

Wagner's Use of Paired Characters in *The Ring*

Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* is a richly complex work that can be analyzed in many different ways on several different levels. One way to explore Wagner's themes concerning human desires and motivations is by looking at various pairs of characters and how they interact. Some are fairly obvious foils showing the contrasts between two opposing ideas. Others are two facets of the same human desire. In the first two operas alone, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, there are several pairs of characters, many involving Wotan, that serve as vehicles for Wagner's ideas on the corruptive force of power and the positive force of natural love. Wagner clearly believes in the moral supremacy of love unhindered by the bonds of human corruption. However, Wagner seems to portray this love as an inherently weak force when paired with the desire for power and because of this power difference, the characters that most embody love usually end up suffering the worst hardships. Despite this, love is an ever-present force that is never completely defeated.

The first and most obvious pair of characters to demonstrate Wagner's main theme is the pair of giant brothers Fasolt and Fafner, first appearing in scene two of *Das Rheingold*. It is fitting that these two characters should so blatantly embody the opposing concepts of love and power since this will be the main theme of the rest of the opera. Very soon after their entrance, the two brothers debate the worth of Freia, the embodiment of love. While Fasolt claims, "we longed for a woman, so charming and fair" (24), Fafner states "Freia's charms mean nothing, but we gain as soon as the gods have lost her" (24-25). This conflict between the desire to love and the desire to wield

power is the central theme of Wagner's work, demonstrated by Alberich alone in the first act of *Das Rheingold* and further emphasized through the arguments of the two brothers in the second act.

The two brothers also demonstrate that this conflict seems to be one in which love is consistently at a disadvantage. The passive nature of Freia's character is the first indication of this. The second indication is the way in which the two giant brothers interact. In one case, Fafnir bullies and argues with Fasolt in order to convince him to give up on Freia and take the Nibelung gold instead. Despite the fact that Fasolt eventually agrees to this, he gives his consent reluctantly. In Wagner's stage directions he writes, "Fasolt's demeanor suggests that he has been persuaded against his will" (33). Fasolt's will, the will of one who favors love, is not strong enough to overcome the will of one who desires power. Later, gold, which is representative of power, is able to overcome Fasolt's desire for love again as the ransom for Freia is paid. This section of the opera is more directly derived from the story of the otter's ransom found in the *Saga of the Volsungs* than other parts of *Das Rheingold*; however, it conveniently fits Wagner's themes for *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Freia must be totally covered in order for Fasolt to give up on her. He "cannot turn from this maiden, while her eyes inspire [him] with love" (63). That is, he cannot totally give in to the desire for worldly power until he has been completely separated from love. Once the ring, the ultimate symbol of corrupt power, is added to the pile to cover Freia's gaze, Fasolt releases her. Freia's temporary disappearance behind the pile of gold is representative of a spiritual renunciation of love. Almost immediately after this episode, the third and final definitive incident concerning the giants occurs. Fafner murders Fasolt to get the ring, once and for all demonstrating

the destructive force of power and the relative weakness of love to stand against it at this point in *The Ring*.

A less obvious pair of characters, this time demonstrating different aspects of power, is Alberich and Wotan. Through the brief interaction of these two seemingly contrasting characters, Wagner subtly demonstrates the corrupting force of power in both its tyrannical and peaceful forms. Alberich, the Nibelung, represents a power that many people would readily define as negative and tyrannical. He is the first in the libretto to completely give up love for the sake of gaining the gold with which to make his ring of power, and using the ring, he turns the other Nibelung into slaves. Alberich wields his power through the threat of physical violence, the classic demonstration of unjust use of power. Wotan, by contrast, with his spear and his treaty with the giants, represents power through artificial political means. While on the surface Wotan may appear to be just in his use of power, it is very soon revealed that he is virtually the same as Alberich in spirit. It is revealed that Wotan, even before the events in *Das Rheingold* was persuaded to sacrifice love for power when he promised Freia to the giants in return for the building of Walhall. Wotan, although he does not give up love entirely, comes very close when he nearly sacrifices Freia to keep the ring. Even this refusal to give up Freia does not seem completely related to the fact that she embodies love but is instead tied to the fact that she tends the apples which give the gods their eternal youth and immortality. Moreover, Erda is required to intervene before Wotan is able to give up the ring. The artificial power of laws proves to be no nobler than the power of tyranny. Since both forms of power involve the denial of the natural tendency to love, Wagner sees both forms as undesirable.

Wotan and Alberich both gain their power through the exploitation of natural sources, though the reader or viewer doesn't find out about the source of Wotan's spear until *Siegfried*. Alberich steals his gold from the Rhine to forge the ring and Wotan takes the wood for his spear from the world ash tree, which dies because of the theft. The sorrow of the Rhinemaidens, whose laments can be heard several times in *Das Rheingold*, and the death of the world ash tree emphasize the corrupting aspect of power. Even Wotan's seemingly just use of power is shown to be in opposition with nature. He has no sympathy for the Rhinemaidens and orders Loge to "stop their tiresome lament" (71). Loge in an ironic statement suggests they "let the gods' new golden splendour shine upon you instead!" (72). Again Wotan's desires and Alberich's desires closely parallel each other showing that power in any form is a force that only serves to separate people from a pure, natural state of existence.

Later in *Das Rheingold*, Wotan's interactions with Alberich further expose his true nature. Due to the treaty he made with the giants, Wotan is forced to come up with a ransom for Freia. With Loge's help, he decides to steal Alberich's gold and along with it, the ring. Instead of restoring the ring to the Rhinemaidens, he attempts to keep it for himself thereby revealing himself to be both a hypocrite and, like Alberich, a thief. After being berated by Wotan for stealing the gold from the Rhinemaidens, Alberich quickly points out this flaw in Wotan's character saying, "Thief, you blame me for doing that crime which you were burning to do!" (56). Later in the Ring cycle, during the second act of *Die Walküre*, Wotan himself indicates is able to these flaws in his character when he admits to Brünnhilde he "acted wrongly; trusted in treaties where evil lay" (106). However, at this point, he is still unable to see how his attempt to use laws and treaties to

gain power has resulted in turning him into someone who is morally corrupt, just like Alberich.

Die Walküre focuses more on the nature of love as its main subtext instead of the dynamic between love and power. Many of the characters can be clearly identified as representing either love or its antithesis, the world of artificial law. The main pair of characters, Siegmund and Sieglinde embody the kind of natural love outside the artificial bonds of society that Wagner views as the ideal form of love. The fact that Siegmund and Sieglinde are meant to be together is made expressly clear by the use of the love motive during the moment that they first are able to see each other clearly. This is before they have even verbally declared their love, emphasizing the spontaneous and natural genesis of their love as opposed to a coupling that is the result of marriage.

Again Wagner's story is heavily influenced by aspects of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, in this case the story of Signy and Sigmund, and again the source story conveniently allows him to express his own views of the world while keeping some of the surface elements the same. The aspect of both stories that is most striking for the modern viewer or reader is the incestuous nature of the relationship between two of the main characters. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, it is part of a cold-blooded scheme. In *Die Walküre*, the two lovers are unaware of their blood relation at first, but at some point during the first act, they realize they are twins. Interestingly, they seem neither surprised nor disturbed by this fact. The final line of act one ends with Siegmund calling out "Bride and sister be to your brother; the blood of these Wälsungs is blessed!" (95). Wagner uses the incestuous aspect of the relationship to stress the natural and inevitable nature of their love. The family relationship can be seen as a symbol of deep spiritual

kinship that they share through their common negative experiences with a society that is bound by law. Together they symbolically represent Wagner's own concept of ideal love. Additionally, by portraying his two lovers as breaking the incest taboo, possibly one of the oldest human created rules of society, Wagner shows how his concept of love is completely independent of the bonds of society.

During the final scene in act one the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde is given approval by nature itself when spring comes bursting through the doors. Unlike Alberich's and Wotan's desires which are in opposition to nature, the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde is so much in tune with natural forces that even the weather changes in response to their love. This association is further emphasized in Siegmund's speech comparing the union between himself and Sieglinde with the union between the personified forces of Love and Spring. "To clasp his sister here he has flown; for Love called to the Spring; and Love lay hidden deep in our hearts" (90). Interestingly the poetic images used to describe Love and Spring also include incestuous implications. This is another example of Wagner's use of incest to symbolize the naturalness of true love.

Despite the fact that Siegmund and Sieglinde's love is the kind of natural love that Wagner condones, it is still portrayed as a relatively weak force in *Die Walküre*. As a couple, Siegmund and Sieglinde do not survive because they have already been in contact with the world of artificial law. For Sieglinde, living under the laws that Wotan had created damaged her psychologically. After their flight from Hunding's house, Sieglinde seems to have a change of heart crying "Fly from the cursed one, far let her flee! Dishonoured am I, bereft of grace: the purest hero I must abandon, for how can this guilty

wife dare to love him?” (115). She then begins to hallucinate, seeing Siegmund torn apart by Hunding’s dogs. The bonds of artificial society still have a hold on Sieglinde’s psyche and she is unable to reconcile her natural tendency to love with the demands of society which state that she must stay true to her husband even though she does not love him. When she finds that Siegmund has been killed she is quick to decide that suicide is the only way to be reunited spiritually with Siegmund. It is only when Brünnhilde tells her that “love commands” (135) that she live to bear the son which she carries that she decides to live, and even then, she only lives long enough to bear her son.

Siegmund, in contrast to Sieglinde’s psychological battle, has a physical confrontation with Hunding, who symbolizes the laws of human society, especially marriage. Even before the battle begins, Siegmund is doomed to failure because he has been unwittingly drawn into the world of Wotan and his corruption. Even though Siegmund is unaware of it, Wotan is attempting to use him to regain the ring of power. Siegmund has also been pursued his entire life by those who follow the laws that Wotan created, and the sword that Siegmund wields is both provided by Wotan and broken by him. The pure force of love cannot survive in a world of artificial laws and so Hunding, embodiment of marriage and society, kills Siegmund with the assistance of Wotan, who was the creator of the law, and at the behest of Fricka, the symbol of marriage.

Before Siegmund encounters Hunding for the second time, the reader or viewer is already aware of what is going to happen to him because of Wotan’s interaction with Fricka, his wife, who has not changed her opinions since the events in *Das Rheingold*. She continues to act as the advocate of marriage. Scene one of act two is almost exclusively devoted to Fricka and Wotan’s argument over the love of Siegmund and

Sieglinde. Fricka insists that the sanctity of marriage be upheld, insisting that such vows are holy. Wotan's retort directly states Wagner's view on marriage. "Unholy call I the vows that bind unloving hearts" (98). Wotan even condones the incestuous nature of the relationship because of the purity of their love and encourages Fricka to bestow her blessing. She, however, refuses to give her blessing and insists that Wotan break the sword that he has given to Siegmund. Soon after, she states "Siegmund I claim as my slave" (102), yet another of Wagner's commentaries on marriage. By using Fricka, the strongest symbol of marriage, to make this statement against one of the characters symbolizing love, Wagner is demonstrating how humanity as a whole cannot be free to love when artificial human laws, like those of marriage, are still in effect.

Wotan in this confrontation with Fricka begins to show signs of being torn between love and power. The first indication of this is when Fricka mentions his affairs, first with Erda and then with a human woman. These affairs result in the Valkyries and the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. In Fricka's words, Wotan's "glance searched and lusted for love" (100). It is clear that Wotan desires the kind of spontaneous love that marriage does not provide. The fact that three of his children, Brünnhilde, Siegmund, and Sieglinde, embody the kind of pure love that he subconsciously seeks is an even greater indication of this. On a symbolic level, the fact that Wotan's children, but not Wotan himself, are able to experience love, represents the separation from law that must occur before love can truly flourish. Wotan's inability to stand up to Fricka demonstrates how Wotan is an unwilling captive in a cage of his own creation. In his own words, "I forged the fetters; now I'm bound. I, least free of all living!" (105). It is clear later that he truly loves his children; however, because of Fricka's demands and his own plot to

keep the ring out of Alberich's hands, he is forced to suppress his love and kill Siegmund. Both Fricka and Wotan act as the agents of Siegmund's death. Fricka's part is not through direct action, but through forcing Wotan to uphold the laws of marriage from which he himself unconsciously wishes to escape but consciously is not able to separate himself from.

Immediately after Fricka leaves, the focus shifts to Wotan and his daughter Brünnhilde. The relationship between Wotan and Brünnhilde is in direct contrast with that of Wotan and Fricka. Instead of trying to restrict Wotan's expressions of fatherly love, Brünnhilde encourages those feelings. She states, "to Wotan's will you're speaking" (106) and this is closer to the literal truth than even Wotan realizes. Brünnhilde is able to understand Wotan's true inclinations, better than even Wotan can, because she is a child born out of the natural love between Wotan and Erda. This is symbolically represented by Wotan's blindness in one eye and Brünnhilde's perfect sight. In *Das Rheingold*, Wotan mentions giving up his eye for Fricka. Giving up his eye and entering into an unloving marriage caused Wotan to become literally blind in one eye and blind to the effects of love around him. He is unable to predict the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, and he is unable to fathom Brünnhilde's true function as his unconscious will to love according to his natural tendencies.

It is when he is speaking to Brünnhilde that Wotan is able to come to terms with some of the wrong he has committed and the feelings of love lying deep in his subconscious. As previously mentioned, he admits to wrongly relying on treaties to wield power. He also admits "the longing for love would not leave me" (106) and mentions his affair with Erda. He then begins to show his conflicting feelings concerning

the ring and the society he has created. He wishes to stop the “shameful defeat of the immortals” (107) but at the same time he seems to regret gathering warriors for this purpose because they are bound by “treacherous treaties, shameful agreements” (108). When Brünnhilde tries to convince him to go against Fricka’s wishes he becomes angry. Revealing his active denial of his true feelings he asks Brünnhilde “What are you but the obedient, blind slave of my will?” (112). Wotan’s anger in this confrontation seems to stem from the subconscious realization that his words directly contradict the true situation. Wotan is confronting the embodiment of his own will, which he is unable to follow due to his own power hungry actions. The emotions he exhibits are comparable to Sieglinde’s psychological battle in the following scene, in that both are examples of the emotional trauma that occurs when society’s rules conflict with the natural drive for love. Only when Wotan speaks to Brünnhilde is he able to articulate some of his unconscious turmoil clearly showing her function as a manifestation of Wotan’s internal self.

Everything that is subtly hinted at in act two, scene two is verbally confirmed in act three, scene three when Wotan confronts Brünnhilde after she has defended Siegmund. While describing the feelings that Siegmund inspired in her, she directly refers to Wotan’s inability to recognize the effects of the natural love he feels for Siegmund. Brünnhilde states, “my eyes saw but one thing alone...I saw that one thing which you could not...love’s holy yearning, hopeless despair-proud in defiance, dauntless in grief...You, who this love in my hear inspired, when you inspired the Walsung with your will, you were not betrayed” (146). Brünnhilde confirms that Wotan is, ironically, the source of natural love through his fathering and raising of Siegmund,

and that by defending Siegmund, Brünnhilde was only following what would be Wotan's true desires if they were not tempered by the forces of artificial law.

The source of Wotan's anger is also confirmed by Wotan himself who states, "terrible grief awoke my rage; when, to save creation, the spring of love in my tortured heart I imprisoned?" (146). Wotan's anger is not really directed at Brünnhilde or any other specific character. It springs from Wotan's frustration at having to strike down his children who embody the love that he so desperately longs for. Again, Wagner's Wotan seems to represent the plight of the modern man who secretly longs for freedom from society's rules, but, at the same time, refuses to truly separate from them, even if it means going against true love.

It is in this final scene that Wagner foreshadows Wotan's transformation into the Wanderer who will appear in *Siegfried*. Brünnhilde acts as the catalyst for this transformation through her active disobedience of Wotan's verbal command in favor of following his unspoken desires. Through her words and actions Wotan begins to realize the hopelessness of the situation that he himself has created. Wotan's eyes meet with hers during the final moments of *Die Walküre* and a small change comes over him. The significance of Brünnhilde's vision as opposed to Wotan's metaphorical lack of sight is highlighted here again as it is implied that part of Brünnhilde's knowledge and spirit is imparted to Wotan in these final moments through their locked gaze. Wotan finds it in himself to save Brünnhilde from being forced into an unloving marriage like his own and agrees to ensure that the man who wakes her will be the hero she desires. Love, symbolized by Brünnhilde, has again been defeated, but the defeat is only temporary. According to Wagner's views on natural love it is only fitting that Brünnhilde be saved

for one who is completely free of the taint of society. It is foreshadowed that this hero will be the one that Wotan has been wishing for. “For one alone wins you as bride, one freer than I, the god!” (151). The fact that Wotan understands this implies that through Brünnhilde he has finally begun to understand the nature of love and the impossibility of reconciling it with his own artificial creations. The final line of *Die Walküre* demonstrates his understanding that his society, represented by the spear, must be destroyed in order for love to be revived. Wotan declares, “Only the man who braves my spear-point can pass through this sea of flame!” (152).

The relationship that Wagner saw between the lust for power and the desire for love is demonstrated many times over the course of the first two operas in *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The two forces are portrayed as fundamentally incompatible as love is repeatedly overcome by the desire for power and the artificial laws that are derived from it. These ideas are symbolically portrayed as a series of paired characters ranging from simple pairs like Fasolt and Fafner to more complex pairs like Wotan and Brünnhilde. However, no matter what pair is being used the same basic principles on love and power are being expressed. The force of love, while being repeatedly portrayed as the weaker force, is also enduring, which creates a slight undercurrent of hope for the eventual revival of love. The mechanism of this revival is hinted at in the final moments of *Die Walküre*, implying that Wagner believes artificial society must be overcome in order for this cycle of conflict and defeat to be broken.

Elizabeth Bittner

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