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Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*

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Loge and Loki

Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* offers a complex portrayal of the Norse gods originally found in the text of *The Elder Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the entire opera is Wagner's character Loge, based upon the Norse god Loki. It seems strange, however, that Wagner depicts Loge as a sympathetic character, a great departure from the demonic Loki of Norse mythology. But by creating a seemingly benevolent Loge, Wagner not only substantiates him as a character whose true motivation is the desire for control, but also provides the backdrop for an interesting relationship with Wotan, the All-Father and ruler of the gods. At the same time, there are numerous reasons why he would not have wanted to portray Loge as simply a god of evil, motivated only by the perpetuation of mischief.

In order for us to understand the relationship between Loki and Loge we must first look at the sources (*Poems of the Elder Edda*, *Saga of the Volsungs*, and *the Prose Edda*) to understand the character Wagner drew upon to create his Loge. Loki is commonly conceived as being a god of evil, the father of terrible monsters such as Hel and Fenrir. In a sense this is true, but at the same time this is a simple and inaccurate label. One of the main reasons he is seen as a nemesis throughout the sources is that he falls outside the values of the Norse code of heroics. Throughout Norse mythology and

folklore, great emphasis is placed on manly strength and bravery. Even in the face of certain death it is better to fight courageously and valiantly than to back down in any way. For example, in *The Fall of the Volsung* from *Saga of the Volsungs*, Signy informs her father of King Siggeir's secret plans to surprise and kill the Volsung clan. She tells her father to "return at once to (his) kingdom and gather the largest force (he) can."¹ King Volsung then responds quite dramatically "all people will bear witness that unborn I spoke one word and made the vow that I would flee neither fire nor iron from fear, and so I have done until now..."² This emphasis on brute strength and valor is portrayed and romanticized all throughout the sources. Never, though, does a hero display an incredible amount of intellect. In fact, characters who display the ability for deceit or cunning are usually viewed as evil, just as King Siggeir is in the previous example. Loki is, as Snorri Sturluson calls him, "the father- of-lies and disgrace-of-gods-and-men,"³ because he uses intellect as his strength to control characters who are physically stronger and more valiant than he. In contrast to the masculine ideal, Loki is portrayed as almost asexual and is considerably more feminine than Odin or Thor. In one tale Loki turns himself into a mare and then gives birth to Sleipnir, and there are many other instances where Loki changes sex in order to attain some end. This sharply contrasts with a hero such as Thor, who wants nothing to do with having to dress up like a woman, as he is forced to do in order to regain his hammer in *the Lay of Thrym*. Therefore, despite the common view

¹ *Saga of the Volsungs* Trans. Jesse L Byock Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. 40

² *Saga of the Volsungs* Trans. Jesse L Byock. 40

³ Snorri Sturluson *The Prose Edda* Trans. Jean I. Young Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954. 55

that Loki is simply a god of malignant forces, it is clear that it is not simply Loki's deeds which earn him this label, for Loki carries out good as well as bad actions just as almost all of the other gods. But it is the way in which he accomplishes these deeds that make him the bane of both gods and men.

There exists even more solid evidence in the sources to indicate that Loki is more than just a god of evil or "father-of-lies."⁴ For example in *Loki's Insolence* found in the *Elder Edda*, it is revealed that Odin is a blood brother of Loki. In a most ironic and interesting passage Loki addresses Odin: "Odin, you told me long ago when we blended our blood together, that never again would you take a drink of ale unless it was brought to us both."⁵ Odin replies, "Vidar stand up and give your seat to Fenrir's father..."⁶ What makes this passage so intriguing is the fact that Fenrir will eventually kill Odin in the final battle and Odin's son Vidar will avenge his father's death. The fact that Odin fully knows this and the irony of his words is made apparent by the fact that he refers to Loki as "Fenrir's father."⁷ Loki's blood brotherhood to Odin suggests that they are, to a certain degree, foil characters. The fact that Odin knows what Loki will do but does not seem to care implies that, in a way, they are the same at heart.

This leads us to the first motive behind Wagner's decision to make Loge a more sympathetic character. By reversing Wotan and Loge's traditional roles as seen in the

⁴ Snorri Sturluson *The Prose Edda*. 55

⁵ Edward Peters ed. *Poems of the Elder Edda* Trans. Patricia Terry Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. 74

⁶ Edward Peters *Poems of the Elder Edda*. 74

⁷ Brian Branston *Gods of the North* New York: The Vanguard Press, 1955. 168

sources, an interesting contrast arises between the two characters. Wagner depicts Wotan as power hungry and ruthless. Wotan is every bit as deceitful as Loge, and is the main instigator in trying to cheat the giants out of their fair pay. Additionally, Wotan is only concerned with the acquisition of power. After stealing the ring from Alberich, he refuses to pay it as a ransom for Freia. It is only after being confronted with a grave warning from Erda, and the prospect of losing the golden apples of youth, that he consents to give up the ring. Loge on the other hand is portrayed as quite the philanthropist. His constant persistence in wanting to give the ring back to the Rhinemaidens, makes him seem almost too good to be true. Thus, Wagner draws upon the idea of blood brotherhood found in the sources in his juxtaposition of these two characters. Through this he is able to emphasize the fact that Wotan is no better than Loge because they both find motivation from the same source, the desire for control.

The Loki of the original text is described by Snorri as “continually involving the Æsir in great difficulties and...often helped them out again by guile.”⁸ This is a direct reference to the fact that in many of the stories Loki moves other characters in and out of danger like pawns in a chess match. The fact that Loki is so proficient at this and finds no better sport than to control others, hints at the true motivation behind all that he does. Loki represents the intellect and intellect is inherently tied to the desire to control, for what motivates man in the pursuit of science and knowledge but the desire to control nature and other men? In nearly every folktale and story that Loki is involved in, his object is to control others by using his intellect to lead others into doing whatever he wants them to do. Furthermore he is very adept at this and knows that in this sense he is

⁸ Snorri Sturluson *The Prose Edda*. 55

the most powerful god. He says in *Loki's Insolence* before going to the Æsir and making verbal war with every member, "I tell you Elder if we two make war with words, every time you open your mouth I'll have an answer."⁹

In Wagner's *Ring of Nibelung* this desire to control is at the forefront of Loge's character. One must take into account that Loge has his hand in nearly every major event that takes place in *Das Rheingold*. The fact that Wotan has offered up Freia as a reward in the first place, is, according to Wotan, a result of a promise that Loge made to him. He says, "There is Loge! Where have you been, you who assured me that I'd escape this contract."¹⁰ Loge's response to this indicates that he will have nothing to do with being controlled in any way. He answers, "I roam through the world as I please; I'm not held by house or home."¹¹ When Wotan summons Loge and demands that he devise a ransom for Freia, Loge eludes the question with deft skill, taking control of the whole scene and then slyly presenting the ransom for Freia to both the Giants and Wotan at the same time. Loge is also clearly in command in the scene where the ring is stolen from Alberich. Loge uses his guile to trap Alberich, while Wotan must restrain himself from using brute force. Finally the death of Fasolt is also brought about by Loge inciting him to take the ring.

Loge's title of fire god can also be seen as symbolic of his thirst for control. Loge's unquenchable thirst for control and the inevitable destruction of everything in his way parallels the natural instinct of fire to do the same thing. His statement that he

⁹ Edward Peters *Poems of the Elder Edda*. 73

¹⁰ Richard Wagner *The Ring of Nibelung* Trans. Andrew Porter New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976. 26

¹¹ Richard Wagner *The Ring of Nibelung*. 27

“feel(s) a temptation to turn and destroy them (the gods), change to flickering fire, and burn those great ones,”¹² reveals that he has power over all the other gods, in a way that they cannot even fully comprehend. He states earlier in the same passage that “they are hastening on to their end,”¹³ giving the impression that he is able to comprehend the larger picture more than anyone else. He ends this soliloquy by saying, “who knows what I’ll do?”¹⁴ leading one to believe that power is in his hands. He has the ability to decide what will happen next.

Wagner’s characterization of Loge as more sympathetic than his Norse counterpart also supports this idea of Loge being motivated by desire for control. Loge’s sympathetic nature can be seen as not only a means of drawing a comparison between Wotan and Loge, but also as further evidence of Loge’s devious nature and deceitfulness. Snorri writes of Loki, he is “handsome and fair of face, but has an evil disposition and is very changeable of mood.”¹⁵ We must take into account the fact that *Das Rheingold* takes place over a very short period of time, and Loki’s disposition could be a passing façade, a tool being used to attain some further end. Loki is obviously not averse to taking on guises which are even more elaborate as when he changes himself into a woman in order to discover Baldr’s weakness.

Thus Wagner’s portrayal of a benevolent Loge is not random or arbitrary. It is drawn directly from the Norse sources and serves a definitive purpose. By choosing to

¹² Richard Wagner *The Ring of Nibelung*. 71

¹³ Richard Wagner *The Ring of Nibelung*. 70

¹⁴ Richard Wagner *The Ring of Nibelung*. 71

¹⁵ Snorri Sturluson *The Prose Edda*. 55

depict a sympathetic Loge, Wagner blurs the traditional lines of good and evil, and presents a drama that raises questions about the morality of man's true motivation.