

“Those Ill-Mannered Girls.” Brünnhilde, the Other Valkyres, and the Familial Relationships among some of the Characters in Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Note: All reference to the libretti of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is to Stewart Spencer’s translation in Spencer et alli *Wagner’s “Ring of the Nibelung”: a Companion*.(New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.)

In her confrontation with Wotan in Act II of *Die Walküre* over Siegmund and Sieglinde’s adulterous and incestuous relationship, Fricka makes the following charge against her husband:

In sadness of spirit
I had to stand by,
while you faired to the fray
with those ill-mannered girls
who were born of the bond
of a dissolute love [p. 143]

The “ill-mannered girls” she is referring to are, of course, Brünnhilde and the eight other valkyres. Fricka’s position as goddess of legitimate marriage relations and “domestic tranquility” contrasts sharply with the valkyres’ “one of the boys” lifestyle as the press gang for Wotan’s *männerbund*. Indeed, at the beginning of the act Brünnhilde states her preference clearly:

In strife of this kind [i.e. domestic quarrels]
I care not to fight,
fond though I am of
brave men’s battles. [p. 140]

Brünnhilde is quite unique among the valkyres. She is the only one to defy Wotan’s direct order, defending Siegmund even after being directed not to do so. In Act III, Scene 2 Wotan, in response to the other valkyres’ atonal whining in defense of their leader, even complains of their weakness:

You weak-hearted
herd of women!
Such feeble wits
did you win from me?
Did I bring you up boldly
to fair to the fight,
did I render your hearts
 both hard and keen
that you hoydens now wail and whine
when my wrath chastises a traitor. [p. 180]

Brünnhilde is unique in her independence, in her closeness to Wotan, and in her ability to see things from a human's (Siegmund's) point of view. She is the heroine who will perform the "world-redeeming act" of returning the cursed ring to the Rheing daughters to counter her father's tragic failure to do so and which has gotten the world into the mess that it is in.

Brünnhilde is also unique in another way.

She is Wotan and Erda's only child.

It is assumed by commentators to the *Ring* that all nine valkyres are the children of Wotan and Fricka. But this assumption, which the above quote from Fricka seems to support, does not seem to be backed up by either other references to Brünnhilde's ancestry, or by the parallels between the characters and situations in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* on the one hand and *Götterdämmerung* on the other.

There are two direct references to Brünnhilde's ancestry in the text, one by each of her parents. The first one occurs during Wotan's long narrative in Act II, Scene 2 of *Die Walküre*. After telling of Erda's visit to warn him of the ring's curse and a possible ending to the gods he continues:

Then I lost all lightness of heart;
The god desired more knowledge:
 into the womb of the world
I descended,
 mastered the vala
 with love's magic spell

and broke her wisdom's pride,
that she gave account of herself.
Knowledge I gained from her;
from me though she gained a pledge:
The world's wisest woman
bore to me, Brünnhilde, you. [p. 150]

This would appear to indicate Wotan and Erda only having one child, but then he continues:

With eight sisters
I brought you up: [p. 150]

This would also seem to contradict the idea of Brünnhilde being Wotan and Erda's only child, but in German, as in English, the word "sister" can apply to close relationships between biologically unrelated women, as, for example, among the members of Christian religious orders. The valkyres certainly form an order of sorts, though they are more akin to the members of one of the crusader orders like the Knights Templar than to Hildegard of Bingen's nuns. The other reference to Brünnhilde's ancestry occurs in the first scene of Act III of *Siegfried*. After Wotan says that he has scorned the Norns as a source of advice, Erda says to him:

Deeds of men
becloud my mind:
wise though I am,
A ruler once tamed me.
A Wish-Maid
I bore to Wotan:
for him he bade her
choose slain heroes.
She is brave
and wise withal:
why waken me
and not seek knowledge
from Erda's and Wotan's child? [p. 256]

The question is *not* “why waken me / and not seek knowledge / from one of Erda’s and Wotan’s children.” The reference here is clearly to Brünnhilde, as Wotan’s reply makes clear:

Do you mean the valkyre,
Brünnhilde, the maid? [p. 256]

And then he proceeds to tell Erda what has happened to Brünnhilde and why. Again, Brünnhilde is singled out from among the other valkyres.

A further objection might be raised by Act I, Scene 3 of *Götterdämmerung*. Waltraute breaks ranks to come to Brünnhilde to plead with her to give up the ring to the Rheindaughters and prevent the destruction of the gods. But unlike Erda’s warning in Wotan in Scene 4 of *Das Rheingold*, Waltraute’s plea falls on deaf ears as Brünnhilde refuses to part with the token of Siegfried’s love. Waltraute seems to be showing some of Brünnhilde’s independence here, but, as she herself makes clear (p. 302), her visit is motivated by Wotan’s radical change in behavior and the immanent doom of the gods and not by any wish to understand what has motivated Brünnhilde’s disobedience. To the end Waltraute remains a good trooper, returning to the doomed Valhalla, totally unable to comprehend what now motivates her former comrade-in-arms.

Another way to approach this problem is by classifying the characters of the *Ring* by what one knows of their immediate ancestors. This gives us four classes in which to put the 34 named characters of the drama. These are [1] nothing of their parents is known; [2] their tribe is known; [3] one parent only is known; and [4] both parents are known. The first class, consisting of those characters of whom we know nothing about their ancestor, has the following members:

Wotan
Loge
Fricka, Freia, Froh, Donner
Erda
Siegmond and Sieglinde’s unnamed mother.

Two things are notable about this list, namely, all but one are deities, and, except for Fricka and her siblings, all are singletons.

The second group contains those whose tribe is the only fact of their ancestry which is known. This group consists only of males:

Fasolt, Fafner ----- giants
Alberich, Mime ----- Nibelungs
Hunding ----- Neidungs

The third group is that of those characters only one of whose parents are known:

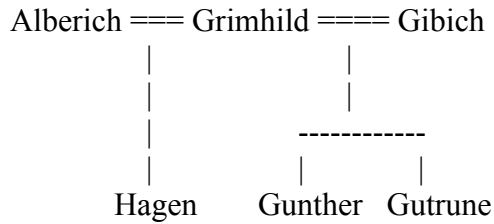
The Rheindaughter's ----- the Rhein, which is masculine in
German, though most rivers and feminine.
The Norns ----- Erda
Siegmond, Sieglinde ----- Wotan / Wälse

The fourth and last group consists of those of whom both parents are known:

Brünnhilde ----- Wotan, Erda
Hagen ----- Alberich, Grimhild
Siegfried ----- Siegmund, Sieglinde
Gunther, Guttrune ----- Gibich, Grimhild

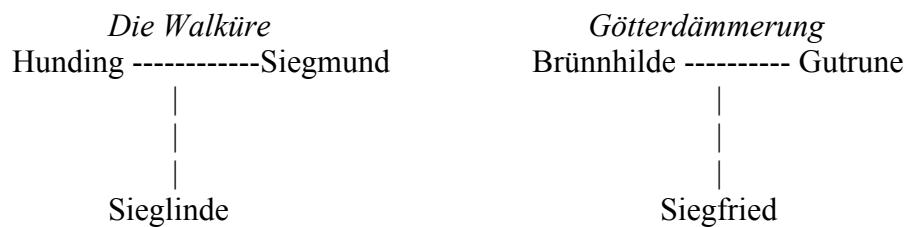
Except for the Gibeckung siblings, all of these characters are singletons. Also, all are not gods, Brünnhilde being a demigoddess who is made a human at the end of *Die Walküre*. If we were to add the eight other valkyres here, then we would have seven characters who appear in *Die Walküre* but not in *Götterdämmerung*.

As Warren Darcy has pointed out in his "*Das Rheingold*": *Its Genesis and Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 31-33, there are numerous parallels between the first two operas of the *Ring* and the last one in both events and characters, the microcosm of *Götterdämmerung* reflecting the macrocosm of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. But just as a mirror will reverse an image left-to-right but not top-to-bottom, this reflection of the macrocosm in the microcosm often involves a gender difference in the corresponding characters, though the events remain the same or similar. This



As can be seen, Alberich actually corresponds to Erda and Wotan to Grimhild, with Hagen corresponding to Brünnhilde, and Gunthur and Gutrune to Sieglinde and Siegmund. But instead of a direct parallel, which would have the Gibichung siblings marrying and having a daughter to marry Siegfried, they opt for the socially acceptable exogamous pairing which is the usual barren disaster exogamous relationships in the *Ring* are.

This last correspondence will be clearer if we consider the two love triangles in the *Ring*:



Note again the gender switch: Brünnhilde = Hunding, Gutrune = Siegmund, and Siegfried = Sieglinde.

Though they are individuals in that they have names, the eight other valkyres are essentially without individuality, Waltraute's disobedience being motivated by extreme panic caused by Wotan's inaction rather than by individual will or thought. Their parallel in *Götterdämmerung*, again with the gender switch, is the nameless Gibeckung vassals who carry Siegfried's body back to the Gibeckung hall, which is itself the parallel for Valhalla in the final act. In the conflagration of the final scene the direction is reversed and the macrocosm reflects the microcosm. Things seem to have come full circle, but as the different key of the ending shows, something has changed. Brünnhilde's *coniunctio oppositorum* with Siegfried causes love to triumph over greed (the ring), political power (Wotan's spear) and the tribal affiliations which puts the group superior to the individual.