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978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

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WAGNER'S RING CYCLE AND THE GREEKS

Through his reading of primary and secondary classical sources, as well as his theoretical writings, Richard Wagner developed a Hegelian-inspired theory linking the evolution of classical Greek politics and poetry. This book demonstrates how, by turning theory into practice, Wagner used this evolutionary paradigm to shape the music and the libretto of the *Ring* cycle. Foster describes how each of the *Ring*'s operas represents a particular phase of Greek poetic and political development: *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* create epic national identity in its earlier and later stages respectively; *Siegfried* expresses lyric personal identity; and *Götterdämmerung* destructively culminates with a tragi-comedy about civic identity. This study sees the Greeks through the lens of those scholars whose work influenced Wagner most, focusing on epic, lyric, and comedy, as well as Greek tragedy. Most significantly, the book interrogates the ways in which Wagner uses Greek aesthetics to further his own ideological goals.

DANIEL H. FOSTER is Assistant Professor of Theater Studies at Duke University, and Visiting Scholar at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His work has appeared in many publications including *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, and *Text and Presentation*. This is his first book.

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Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To Kelly:

*editor, wife, scholar, mother, author, lover,
the leitmotif of my life –
always there, always the same,
and yet always adapting and changing.*

And to

*Oona Prudence Freya Foster-Amienne:
she feeds me the golden apples that keep me forever young.*

CONTENTS

List of musical examples | ix
Preface | xi
Acknowledgments | xviii
Introduction | i

Part I Epic

i Introduction: what is epic? | 33
2 Retrospective narrative and the epic process | 45
3 The orchestral narrator and elementary epic | 65
4 Spiritual and factual realities in epic | 83

Part II Lyric

5 Introduction: what is lyric? | 111
6 Orpheus and lyric liberation | 122
7 First-person opera and lyric identity | 140
8 Lyric and the rebirth of tragedy | 157

Part III Drama

9 Introduction: what is drama? | 183
10 Opera and tragedy | 197
11 Opera and comedy | 220
12 Resolution and ambiguity in comedy and tragedy | 235
Epilogue: Time, the *Ring*, and Performance Studies | 253

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks
Daniel H. Foster
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii | Contents

Appendices Wagner's primary and secondary sources | 267
Appendix A Wagner's primary sources | 269
Appendix B Secondary scholarship by authors Wagner knew personally | 276
Appendix C Secondary scholarship by authors Wagner knew by reputation or by reading | 284

Notes | 295
Bibliography | 352
Index | 363

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks
Daniel H. Foster
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

- 1 Nibelung motif | 70
- 2 Ring motif | 70
- 3 Freia motif | 71
- 4 Valhalla motif | 72
- 5 Rhine motif | 72
- 6 Valhalla motif | 79
- 7 Corrupted power motif | 80
- 8 Remembrance of corrupted power motif | 81
- 9 Siegfried motif | 135
- 10 Tarnhelm motif | 214
- 11 Curse and oath motifs | 218
- 12 Mime's nursing song | 226
- 13 Remembrance of nursing song | 226
- 14 Chorus of vassals | 227

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks
 Daniel H. Foster
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFACE

The basic thesis of this book is that each opera in Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) represents a particular phase in the cultural evolution of a mythic world modeled in part upon the ancient Greek world. This thesis is immediately supported by two claims that Wagner made about the *Ring* in a letter to his friend, August Röckel, on August 23, 1856. The first is that in the *Ring* Wagner claims he intended to construct "a Hellenistically optimistic world [*eine hellenistisch-optimistische Welt*]¹ for myself which I held to be entirely realizable if only people wished it to exist."² This world he says he constructed by relying upon his intellectual "conceptions."³ Wagner's second claim is that, "instead of a single phase in the world's evolution, what I had glimpsed [in the *Ring*] was the essence of the world itself in all its conceivable phases."⁴ Wagner attributes this second claim not to his intellectual conceptions but his artistic "intuitions." Thus we have the notion of a Greek model in the first claim and cultural evolution in the second. But because Wagner attributes the second claim to intuition more than intellect, he favors that one. And yet, upon closer examination, it appears that the only real difference between the two claims is chronological. The intellectual idea is one Wagner intended to carry out before he completed the *Ring*, and the artistic idea is one he began to see only after he had been working on the *Ring* and began to see where it was going. In other words the intellect came first, art second. But since there is no fundamental reason to discount the first in favor of the second, especially since both fit the facts, the two claims can be combined into the compound thesis that the *Ring* evolves, opera by opera, according to an idealized paradigm of Greek culture.

Beginning with this as a tentative thesis it in turn raises further questions: What are the phases of Greek cultural evolution the *Ring*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii | Preface

supposedly depicts? How did Wagner arrive at these particular phases? And why did he do this? To answer these three questions – what, how, and why – this book delves into three further claims that other scholars who have written on the subject have developed only in part or not at all. They are: (1) The forms and content of the four operas in the *Ring* follow a quasi-Hegelian evolution of Greek poetic expression from epic to lyric to drama, with each genre pertaining to a particular stage in the world's cultural development. (2) To understand Wagner's perspective on the Greeks it is important to study not only the primary works Wagner knew but also the secondary works of scholarship that influenced his understanding and his use of the Greeks.⁵ And (3) Wagner used the Greeks not only for aesthetic purposes but also political purposes, particularly nationalistic and anti-Semitic ones.⁶

Fleshing out my original, tentative thesis with these three subsidiary claims leads to the more complex thesis that through his reading of primary and secondary classical sources, as well as his writing of critical essays, Wagner developed a Hegelian-inspired theory of Greek cultural evolution that moves from epic through lyric to tragedy and finally comedy, a genre that, according to Wagner, both announced and was implicated in the downfall of classical Greek civilization. In this evolutionary theory of poetry and politics, one genre does not simply disappear into the next but is transformed into it. Thus each genre not only retains something of the preceding evolutionary phase but also foreshadows something of the following one.⁷ The objectivity of epic prefigures the reality of drama; lyric focuses on the individuality of character; and in drama both epic objectivity and lyric subjectivity combine to form civic identity. Seen not only as a theory but also a model, this evolutionary paradigm in turn shapes the cyclical plot and the individual operas of the *Ring* cycle. Each of the *Ring's* operas represents a particular phase of poetic and political development that points both before and beyond itself, to what precedes and follows it. *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* create epic national identity in its earlier and later stages respectively, *Siegfried* expresses lyric personal

identity, and *Götterdämmerung* destructively culminates with a tragi-comedy about civic identity, an individual's failure to find a place in society and the ultimate failure of that society itself.⁸

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The three main sections of this book trace Wagner's evolutionary model for Greek poetic form as it appears in the *Ring*. Each section corresponds to one of the three major genres upon which Wagner based his trilogy: epic, lyric, and drama. These three parts are then further sub-divided into four chapters. The first chapter of each part reconstructs Wagner's respective theories of epic, lyric, and drama by discussing his arguments in the context of their major scholarly influences, especially Hegel's *Aesthetics*, but also the works of other scholars that helped him formulate his opinion of the three genres. Because these theories are sometimes abstruse, complex, and/or unknown to the non-Hegelian reader, these prefatory chapters are intended to serve as analyses and introductions to the subject rather than full-blown interpretations. They are an attempt to reconstruct Wagner's thoughts about the Greeks by looking at the Greeks through the same theoretical lenses that Wagner saw them.⁹ The next three chapters in each part then use these findings to discuss how the Greeks influenced both the *Ring* as a whole and its individual operas.

In the introduction I begin by analyzing how and why Wagner venerated the Greeks from his early childhood until his death. I briefly survey all the specific primary and secondary classical authors he read and/or knew personally.¹⁰ Beyond this more bibliographical argument I claim that through his interest in antiquity Wagner participated in a trend that was sweeping Europe during the nineteenth century. However, one of the things that sets Wagner apart as an artist and a German was that he did not turn toward a more generically "classical" culture. Instead, he avoided the Romans as the ancestors of the Italians and the French, and he disdained the ancient East for its ties to Jews and Jewishness. At one time or

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978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv | Preface

another Wagner counted at least one of these groups as a threat to German national identity and so he criticized their cultural offerings. By turning specifically to *Greek* epic, lyric, and drama for inspiration, he made a choice based on more than just form or style. It was also informed by national politics.

In Part I, after an introductory chapter on epic as a genre inextricably bound up with national identity, I begin chapter 2 with the thesis that, despite Wagner's own arguments against narrative in general and epic in particular, the libretto for the entire *Ring* owes an important artistic and political debt to Greek epic. This debt can be seen by examining the *Ring's* libretto as both a process and a finished product. Unlike what previous authors have said on the subject, I argue that in his theoretical works Wagner does not dismiss all epics and every narrative technique as somehow "bad" or imperfect. He praises Homer, and in the *Ring* he strives to do for Germany what he imagines Homer to have done for Greece, namely, provide his country with a national bible rooted in the sagas and myths of the *Volk's* collective past. One way in which he achieves this goal is by emulating Homer's technique of retrospective narrative and writing the libretti for the *Ring* in reverse order.¹¹ He begins with the fatal wound received by his hero, Siegfried, and generates prequel after prequel in search of its original cause. Finally, he arrives back at the very origins of time itself and the original sin of the *Ring*: the valuing of culture over nature, power over love. By focusing more specifically on *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, chapters 3 and 4 discuss the ways in which Wagner uses basic and advanced forms of epic in both the music and the libretti for these operas. Borrowing not only from Homer but also Hesiod and other epic poets, in *Das Rheingold* Wagner uses theogonic, didactic, and epigrammatic epic forms to create the inherently flawed world of the *Ring* and the gods that rule over this fallen world. Then in *Die Walküre*, as the *Ring* evolves both aesthetically and politically, Wagner introduces humans, depicting their interactions with the gods as more concrete and more Homeric by making his Teutonic source stories conform more closely to the ideal of proper Greek epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

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Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

I begin Part II with chapter 5, an analysis of the essential relationship between lyric and personal identity. In chapter 6 I argue that in *Siegfried* Wagner creates a liminal space occupied by lyric forms and characters. With *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* Wagner represents his characters in an embattled epic context. In *Götterdämmerung* he puts them in a more civilized setting, similar to the way that Greek dramatists made their heroes face the problems of personal responsibility within the civic context of tragedy and comedy. But between these two stages lies *Siegfried*, a poetic and political proving ground where heroes are neither wholly consumed by outside forces nor entirely subsumed by inner ones. In his eponymous opera Siegfried fills out the contours of the mythical Greek lyricist, Orpheus. He does this not only to further the plot of the *Ring* but also to facilitate Wagner's own self-discovery as an artist and an individual. Like Orpheus, Siegfried is a singer, a child of nature, friend to forest creatures and rescuer of maidens from death (or in Brünnhilde's case death's counterfeit, sleep). But like Wagner Siegfried is also anxious about his biological and artistic paternity (chapter 7). Just as Siegfried fears that Mime might be his real father, so Wagner fretted over the possibility that his own father was a Jew named Ludwig Geyer, his mother Johanna's second husband. By allowing Siegfried, his operatic double, to discover his true paternity through nature Wagner tries to solve what he saw as both his country's and his own identity crisis. Such a solution is undercut, however, by the similarities Wagner shares with Wotan and Mime. These similarities with "flawed" characters are further complicated by Siegfried's slaying and slaking of his thirst with the blood of the dragon Fafner (chapter 8). His subsequent transformation via Fafner's blood hints not only at miscegenation and pollution (such as that which contaminated Apollo through his slaying of the Python at Delphi), but also at the possibility of a new, hybrid creation that would combine the best of two worlds, symbolized by Siegfried on the one hand and Fafner on the other. Startlingly (perhaps even for Wagner), through his transfusion and subsequent transformation Siegfried becomes a symbol of music drama as the synthesis of German lyric and French spectacle.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi | Preface

In Part III I begin with chapter 9, which analyzes the notion that civic identity and collision, mostly between national and personal identity, are essential to drama. In chapter 10 we see Wagner enlisting the aid of Aristophanic parody and Greek tragedy in order to write the finale to the *Ring* cycle. Somewhat against the evolutionary progress of the *Ring* as a whole, in this final opera Wagner seeks through ridicule and critique to destroy the old perhaps more than he seeks to create the new. In other words he does not deliver on the formal promise he made at the end of *Siegfried* to create a hybrid opera that would combine both French spectacle and German lyric. Instead, he works within the ambivalent genre of tragi-comedy, thus fulfilling Siegfried's and Brünnhilde's ecstatic wish at the end of *Siegfried* to die laughing. To some extent Wagner is forced into this semi-destructive attitude by the fact that the music for this final opera was written last chronologically while the libretto, the oldest for the *Ring*, was written first and clearly reveals the influence of French and Italian operatic models, complete with massive choruses and wedding ceremonies, blood-brother duets, and princes and princesses. Instead of upgrading the libretto or scaling back his musical invention, Wagner uses his music to deconstruct what the libretto seems to say in earnest. Most obviously, he scores the music for his male choruses in *Götterdämmerung* in such a way as to parody the chorus of French grand opera, a form he denounces in his theoretical works as both retrograde and unnecessary (chapter 11). For, according to Wagner, the Greek chorus had long ago evolved into the operatic orchestra. From an aesthetic perspective its use on the modern stage thus constitutes a needless repetition. Similarly, from an ethical perspective the chorus represents an unnecessary luxury. As the representation of an unhealthy civic body this chorus has to be purged, a cleansing that is eventually achieved through the ending of the *Ring*, itself a darker and more destructive version of certain endings for Greek New Comedy. Instead of being united through the civic ceremony of a wedding, Siegfried, Brünnhilde, and, symbolically, German society as a whole are tragically united upon a funeral pyre that eventually engulfs the entire world of the *Ring*, negating the old through destruction and yet, perhaps, neglecting

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface | xvii

to create the new (chapter 12). In this way Wagner disrupts and terminates the *Ring's* cycle of poetic and political evolution. By brutally negating history, as Adorno would have it, the *Ring* may ultimately not only evolve but also revolve, in both senses of that word. It revolts against the past only to return to it, ending almost exactly where the entire cycle began, thus embodying certain Greek notions about the return to stasis at the close of tragedies. As we leave the *Ring* the stage is once more flooded and the Rhinedaughters once more in possession of the Rhinegold. Ambivalent to the end, the *Ring* cycle's finale both is and is not what it seems: a new beginning and the eternal return of the same.

In the epilogue I reconsider the *Ring's* relationship to time and history by using the language of performance theory. Because books do not appear instantaneously but rather over time, this epilogue in part represents my own evolution as a scholar and a teacher, a widening of my interest in theater to include performance studies. But beyond this more personal reason for the epilogue lies the fact that Wagner's own theoretical writings and the *Ring* cycle itself have been essential in shaping certain modern and post-modern ideas of performance, especially with respect to ambiguity, recycling of the past, and mixing art, politics, and self-expression. Such a re-examination of opera through eyes other¹² than those used in more conventional studies of music, theater, classics, and aesthetics is intended to further one of the main methodological goals of this book: to open up opera to new hermeneutic practices.¹³ In light of this I argue that twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatrical practitioners and theorists have adopted and adapted certain Wagnerian innovations despite the fact that they have sometimes violently disagreed with Wagner's ideological leanings. In the same way that Wagner took from the past, picking things over and piecing them together through his own unique blend of mytho- and politicopoeisis, so history has dealt with Wagner. Ultimately, by acquainting ourselves with the complex and sometimes corrupt ways in which Wagner Hellenized his world, we become that much freer with respect to the ways in which we may or may not choose to Wagnerize our own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Perhaps more so than any books that might follow, the merits of a first book reach well beyond its covers. But unfortunately its faults must stop with the name that appears on the binding. The case is no different with this first book. It certainly possesses its share of faults and although I do not have a lot of people to thank for whatever merit it might possess, I would like to thank a few people a lot.

Because it was a dissertation first, I would first like to thank my dissertation committee, each of whom passed on to me a certain bit of wisdom, virtue, or knowledge without which this book never would have seen the light of day. My dissertation director, Sander Gilman, taught me (as some advisors do not) that one cannot get a first job or publish a first book until one finishes a dissertation first. Easy advice in theory, not so easy in practice. Just ask any grad student. My first reader, David Bevington, showed me what dedication meant. And not just dedication to his research, but dedication to his students, a rare combination in today's academy. And last but not least, my second reader, Michael P. Steinberg, opened my eyes to the political dimensions of opera. It is to him that I am indebted for one of this book's fundamental premises, namely, that opera can be a powerful ideological weapon.

There have of course been other readers and opportunities that have shaped my work since I was a graduate student. As a Mellon Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Humanities Forum I was able to pursue my research on Performance Studies and opera. At Duke University three colleagues in particular read and commented on early drafts of this book and assessed it from their particular disciplinary perspectives: Bryan Gilliam read it as a musicologist, Peter Burian as a classicist, and John Clum as a theater historian.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51739-3 - Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks

Daniel H. Foster

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

More recently, while a visiting fellow at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences I was able to finish my final revisions. And lastly, there are the people associated with Cambridge University Press: Arthur Groos, who closely read the manuscript and kindly allowed it to be published in his Cambridge Studies in Opera series; Rebecca Jones, who has been very prompt and thoughtful in all of her contacts with me and in helping me get just the right cover for the book; and Victoria Cooper, who initially thought enough of the book to send it off to readers and who successfully persuaded the Cambridge University Press Syndicate to publish it.

On a more personal note, I would also like to thank my family, particularly my mother, Eugenia, and my father, Harmon. While they may not have contributed directly to the pages of this book, they did author its author. When I was younger they told me I could do anything and I (foolishly enough) believed them. When I wanted to pursue something as impractical as the Liberal Arts – worse yet, a “Great Books” program at St. John’s College – they let me go with their blessing. Combining their belief in me and the philosophy of my undergraduate institution, further fostered by my graduate work in Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago, produced someone who believes in the benefits of interdisciplinary study and that we are all standing on the shoulders of giants. True, I have tried to climb down off the shoulders of some of those giants, but I still look up to them.

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xx | *Acknowledgments*

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