creon and is executed, since the audience sees it happening in real time. Similarly, it is not too hard to imagine Siegfried's forging Notung, killing Fafner, and claiming Brünnhilde within a four hour period. With the possible exception of Siegfried's Rhine Journey between the Prologue and Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, each opera of the *Ring* is temporally continuous, with one act taking place immediately after the end of the previous one. The most significant temporal gaps in the *Ring* occur between the operas. Of course, if each opera is treated as a separate drama, then this still obeys the unity of time.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, throughout the *Ring* cycle, Wagner obeys the unity of action, which Hegel describes as the "one truly inviolable rule.... Every action must without exception have a *distinct* object which it seeks to achieve" (Hegel 12). Every action in the *Ring* works toward an inevitable *telos*: the destruction of Wotan and the return of the Rhinegold to the Rhinemaidens. The only part of the *Ring* that might seem to violate this unity is Act I of *Die Walküre*, which features none of the characters or plot elements the audience is familiar with from *Das Rheingold*. However, as the audience learns later through Wotan's exposition in Act II, Siegmund's story is part of his intricate plan, and is tightly woven into Wotan's quest to get the

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the temporal structure of *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* mimics that of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. In each case, roughly a generation passes between the first drama and the second; enough time for the son of the hero from the first to grow up and become the hero of the second (Agamemnon/Orestes, Siegmund/Siegfried). An indefinite amount of time, perhaps a number of weeks or months, passes between the second drama and the third; enough time for the Furies to terrorize Orestes, or for Brünnhilde to teach Siegfried the ways of the world.

Ring back. Indeed, the plot itself is so tightly woven that there is little room for subplots; it is difficult to imagine removing any individual plot element from the *Ring* without serious consequences. The struggle between Wotan and Alberich to obtain the Ring, along with the inevitability that neither one of them will get it, informs the *Ring Cycle's* entire plot.

#### IV. The Dichotomies

A conflict between two complex sets of ideals is constantly at work in Greek drama. These ideals may, for terminology's sake, be lumped under the titles "masculine" and "feminine." This is especially useful in dramas with female protagonists (e.g. *Antigone*, *Medea*, *Electra*) who have convictions that are somehow incongruous with the male-dominated society. In *Antigone*, for instance, Creon clearly represents masculine logic, Sophistic new learning, and the good of the community, while Antigone represents feminine passion, religious tradition, and the good of family. This same dichotomy exists between Jason and Medea, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes and the Furies, and so on. Most of Attic tragedy deals with some aspect of this masculine versus feminine conflict, and (in the case of Aeschylus and Sophocles, if not Euripides) opts for a way to compromise the two.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, (which he dedicated to Wagner), Nietzsche famously classifies these two systems of ideals in terms of the two gods of art, and calls the masculine and feminine sets of ideals the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian," respectively:

The further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, just as reproduction depends upon the duality of the sexes, their continuing strife and only periodically occurring reconciliation.... With those two gods of art, Apollo and Dionysus, we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. (Nietzsche II, 1, par. 1-2)

Nietzsche does this in order to highlight the similarities between Greek tragedy and Wagner's project; to suggest that the aforementioned masculine and feminine ideals were somehow bound

up with corresponding types of art. This makes the content of drama, the masculine/feminine conflict, an allegory for the project of drama as a whole, a conflict of two opposing arts.

Wagner takes a completely different approach to masculine/feminine dichotomies, compared to the Nietzschean view. In the *Ring* there is not always a clear-cut difference between the two sides. Wagner's interpretation of sexual union often relies on androgyny, on sexual roles becoming interchangeable and indistinguishable. "Then you are Siegfried and Brünnhilde," says Brünnhilde in the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, to which Siegfried responds, "Where I am, both are united" (Wagner 255). The only productive sexual relationships in the *Ring* are ones that rely on sameness. In most cases, this takes the form of incest, e.g. Siegmund and Sieglinde, and Siegfried and Brünnhilde. On the other hand, relationships between differentiated men and women that arise for social or contractual reasons: Fasolt and Freia, Hunding and Sieglinde, Siegfried and Gurtrune, Gunther and Brünnhilde, etc., are shown to be hollow and devoid of any true feeling, except possibly lust. The success of homogeneous love at the expense of heterogeneous love overturns most classical conceptions of gender, as well as the various gender expectations the audience may harbor.

Despite this thematic of androgyny and incest, there is something to be said for a differentiation of masculinity and femininity in the *Ring*. However, it exists in a highly modified form of the Greek paradigm. Wotan, for example, fits into the Apollonian or masculine category through his notions of rule by law, since civic law (or *nomos*) is often associated with masculinity in the classic view. However, Wotan is not authentically Apollonian because he is not working toward social order. His only lasting interaction with a human occurs when he raises Siegmund, but this takes place in the wilderness outside of society. Moreover, it is difficult to associate Wotan with any sort of masculine logic as the Greeks might have conceived it. His

actions are highly illogical; he repeatedly attempts the same thing without success: to derive from himself an order for the world. In this respect, he adopts the passion and instinct of a Dionysian character. For Wagner, what makes Wotan distinctly masculine, along with Siegmund and Siegfried for that matter, is that he is a conscious being of action. The women around him become manifestations of his unconscious feelings. This is why Fricka does not act; she simply fuels Wotan's guilt about violating Hunding's social order, in order to get him to act. Erda serves essentially the same function, by pleading the case of the Rhinemaidens. Brünnhilde, on the other hand, acts, but only as a manifestation of Wotan's will; she even says as much in Act II of *Die Walküre*: "What am I / if not your will alone?" (Wagner 106). Even when she violates his command at the end of Act II, it is to obey a deeper, subconscious will that exists underneath the command; she points out to Wotan "you were false to yourself" (Wagner 145). Brünnhilde seems to play a similar unconscious role with Siegfried; it is he who goes out into the world as a conscious agent while she remains on the otherworldly Valkyrie Rock. It is only after her relationship with Siegfried is broken, through her marriage to Gunther, that she becomes a free agent capable of acting on her own. The effect of this modified masculine / feminine dynamic creates a similar effect to using the orchestra as chorus. It emphasizes the consciousness of the individual, as opposed to social roles the individual should fill.

### Conclusion

For all of Wagner's belief that Greek drama was the highest form of art, he sought to break its limitations. To the ever-present theme of Greek tragedy, that "Power corrupts," Wagner adds a clause to obtain the over-arching theme of the *Ring*: "Power corrupts, but love redeems." The nature of this theme forces him to de-emphasize the role of society in drama, and to further problematize the individual's relationship with society. In practice, he goes about this by modifying or hyperbolizing classical conventions, so that he can create a modified, hyperbolized view of the individual. When compared to the work of his contemporaries, some elements of the *Ring* seem to return to classical convention, while others seem to shatter any classical or modern notion of how drama should be done. This is part of the reason why the *Ring* was so revolutionary, not only in the history of music-drama, but drama itself.

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