

Kate Phillips

GRC 362E

Weinstock

4 December 2009

Building a Gender Bridge:

The Transformation of Civilization in Wagner's *Ring*

Wagner's reach into the mythic past for the foundation of his great *Ring* cycle is not limited to plot devices. While the operas draw largely from the specific Norse and Scandinavian folkloric tradition, I believe that the thematic structure of the cycle as a whole is indebted to a putatively necessary cultural transition often depicted in general myth world-wide: the decline of the primordial "masculine" world in favor of a civilized "feminine" one. Wagner uses central characters of the *Ring* to personify the polar ends of this spectrum: Wotan and Brünnhilde.

Wotan's ambivalence and eventual failure as ruler will be revealed to belie the failure of the masculine archetype as a whole, whereas Brünnhilde's rise to prominence in the universal story and the eventual primacy of the virtues which she upholds in the "new world" created at the end of *Götterdämmerung* illustrate the rise of feminized civilization. Finally, it will be demonstrated that this entire process is aided by the character of Loge and what he represents, not only in his Wagnerian characterization but also in the pantheon of Germanic folklore. Neither masculine nor feminine, he is able to bridge the gap between these two extremes, proving not only the ungendered nature of the qualities he represents, but also the important role these qualities have in the advance of world civilization.

Introduction: A Defense of The Arc

It may be questioned why I have settled upon this seemingly polarizing depiction of cultural trends in gender categories. The “masculine” and “feminine” archetypes of civilization are not meant to wholly represent gendered individuals, but rather the scholastic understanding of general cultural trends. We may look into Bernard Knox’s introduction to *The Odyssey* to see his claim that the move from *The Iliad* to *The Odyssey* illustrates through poetry the overall development of Greek (and generally, human) civilization from warlike masculinity to legal and domestic femininity. While this may seem a troubling archetype to women who feel “domesticity” is a bit of a short shrift, it remains the lens through which gender is usually viewed in the scholarly Western tradition, so use it we must. We can take this template of transition and apply it to a whole host of world-myth tales. The New Testament depicts a God of pathos, instead of the Old Testament God of vengeance. The bellicose mead halls of Saxon lore which populate Geoffrey of Monmouth’s writings fade into the chivalric and intensely codified world of King Arthur in Malory and, later, Tennyson.

As Wagner was indeed seeking to create through his operas a German-centric “world” history, this mythic-universal interpretation of the *Ring* cycle follows. It solidifies his promulgation of national significance for Wagner to implant a universal civilizing trend in the creation of his idealized German world. Change denotes progress, mark of a nation ready to join the ranks of the world. Wotan himself claims, in *Rheingold*, “All who live love renewal and change: that pleasure I cannot forgo!”¹ I argue that the specific change Wagner implements in his realm is the transition from “Might”

¹ Wagner 21.

(masculinity) to “Right” (femininity), using the androgynous Loki as the catalyst. Once more, this is *not* a statement about gendered individuals. Women are just as capable of prizing might and power, as men are capable of having an affinity for order and love. These titles are merely conceptual tools to help understand a common developmental trend.

Part One: Masculinity's Decline

It has often been claimed that the protagonist at the heart of the *Ring* cycle is Wotan. As he does indeed constitute the pathetic trajectory into a helpless demise and undergo arguably the greatest revolution of character in the cycle, this stance is easily defended, especially if the *Ring* is read as pure tragedy, a story of failure alone. Of course it must be recalled that the *Ring* is a *cycle* and thus Wotan's failure implicitly means that what he represents is a direct counterpoint to the new trends that arise. In any case, Wotan represents a sort of lawless and dominant masculinity, reveling in its power in *Das Rheingold*, lamenting in its self-destruction in *Siegfried*. It is important to recognize that Wotan's *essential nature* does not change, only his own conception and opinion of this essential nature. Thus he cannot ever represent more or less than the potent and dominant male, though in his defense he does come to lament this fact. Wotan personifies the failure of the significant qualities of the masculine order. As they appear in Wagner's story, they are the rule through power, the implementation of a single, uncritical will and supreme self-confidence (with a good amount of misogyny). Each of these ideals is struck down in turn throughout the cycle.

The first to go is the power with which Wotan seeks to rule. Wotan, we can observe, “rules in the manner of feudal kings through a combination of wars and alliances, with the resulting treaties inscribed in his spear, his symbol of office.”² His power is subjective and indivisible, a divine appointment (by himself) that is only as defensible as his martial abilities allow, in the vein of feudalism. Wotan’s power holds only as long as it is ultimate and uncontested. He himself is above the law, and does not hesitate to leave his own system when it suits him. Wotan asserts that Valhalla is just such a symbol of this kind of supremacy (“Manhood’s honor, unending power, rise now to endless renown!”³), yet as Mark Poster points out, the symbol does not work. When Wotan hears of the power of the Ring, he exclaims, “The ring must be Wotan’s!”⁴ Poster tells us this intimates that “the closure is opened again; Valhalla does not encompass all power; Wotan’s will is a lack.”⁵ Kitcher and Schacht too see this failure: “Already in *Rheingold* we know that Wotan has failed ... Valhalla-perhaps like other ventures before it – has not solved the problem.”⁶ Also, Wotan’s power is not uncontested. From the very beginning, Alberich sees himself as a direct rival of Wotan, and Wotan even describes himself as an equal, if not the twin of this earth-bound dwarf, calling himself “white Alberich.” The constancy of an opposing will suggests that power must always be a balance between these two wills, and one must dominate through martial prowess. This system of constant opposition in universals falls away as the *Ring* concludes, collapsing this tenet of feudal and masculine civilization.

² Poster 132.

³ Wagner 19.

⁴ *Ibid.* 31.

⁵ Poster 132.

⁶ Kitcher 79.

I referred to the “will” above, and will speak more of it here. Another key factor of the masculine, “Might”-imposed power is the necessity of a single uncritical will. Unfortunately, it becomes increasingly clear, if not from the start, definitely by the middle of the *Ring*, that Wotan simply does *not* know what it is he wants. He explicates his will in three different places throughout the cycle (here I collude with Poster’s distinctions of the Wotan’s three wills), and in each soliloquy on the “true” nature of his will, he presents an idea which is flawed, and even he knows it. His first Will is to forever reign in Valhalla and uphold the honor of men: “On the mountain summits the gods will rule! Proudly rise those glittering walls which in dreams I designed, which my will brought to life.”⁷ But, as I have already stated above, this Will is flawed from the get-go. His power is contested; a peaceful dominance is not to be enjoyed. So Wotan’s Will changes, this time appearing in *Die Walküre* as the desire to find a hero who can save the gods. But this Will is almost immediately revealed to be fundamentally flawed by the appearance of Fricka, who reveals in her own crushingly resounding statement that Wotan has already gotten in his own way: the hero who is to save the gods cannot be helped by Wotan, and Wotan had already given Siegmund the sword. The supreme god requires the will of another: “How can I create one, who, not through me, but on his own can achieve my will?” This seems an impossibility for Wotan, who claims, “My hand can only make slaves!”⁸ So he changes once again, to his final Will, which is simply to self-destruct and make room for a new and “free” humanity. While this final Will holds through the final two operas as the guiding force behind Wotan’s actions, it fails the first test for a standard of the masculine world because its goal is to fail instead of dominate.

⁷ Wagner 19.

⁸ *Ibid.* 111.

The final failing of the masculine world found in the *Ring's* diegesis is the diminishing of self-confidence. Wotan ceases to seek refuge in the masculine world and instead turns to women to solve his problems. Poster writes that the three times Wotan explicitly clarifies his Will, he does so to women. The first Will (that of permanent glory in Valhalla) is a serenade to Fricka, his wife. The second, that search for a hero, is a battle cry for Brünnhilde, his daughter. And the third and final Will, the desire to simply fade away, is lamented to Erda, his lover, and also the earth mother. Poster writes that Wotan turns to women because, “in the *Ring*, the male subject is at a point of confusion, a position from which no satisfactory direction may be discerned.”⁹ Our central male is baring his soul to the spectrum of relationships with which men come to know women. Wotan has appealed to every kind of woman he knows in order to sort out his problems, which corroborates Poster’s claim: there is a lack of confidence in his own gender and point of view, and a deep-seated confusion with his inability to know his own will. This is the nail in the coffin for a masculine civilization. By Wotan’s last appearance on stage in *Siegfried*, he himself has witnessed the decline of the values he once exemplified, and in *Götterdämmerung* he does not appear at all, except in passing reference, as if he is already part of a storied and irrelevant past.

Part Two: The Rise of Femininity

If there is a past, we must then ask ourselves, what is the present? If we have a cycle, we must discover what it is that rises anew. I have already claimed it is femininity realized in civilization, and there is no character better suited to represent Woman in the

⁹ Poster 144.

Ring cycle than everyone's favorite ex-Valkyrie, Brünnhilde. As we did with Wotan, we must note that it is not Brünnhilde's *essential nature* that changes through the narrative arc of the *Ring* cycle, but merely the circumstances in which she is placed and her own opinions and conception of them. Brünnhilde, though she undergoes a transformation from Valkyrie to mortal woman, remains intrinsically aware of and associated with the qualities of feminine civilization. Her sense of justice and empathy is present when she first speaks with Wotan about his command for her to kill Siegmund, and she laments that he is acting against his will.¹⁰ Though she aspires to the masculine order as a Valkyrie, she is defined first for her disobedience, and once she is sexually mature (i.e., a woman) she is able to prize and implement her feminine qualities all the more. More of this will be explicated later. Following my previous pattern, I have pinpointed three essential qualities that seem to sum up the general ideas represented by "feminine" civilization. These are rule through empathetic or pathetic love, self-analysis, and a codified system of laws under which all are subject, including its creators.

Brünnhilde is an unabating defender of love, even as a Valkyrie. This love is "revealed in her actions prior to and independent of the plan to protect Sieglinde ... it was empathetic love rooted in part to her strong emotional responsiveness to high worth ... she will move to an erotic love ... committed to its object in a way she has never known."¹¹ Although the type of love she feels most strongly at each point in the cycle changes, there is no doubt that at all moments love is an essential to her character.

Brünnhilde's first major action as an individual (and, as any good writing teacher will tell you, action defines character) is to defy Wotan and protect Sieglinde, a decision

¹⁰ Wagner 112.

¹¹ Kitcher 158.

motivated by love. The move to erotic love she feels for Sieglinde's son is simply another manifestation of the same form. In essence, Brünnhilde's power always stems from her love: she has the ability to defy the "ultimate" ruler because of it, and she is also the possessor of the most powerful object in the entire cycle at the penultimate moment because of it. The Ring, of course, means something entirely different to her than it did to Wotan or Alberich or anyone else, and she makes all her decisions by it, eventually becoming the only character to make the obvious empathetic choice in the cycle: return the Ring to the Rheinmaidens. She makes this choice as the final and dominant possessor of the object, and of the fate of the world she knows, which she decides to burn. Brünnhilde's transformation through love has "value beyond all mere mundane reality, with the prospect of perpetual possibility."¹² Perpetual possibility, not inevitable destruction, is the fate of this first tenet of femininity.

Self-awareness and analysis are extremely important to the more "civilized" world of the feminine. Brünnhilde was first able to provide self-awareness to only one character, Wotan, in her role as Valkyrie, who claims, "Brünnhilde alone knew all my innermost secrets ... saw to the depths of my spirit!"¹³ Because of Brünnhilde's discernment of what Wotan *truly* willed instead of what he ordered her to do in his own haze of self-ignorance, she is banished out of his world. But she is banished *into* a new world, where practical and right decisions are indeed based on this kind of self-analysis. The ability to critique oneself gives Brünnhilde a unified will that does not vary throughout the cycle, arguably allowing her to outlive everyone else. Though she, too, dies, it is by her own hand, and at the time and place of her choosing, through her own

¹² Kitcher 184.

¹³ Wagner 152.

understanding of the next right action: “I know what must be. All things, all things, all I know now; all to me is revealed!...I cast now the flame at Walhall’s glorious heights.”¹⁴

Her ideology survives beyond her instead of dying with her.

The final quality of the feminized world is that of a superior and generally-agreed upon law that is not based on the ideas of a single ruler but rather an amalgam of the ethics of those it governs, above which no individual exists, but to which all are subject. Brünnhilde intimates that this sort of code is now a part of the world order in her accusations of Siegfried’s betrayal. Her grief is not purely because she loves him, but also because he promised himself to her: “For he has betrayed every vow, and falsehood now he has sworn!”¹⁵ He has broken vow even more, it seems, than her heart. This is not the world of Wotan and Fricka, where adultery is tolerated in favor of male dominance. It is a world that places its trust in a general will from everyone to obey the social contract. Wotan’s treaties were sworn on a spear (a weapon), while the promises and laws of this new world are sworn on the Ring (which through Brünnhilde has come to symbolize love). The vassals in the Gibichung hall are just as concerned with the honor of Siegfried as everyone else (“Answer the charge, if you are true! Swear with a vow!”) Justice is a new idea that is communicable to all and not just to the ruler, and Justice is the final act of the cycle as the Ring is returned to the Rheinmaidens.

And so these key qualities that characterize Brünnhilde escalate to prominence as the *Ring* winds down to an end. As the old world dies away, the feminine concepts wait in the wings, in place for the new “replacement” world the Ring proposes to us at its close.

¹⁴ Wagner 327.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 298.

Part Three: Loge as the Bridge (and Why)

The *Ring*, viewed or read with a modicum of attention to detail, owes much to the character of Loge. He is the catalyst, the motivation, the beginning and the end. His pervasiveness is not due to physical appearance on stage, however. He appears only in *Rheingold*, but from that first opera entertains the idea of turning himself back into flame: “I feel a temptation to turn and destroy them; change to flickering fire, and burn those great ones who thought I was tamed.”¹⁶ Loge is then the first character that is invoked in *Götterdämmerung*: the Third Norn describes the sky as “Loge’s flames.” The Norns proceed to relate his story in detail during their general recap, once again belying his importance. At the last, Brünnhilde invokes him in her final acts, fulfilling the destiny of destruction that was established he prophesied in the beginning. He is integral to the transition that occurs in the narrative arc of the *Ring*. This is deeply significant because Wagner does not simply illustrate and stage the transition of human civilization from masculinity to femininity and leave it at that, like many great imitators of mythology. He tells us *what* the catalyst is for this transition, and characterizes it in Loge.

Loge is perfectly suited for this role, even before entering Wagner’s own pantheon, because of his Norse source and counterpart, Loki. Loki is firmly ungendered, as Stefanie von Schnurbein’s thorough article illustrates.¹⁷ A thorough treatment of her work is not suitable for this paper, but I will touch on the key points. Loki is the progeny of an unheard-of sexual union (a goddess with a giant) and his *own* progeny are pure

¹⁶ Wagner 71.

¹⁷ von Schnurbein.

destruction (the Midgard serpent, Hel, and the Fenris wolf). Sexuality in its reproductive implications can only be destructive and thus is ambivalent for Loki. Von Schnurbein also claims that Loki exemplifies the *ragr* man (penetrated man) in his own sexual unions. Neither masculine nor feminine, Loki is able to occupy an intermediary role in almost all exchanges in Norse mythology, and in Wagner's cosmology as well: he mediates the union between Fasolt and Freia, and negotiates balance and chaos between Wotan and Alberich. Thus he becomes also the intermediary in the all-encompassing transition from masculine to feminine civilization.

Loge appears, or is invoked, three main times throughout the cycle. His first appearance is a physical one, as he is ever at the side of Wotan during *Rheingold*, helping bolster Wotan's claim to power, though reluctantly. His desires conflict with those of both the gods and the giants (he wants to give the Ring back to the Rheinmaidens), and is dissatisfied with having his desires ignored. Of course, his will is the only one to ultimately come to fruition in the cycle, but that is after the long transformative process of the other three operas. In this first appearance, he is an outsider member of the world of masculinity. Loge is invoked a second time as the fire to surround Brünnhilde's rock. His fire is the key element that creates a bond of love between Brünnhilde and Siegfried (as Brünnhilde will not have anyone who cannot brave it), and that bond will compel Brünnhilde further into her rightful role as standard of femininity. After having laid the path for this transformation, Loge "appears" a third time at the very last. He is the personification of the flames that consume Valhalla, the old world that Brünnhilde destroys ("Summon Loge to Walhall!"). As the stage and the world are swept away in fire and water, the Magic Fire motive soars above the rest for a brief moment, the catalyst

and intermediary, but ultimately fades away to allow the motives of the new order to fill the stage, accompanied by the nascent Rheinmaiden motives. Together this final movement tells us we are starting a new world, but with different rules. Loge is not a part of it, but without him it would not have been possible.

And yet, *why* Loge? What statement does Wagner want to make about civilizing trends if he uses this ambiguous, ungendered, corrupt and destructive character? I have two central claims in this respect. First, Loge is essentially destruction incarnate. In the Norse sources, Loki joins forces with the giants along with his children in order to destroy the gods whom he once helped. It is easy to think of him as a harmless trickster character, but when rallied against Valhalla, he is evil, an undiluted force of wreckage. Wagner's well-known adherence to Schopenhauerian values allows this idea of Loge. He is the catalyst because destruction is the necessary binding force in Schopenhauer's world. Life is essentially tragic and *all* transformations are bound by a destructive catalyst. Schopenhauer wrote that human will inevitably gravitates toward failure; by placing Loge as the magnetic center in his cycle, Wagner was, perhaps, corroborating this claim.

Another reason for Loge's significance in the *Ring* necessitates returning to a point I briefly touched on much earlier: Wagner's drive to create a "German" cosmology. Wagner sought to describe the uniquely German spirit in many of his writings. A particular definition from his prose works follows: "The German virtue herein expressed thus coincided with the highest principle of aesthetics ... according to which the 'objectless' or purposeless alone is beautiful."¹⁸ Treadwell explains Wagner's ideas here,

¹⁸ Quoted in Treadwell 192.

writing that “both Germanness and art are defined by their anti-utilitarianism, by the fact of being ends in themselves rather than means to some ulterior purpose.”¹⁹ As Wagner sought to make the German national idea both unique and globally relevant, he manipulated this Loge character in order to unite the universal (myth) with the unique (purposeless ambivalence). Loge’s ambivalence and general refusal to claim any sort of purpose in his individual actions seem to state that *this* German myth of maturation into the feminine civilization is driven by a particular German spirit: that which refutes utilitarianism and in its ambivalence makes room for freedom of expression.

These theories seem likely as explanation for the necessity of Loge in the Ring cycle, but are by no means definitive. Such is the nature of interpreting Wagner through philosophical means: his own inability to cite his influences with any sort of continuity and his general reluctance to admit influence at all make it difficult to point to a clear underlying purpose. And perhaps this is for the best, because it allows the *Ring* as a whole to truly perform the work Wagner originally meant for it to do: to rise above the particular and tell a universal story. What is important, it seems, is not *why* civilizations follow a masculine to feminine trend, but that they *do*, and in this transition we interpret our own place and our own reasons. So it is Loge’s manipulation of the world of the Ring from a place defined by Wotan’s declining standards to a world imbued with the virtues of Brünnhilde that allows us to recognize our own world, German or no, in the cosmology of the *Ring*.

¹⁹ Treadwell 194.

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