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Dieter Borchmeyer: Drama and the World of Richard Wagner

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Love's Madness, Fairy-Tale Enchantment,
and a Sicilian Carnival

DIE HOCHZEIT, DIE FEEN, AND DAS LIEBESVERBOT

We must seize our chance and honestly seek to cultivate the
age's new forms, and he will be its master who writes in
neither an Italian nor a French—nor even in a German—style.

—Richard Wagner, “German Opera” (1834)

IN 1830 the seventeen-year-old Wagner first turned his hand to writing an opera,¹ but beyond the fact that he described it as a “pastoral opera” and that it was modeled on Goethe’s pastoral play of 1768, *Die Laune des Verliebten* (The caprice of the infatuated lover), we know nothing about it, as he quickly abandoned the idea, and no text or music has survived. His next operatic venture (WWV 31) dates from the year of Goethe’s death—1832—and on this occasion Wagner completed the libretto and made a start on the score. Three numbers were set, and these have survived,² but Wagner later destroyed the libretto on the grounds that his sister Rosalie hated it. (This is entirely plausible, as Rosalie was then working as an actress at the Royal Saxon Court Theater in Leipzig and was therefore in a position of some influence. Wagner evidently hoped for her support in this and other operatic ventures.) In his “Autobiographical Sketch” of 1843, he refers to it as an “operatic text of tragic import, although I no longer remember where I found the medieval subject” (GS 1:8). Later, in *My Life* (ML 75), he recounts the plot of the opera in some detail and states that he had first encountered it in Johann Gustav Gottlieb Büsching’s *Ritterzeit und Ritterwesen* (The age of chivalry and nature of chivalry), a farrago of fact and fiction about the Middle Ages that had been published in Leipzig in 1823 and whose importance for Wagner cannot be overstated, for it was here that he found the seeds of ideas for all his operas based on medieval themes, up to and including *Parsifal*. (A copy of the volume also found its way into Wagner’s library in Bayreuth.)

PRE-ECHOES OF *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*

A frenzied lover climbs up to the bedroom window of the fiancée of a friend of his, where she is waiting for her lover; she struggles with the madman and hurls him down into the courtyard, where every bone in his body is broken. At his funeral, the fiancée utters a cry and sinks lifeless upon his corpse. (GS 1:8–9)

Wagner was so attracted to this tale that he even thought of turning it into a short story in the style of E.T.A. Hoffmann. It is based in turn on a medieval verse narrative by an anonymous late-thirteenth-century German poet. (Its title, *Frauentreue* [Women's fidelity], is not authentic but derives from an epilogue added by a later poet: "Das heizet vrouwen triuwe" [This is an example of women's fidelity].) The young Wagner knew this poem only at second hand, namely, from Büsching's retelling of it, but by the time that he came to dictate *My Life*, he had already forgotten it, so much so that he confused its plot with that of his own libretto. Only much later did he get to know the original in Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen's 1850 three-volume anthology, *Gesamtabenteuer* (Compendium of adventures). "In the evening," we read in Cosima Wagner's diary for 1 May 1873, "R. reads me *Frauen Treue* [*sic*] by Konrad von Würzburg, the original of his *Hochzeit* [The wedding]." (Wagner was in error in attributing the poem to Konrad von Würzburg, who was in fact the author of the previous texts in Hagen's collection.)³ It left a "wonderful impression" (CT, 1 May 1873). Wagner was clearly so fascinated by the poem that he read it again eight years later. "We are very moved by its great respectability," Cosima noted on 17 October 1881. "There is something almost petit-bourgeois about it, in spite of all its boldness." And she follows this up with a remark on the middle-class husband of the story, a comment that suddenly makes it clear what Wagner found so fascinating about this tale: "In the husband R. recognizes his King Marke" (CT, 17 October 1881).

Büsching's bombastically overwritten summary of the plot of the original thirteenth-century poem runs as follows:

A worthy warrior and knight, overbold in both body and spirit, had set his mind—as many a God-fearing knight would do—on winning a woman's favors by dint of chivalry, which had cost him full many a gory wound. . . . In the course of his journeyings in search of adventure, this knight came to a town. He did not know the people here, with the exception of a single townsman whom he met here and who belonged to his circle of acquaintances. The knight approached him, addressed him as an acquaintance, and asked where he could find the most beautiful woman in the town.⁴

The townsman informs him that he will be able to see all the townswomen at the forthcoming service that is held each year to commemorate the consecration of the local church. And here the knight discovers a woman who robs him of his senses: "Si kam im zuo der selben stunt/mitten in sines herzen grunt,/darûz si nimmer mêt geschiet,/biz der tût ez verschriet" [All at once she entered the very depths of his heart, remaining there until death destroyed it].

The knight who arrives in town, becomes friendly with a member of the local burgher class, and falls in love with a middle-class woman at a church service—the reader is inevitably reminded of *Die Meistersinger*. In the case of *Die Hochzeit*, Wagner took up neither the motif of the meeting in church nor the social relationship between the knight and his lover, but instead described her as a "lady of noble birth" (ML 75). Neither she nor either of the two men is given a name: all are referred to merely by their social status. Büsching goes on to explain how the knight

pointed out this lady to the townsman who was accompanying him, and the townsman recognized her as his own wife. With a smile, he asked the knight to stay with him as his guest, but the latter declined, so oppressed was his heart, and each day he wandered through the town, hoping for a glimpse of the woman he loved. He took lodgings close to her home, so that he could see her all the more often.⁵

It was not long before the woman noticed the lovesick knight and began to grow wary, “wan si ze nieman liebe truoc, / wan z'ir êlichen man” [as she had never loved anyone apart from her lawfully wedded husband]. At this point, Büsching interrupts his summary of the plot, returning to it later and completing it at a totally unexpected point in his narrative. Wagner must have read Büsching's work very carefully for him to have been able to make sense of the story and reconstruct the overall context.

The knight organizes a tournament for the sake of the woman he loves, appearing at it wearing only a silk shirt.⁶ The point of an opponent's spear becomes embedded in his side, and he will allow only this one woman to remove it: “Mich sol nieman tuon gesunt, / wan durch der willen ich wart wunt, / læt mich diu sus verderben, / sô wil ich gerne sterben” [No one shall cure me except the one for whose sake I was wounded; if she leaves me thus to perish, I'll gladly die]. The idea of a knight being healed by the woman he loves is familiar, of course, from the exposition of *Tristan und Isolde*. Yet Büsching omits this very motif in his retelling of the plot of *Frauentreue*.⁷

The woman is fully aware of the erotic nature of the knight's request and so she initially refuses to draw the tip of the spear from his wound, and it is only in response to her husband's earnest entreaties that, almost dying of shame, she agrees to do so. At this point, Büsching picks up the story again, offering only the briefest account of its tragic outcome.⁸ The knight has scarcely recovered when he enters the couple's bedroom at night and forces himself upon the wife. In keeping with medieval custom, she was sleeping naked but manages to slip on a silk nightshirt. So violent is their struggle that the knight's wound reopens, and, in a manner reminiscent of Wagner's *Tristan*, he bleeds to death. Secretly she carries his body back to his lodgings, finally conscious of the greatness of his love for her: “Alrest diu vrouwe gedâhte, / der grôzen liebe ahte, / die der ritter zuo ir hâte: / dô was ez leider nû ze spâte” [Only now did the woman bethink herself and heed the great love that the knight felt for her: alas, it was now too late]. He is laid out in his coffin in church, whither the woman comes to offer a funerary sacrifice. Only her maid knows the secret of her love. (Again there is a striking parallel with *Tristan und Isolde*, this time with Brangäne.) Standing before the altar, she removes one article of clothing after another—“si vergaz vor leide gar der scham” [in her grief she even forgot all sense of shame]—until she stands there in her shift, then sinks lifeless upon the knight's body in a kind of medieval *Liebestod*, or Love-death.⁹

The whole story is permeated with a series of subtle correspondences: at the beginning the townswomen are placed on show, whereas at the end it is the knight's corpse that is laid out on display; the first and last encounters between the knight and his lady take place in church; and there is the recurrent motif of the silk shirt

or shift that the knight wears in fighting for his lover and that she in turn wears, first when defending herself in the bedroom and second when standing before his bier. Both here and in the tournament the silk shirt or shift serves to symbolize an amorous relationship that flouts social etiquette. Just as the knight sacrifices his personal safety in the tournament, so the woman sacrifices her honor, hitherto staunchly upheld, in an exhibitionist act that was even more provocative in the case of a middle-class woman than it would have been with a woman of noble birth and that is quite unprecedented in church. Thus she challenges the world, formally excluding herself from society with a finality that can end only with her death. A tale of such erotic eccentricity was conceivable only in the late Middle Ages. “Diu minne kan niht mâze hân” [Love cannot show moderation], we read in one of the poems of Konrad von Würzburg,¹⁰ the thirteenth-century poet to whom Wagner attributed *Frauentreue*. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of all this is that Wagner discovered this tale—it was virtually unknown in his own day but anticipates many of the relationships of his later music dramas—hidden away among the chaff of Büsching’s rhapsodically rambling work.

The reader who is unfamiliar with the intricacies of medieval relationships and who assumes the existence of an unambiguous ethical order in which marriage is inviolate will be surprised by the glorification of a love that overrides the ties of middle-class marriage by demonstrating its allegiance to a higher code of ethics involving knightly *triuwe*, or fidelity. This emerges not only from the prologue to the poem, in which the anonymous poet praises the lovers’ reciprocal *triuwe* and describes the woman as “diu guote,/diu reine, wolgemuote” [good, pure, and well disposed], but also, and more especially, from its ending, where even the husband sings his wife’s praises when she dies for love of the knight: “ein wîp sô gar ân’ valschen list” [a wife so pure and lacking in falsehood]. (Such praise is presumably possible, as the love between the knight and his lady stops short of actual adultery, a point on which it differs from that of Tristan and Isolde.) And the tale ends with the common burial of the two lovers: “Dâ legte man sie beide/mit jâmer und mit leide/in ein grap, die holden./Sus het si im vergolden,/unt tet im ganze triuwe schîn” [Then with grief and anguish both were laid in a single grave, the lovers. Thus she had requited him and given him proof of her steadfast fidelity].

It comes as no surprise to find that the older Wagner was fascinated by the links between this tale of medieval love and his own *Tristan und Isolde*, even though he did not explore many of their motivic correspondences in *Die Hochzeit*—indeed, he was unable to exploit them, as Büsching had passed over them in silence. Instead, he introduced a number of new motifs that anticipate other themes in his later works. The marriage between Ada and Arindal, for example, resembles that between Isolde and King Marke in that both serve to bring peace and reconciliation to two warring families or nations. In other words, Ada, the main female character, has evidently agreed to marry Arindal on rational grounds, which in turn explains the undeclared erotic fascination that Cadolt exercises over her. Cadolt later enters her bedroom, and, as Wagner explains in *My Life*, “his somber glance strikes her to the heart” (ML 75).

In spite of the differences between *Die Hochzeit* on the one hand and *Frauentreue* and Büsching's résumé of its contents, on the other, there is no denying the similarity between the two subjects or their affinities with the relationship between the three main characters in *Tristan und Isolde*—arguably another reason why Wagner described the libretto in such detail in *My Life* and why he repeatedly returned to it in the final years of his life. The idea of a love that not only destroys an existing marriage but undermines social conventions; the refusal of one of the partners to acknowledge this love (in *Die Hochzeit*, it is Ada, whereas in *Tristan und Isolde*, it is Tristan); the “mysterious strength of these passionate but suppressed emotions” (ML 75) that then break out with all the greater force; and their fatal consequence in the form of a Liebestod and the death of the surviving partner: these are all unmistakable motivic parallels between *Die Hochzeit* and *Tristan und Isolde*. When we read in Wagner's “Autobiographical Sketch” that the bride “sinks lifelessly over the body” at the end (GS 1:9), we are bound to think of the end of *Tristan und Isolde*, where we likewise read in the stage directions that Isolde “sinks down on Tristan's body” (GS 7:81). As Bernd Zegowitz has explained in the context of *Die Hochzeit*, “This sinking upon the body indicates two things. It is both a symbol of Ada's unconsummated bridal night with Arindal and a substitute for their embrace in the bedroom, an embrace that she herself interrupted. Their actual wedding thus takes place in death.”¹¹

In *My Life*, Wagner describes *Die Hochzeit* as “an out-and-out night piece of the blackest hue,” claiming that it was inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann and by the “musical mysticism” of which he was then so fond. “I executed this plan in black on black, disdaining any ray of light and in particular any operatic embellishment, which would have been inappropriate here” (ML 75–76). Two ideas emerge from this statement, both of which were to be of immense importance for Wagner the later music dramatist: first, his Romantic affinity with night, an affinity that was to leave its mark not only on his adaptation of Hoffmann's *Die Bergwerke zu Falun* (The mines at Falun) ten years later but also on his great hymn to the night, *Tristan und Isolde*; and, second, his decision to dispense with elaborate operatic conventions.

Neither of these elements seems to have found favor with Wagner's family, especially his sister Rosalie, although their displeasure may also have been sparked by the relationship between the three characters, a relationship abhorrent to their sense of bourgeois morality. Wagner's next operatic project was his self-styled “Romantic opera in three acts,” *Die Feen* (The fairies, WWV 32) of 1833–34, his first completed work for the operatic stage. Although it, too, inhabits a world of Romanticized medievalism, it could hardly be more different from *Die Hochzeit* in every other respect. The “ray of light” that Wagner had spurned in *Die Hochzeit* and the “operatic embellishments” that he had formerly avoided as “inappropriate” are now back in force, enjoying a theatrical revival that has encouraged Bernd Zegowitz to speak of an outright “repudiation of *Die Hochzeit*”¹² and of its supersession by bourgeois morality. The irreconcilability of marriage and physical love that Wagner had treated in *Die Hochzeit* is countered for the first and last time in his works by the glorification of the family, a shift intended to please and pacify

his sister Rosalie. The fact that he again named his two main characters Ada and Arindal merely highlights the contrast between the two works; as Egon Voss has suggested, Wagner seems to have taken over the names unchanged “in order to rehabilitate the institution of marriage, which had come off so badly in *Die Hochzeit*.”¹³

Ada and Arindal have been married for eight years, and their marriage has been blessed with children. No other opera by Wagner was to adopt such an inviolate view of family life.¹⁴ In all his later works, children appear only as adolescent orphans lacking one or both parents or they are the result of illicit unions. Mothers are either dead or passed over in silence (the only exceptions are Erda, who appears as Brünnhilde’s mother in the *Ring* but has no contact with her daughter, and the mother of Isolde, who never appears onstage), whereas fathers are always widowers, and marriages, invariably childless, are always unhappy or at least beset by trouble and doomed to failure from the outset, assuming that they were contracted in the first place. In short, *Die Feen* is the last of Wagner’s operas to present a wholesome picture of family life. In the words in *Opera and Drama* (GS 4:56), love is always seen as a “disruptive force,” undermining social institutions and conventions. Only in *Die Meistersinger* is a fragile link forged between love and social conventions.

As a paean to marriage, *Die Feen* is therefore a remarkable exception in Wagner’s works—Egon Voss calls it “an opera for Wagner’s family,”¹⁵ and the note of irony is unmistakable. There is a hidden reference to this in the second-act finale of the opera, at Ada’s words “O Himmel, schütz’ ihn, schütz’ ihn vor Verdacht” [O heaven, protect him, protect him from suspicion] in bars 285–89, which quote from Wagner’s melodrama “Ach neige, du Schmerzenreiche” [Ah, look down, thou rich in sorrow’s crown], one of his *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes Faust* (Seven compositions for Goethe’s *Faust*, WWV 15) from 1831. This last-named work was evidently written for Rosalie, who at this time was playing Gretchen in Goethe’s play at the Leipzig Stadttheater.¹⁶ Wagner’s emphatic repudiation of *Die Feen* in later life—and from none of his early stage works did he distance himself so radically¹⁷—is no doubt bound up with his feeling of unease that in an attempt to curry favor with his family, he had denied an essential part of his true nature as an artist and paid tribute to convention both formally and thematically, the very convention that he had mercilessly pilloried in *Die Hochzeit*.

IN SEARCH OF GOZZI

In *My Life*, Wagner claims to have “written *Die Hochzeit* without operatic embellishments and to have treated the subject in the blackest possible vein,” whereas *Die Feen* is said to have been “decked out with a diversity that bordered on the intolerable.”

As for the poetic diction and the verses themselves, I was almost intentionally careless, as I was no longer entertaining my earlier hopes of making a name for myself as a poet.

I had become a “musician” and a “composer” and wanted to write a suitable “libretto,” as I now realized that no one else could do this for me, as a libretto is something unique and, as such, simply cannot be brought off by a poet or a man of letters. (ML 81)

The words that appear in quotation marks are evidently used ironically here; after all, it was a fundamental principle of Wagner’s later reforms that the dualism of words and music in opera should be overcome and that the text should no longer be merely a means to an end, and the “composer,” for his part, would become a dramatist. In the “artwork of the future,” poetry and music were to be equally committed to fulfilling the “aim” of the drama. In Wagner’s eyes, *Die Feen* still fell far short of this goal.

Here, too, the writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann were influential. Wagner was familiar with Hoffmann’s narrative “Der Dichter und der Komponist” (The poet and the composer) from his *Serapionsbrüder* (Serapion brethren) cycle. In this story, which takes the form of a dialogue between a poet and a composer, the imaginary composer advances the idea of a “musical drama” or “Romantic opera” in which “music emerges directly from the poem as a necessary product of it” and argues that the ten fairy-tale plays, or *fiabe drammatiche*, of Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) would be ideal subjects for operas: “In his dramatic fairy tales he achieved everything that I demand of the operatic poet, and it is beyond belief that this rich vein of excellent subjects has not been tapped more often than it has been.”¹⁸

Wagner was to follow up this suggestion and launch his career as a music dramatist with an adaptation of Gozzi’s *La donna serpente* (The serpent woman), which had received its first performance in Venice in 1762. In doing so, he ushered in a long series of Gozzi operas that was to continue until well into the twentieth century, with the *Turandot* operas of Busoni and Puccini, Prokofiev’s *Love for Three Oranges*, and Henze’s *König Hirsch*. Even before Wagner, *La donna serpente* had already been adapted for the stage by Friedrich Heinrich Himmel, whose *Zauberoper* (magic opera) *Die Sylphen* (The sylphs) was staged in Berlin in 1806. In the twentieth century it provided the basis for Alfredo Casella’s *La donna serpente*, first heard in Rome in 1932. And Gozzi himself was the main character in *Die Familie Gozzi* (The family Gozzi), an opera written in 1934 by the pianist Wilhelm Kempff. Nor should we forget Hofmannsthal and Strauss’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (The woman without a shadow), which, although not directly based on Gozzi, takes over a number of motifs and names as well as the general oriental atmosphere of the Italian playwright’s *fiabe drammatiche*.

Gozzi has gone down in the history of the theater as an exponent of the Italian improvised comedy, or *commedia dell’arte*, a genre that he both defended and reformed. By this date in its history, the *commedia dell’arte* had become ossified as a result of the constant repetition of the same stock situations. Gozzi’s hated archrival, Carlo Goldoni, attempted to remedy this problem by turning the *commedia dell’arte* into a more sophisticated form of comedy involving realistic characters and a fixed text, whereas Gozzi himself sought to preserve its original spirit of improvisation and to breathe new life into it by introducing fantastical, fairy-tale elements, drawing on themes and motifs from the *Arabian Nights* and from an anthology of fairy

tales by Giambattista Basile known as the *Cunto de li cunti* (1634–36). Although Gozzi's fiabe drammatiche generally rely on fixed texts, the scenes involving commedia dell'arte characters are merely sketched out in the manner of a scenario, leaving the actors greater or lesser scope for improvisation. These fairy-tale comedies were initially immensely successful, so much so, in fact, that Goldoni was driven from Venice and forced to settle in Paris. But in Italy, audiences soon tired of them, with the result that they eventually fell into neglect, whereas in Germany they flourished and proved hugely influential thanks to Schiller's adaptation of *Turandot* and, above all, to the enthusiastic response of the Romantics, who even compared Gozzi with Shakespeare. Presumably it was Wagner's scholarly uncle and mentor, Adolf Wagner, who drew his nephew's attention to Gozzi. Adolf had known both Hoffmann and Tieck personally, had corresponded with Jean Paul, and in his youth had even known Schiller. In 1804 he translated *Il corvo* as *Der Rabe* (The raven), and in his essay *Theater und Publikum* (Theater and public, 1823) he singled out Gozzi for special mention, praising him as a writer who had raised comedy from the depths into which it had sunk at the hands of the bourgeois realists of the Enlightenment and rescued it "from ordinariness and triviality" by restoring it "to the world of the lighthearted imagination."

It is clear from Cosima's diaries that Wagner never lost his enthusiasm for Gozzi. On 13 October 1872, for example, he explicitly aligned himself with Gozzi in the latter's rivalry with Goldoni, although he was wrong to claim that unlike Goldoni, Gozzi "felt the common people's instinctive hostility to dabbling in literature." Rather, the opposite was the case, with the aristocratic Gozzi regarding the rabble with unfeigned contempt, whereas Goldoni had sought to invest his lower-class characters with a greater degree of individuality.

In his "Letter to an Actor on Acting" (1872), Wagner commended Gozzi for rehabilitating improvisation in his fiabe drammatiche. In his adaptation of *La donna serpente*, of course, he had no choice but to cut the improvised scenes or write them out in full—no other alternative was possible in an opera. The masks of the commedia dell'arte tradition are replaced by other, more or less comic characters who, in keeping with Wagner's decision to transfer the action from Gozzi's semi-oriental, semi-Venetian fairy-tale world of masks to a Nordic realm, now sport such incongruous names as Gunther and Gernot, with the heroes of the *Nibelungenlied* reduced to the point where they have become comic servants. The name Arindal, which Wagner had already used for the male protagonist in *Die Hochzeit*, was taken over from Ossian—Wagner may have found it in Goethe's *Werther*, where it also occurs. The typically Gozzian tendency for the tragic and the sublime to be infiltrated by comic elements and the predominance of the grotesque that so fascinated the Romantics are two aspects of the original that are much reduced in Wagner's libretto, even though here, too, the alternation between tragic and comic scenes has been preserved in essence.

In general, Wagner has taken over intact the plot of Gozzi's tragicomedy, the main difference being the change of imagery surrounding Ada's transformation, a change of which Wagner was particularly proud, as he explained in *A Communication to My Friends* (1851): "A fairy who renounces her immortality in order to

gain possession of the man she loves can win mortality only by meeting certain strict conditions. If she fails to meet them, her mortal lover is threatened with the harshest of fates” (GS 4:252–53). But the ordeal—I will return to the conditions bound up with it—proves too much for her lover. Whereas in Gozzi the fairy is now turned into a snake (only her lover’s kiss can turn her back again), Wagner altered the ending in such a way that “the spell on the fairy, who has been turned to stone, can be broken only by her lover’s impassioned singing” (GS 4:253).

The motif whereby a human being is turned to stone or becomes a statue has a long and venerable tradition in myth, recurring most recently in Christoph Ransmayr’s Ovid-inspired novel *Die letzte Welt* (1988)—in 1990 an English translation appeared under the title *The Last World*—within the framework of a postmodern take on the *Metamorphoses* in which the character of Battus is quite literally petrified. The reader will also be reminded in this context of Lot’s wife, who is turned to a pillar of salt in the Bible, and of the Greek Niobe, who turns to stone in her grief at her children’s murder. The motif is found in myths and fairy tales throughout the world, as is its counterpart whereby the statue is restored to life. Unsurprisingly, it also occurs repeatedly in Gozzi, most notably in *Il corvo*, a piece of which Wagner thought very highly and whose contents are summarized in detail in Hoffmann’s “Der Dichter und der Komponist” (The poet and the composer). And it is found, too, in Gozzi’s *L’augelin belverde* (The green bird), in which one after another of the characters is turned into a statue and back again. In short, Wagner replaced one motif from Gozzi with another. But the way in which he interpreted it derives from elsewhere, for the idea of a statue coming back to life through music is strikingly reminiscent of the end of Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, which Wagner undoubtedly knew. Here the apparent statue of Leontes’ wife, Hermione—it is, in fact, Hermione herself—is restored to her original human form to the sound of music. This idea of a statue coming to life is associated above all with the classical myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with the statue that he had made, so that Venus breathed life into it for him. By the eighteenth century this motif had come to symbolize the very existence of the artist who by dint of his creative fire breathes life into what was dead and artificial. Two strophes from Schiller’s poem “Die Ideale” (1795) illustrate this idea:

Wie einst mit flehendem Verlangen
 Pygmalion den Stein umschloß,
 Bis in des Marmors kalte Wangen
 Empfindung glühend sich ergoß,
 So schlang ich mich mit Liebesarmen
 Um die Natur, mit Jugendlust,
 Bis sie zu athmen, zu erwarmen
 Begann an meiner Dichterbrust,

 Und, theilend meine Flammentriebe,
 Die Stumme eine Sprache fand,
 Mir wiedergab den Kuß der Liebe
 Und meines Herzens Klang verstand;

Da lebte mir der Baum, die Rose,
 Mir sang der Quellen Silberfall,
 Es fühlte selbst das Seelenlose
 Von meines Lebens Widerhall.

[As once Pygmalion, fondly yearning,
 Embrac'd the statue form'd by him,
 Till the cold marble's cheeks were burning,
 And life diffus'd through ev'ry limb—
 So I, with youthful passion fired,
 My longing arms round Nature threw,
 Till, clinging to my breast inspired,
 She 'gan to breathe, to kindle, too.

And all my fiery ardour proving,
 Though mute, her tale she soon could tell,
 Return'd each kiss I gave her loving,
 The throbbings of my heart read well.
 Then living seem'd each tree, each flower,
 Then sweetly sang the waterfall,
 And e'en the soulless in that hour
 Shar'd in the heav'nly bliss of all.

(Trans. Edgar Alfred Bowring)]

The ideas that Wagner found in Gozzi were combined with others drawn from *The Winter's Tale* and from the myths of Pygmalion and Orpheus, who not only tamed wild beasts with his singing but caused the very stones and trees to move, thus producing a potent mix of symbols in which Arindal becomes an artist who through the power of music breaks the spell on his lover, who has been turned into a stone statue. (Musically and dramatically, the model for this scene is Hades in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, where Orpheus's singing and playing melt the hearts of the unfeeling Furies.)

Ja, ich besitze Götterkraft!
 Ich kenne ja der holden Töne Macht,
 Der Gottheit, die der Sterbliche besitzt!
 Du, heiße Liebe, Sehnsucht und Verlangen,
 Entzaubert denn in Tönen diesen Stein!

(SS 11:56–57)

[Yes, godly strength I own!
 I know sweet music's power,
 The godhead that the mortal owns!
 O fiery love, desire and longing,
 Uncharm this stone through music's tones!]

Two of the themes found here—the idea of a creature from the spirit world who yearns to become human and who is prepared to forgo his or her immortality for

the sake of human love, and the tragic clash between the spirit and human worlds—are central to many Romantic operas of the first half of the nineteenth century, beginning in 1816 with Hoffmann's *Undine* and culminating in 1850 with Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Heinrich Marschner's two operas *Der Vampyr* (1828) and *Hans Heiling* (1833) are part of the same tradition.

The idea of testing the love of a human being who enters into a relationship with a figure from the spirit world and who is required to obey an almost impossible injunction is common to three of Wagner's Romantic operas, *Die Feen*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Lohengrin*. In *Die Feen* and *Lohengrin* the test involves not asking a question: the human partner is not allowed to fathom the mystery surrounding the otherworldly being who has entered his or her world. This, too, was a classical motif, as Wagner was fully aware (GS 4:289); suffice it to mention Zeus and Semele, and Amor and Psyche. The motif recurs, at least peripherally, in Wagner's unfinished sketch for *Wieland der Schmied* (Wieland the Smith, 1849–50), where it is said that the Prince of the Light Elves approached Schwanhilde's mother in the form of a swan, much as Zeus approached Leda. They lived together for three years until “the mother, in her foolish eagerness, desired to know who her husband was, a question that she had been told not to ask. Then the Prince of the Elves swam away through the waves in the form of a swan” (GS 3:182). Here motifs from the myths of Leda, Semele, and Psyche have merged with others from *Lohengrin*.

In Gozzi's *La donna serpente*, Farruscad violates a similar injunction by searching his wife's boudoir, and in *Die Feen*, Arindal—anticipating Elsa in *Lohengrin*—urges his lover “to tell him who she is and whence she comes” (SS 11:9). According to *My Life*, Ada has to impose the harshest ordeals on her human lover (the ban on questions is only one such test of his love), for “only by triumphing over them can he free her from the fairies' immortal world and allow her, as a loving wife, to share in the fate of all mortals” (ML 80). This motif is strikingly reminiscent not only of *Undine* but also of a twentieth-century opera to which I have already referred, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.¹⁹ Hofmannsthal is known to have studied Wagner's music dramas in detail while working on his libretto, and there is no doubt that *Die Feen* provided him with a number of ideas, even if the many parallels between the two works—the fact that the Empress, whose father is from the spirit world, originally assumes the form of an animal caught by the mortal huntsman who is later to become her husband; the idea of an ordeal; and the transformation into a statue—can also be explained by reference to the fact that both librettists were drawing on Gozzi. Strauss, too, was familiar with *Die Feen*, as he helped to prepare the work's first performance in Munich in 1888. (To his annoyance, the premiere was entrusted instead to his superior, Franz Fischer.) The production remained in the Munich repertory for many years, and in 1895 Strauss's wife, Pauline de Ahna, took the part of Ada.

A comparison between *Die Feen* and Gozzi's *La donna serpente* reveals the extent to which Wagner refashioned many of the situations that he found in his source, aligning them with the spirit of the great poetic and musical impressions of his youth. Shakespeare's influence is evident not only in the parallel with the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* but also in a number of reminiscences of *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, and Arindal's mad scene in act 2, for which there is no direct parallel in Gozzi, recalls *King Lear*, a work that had already inspired Wagner's first work for the theater, the tragedy *Leubald* WWV 1 (see also ML 32). Mad scenes were of course a regular feature of nineteenth-century operas, most notably Masaniello's in Auber's *La muette de Portici* (The mute girl of Portici), a work that played a paradigmatic role in the young Wagner's life. In much the same way, Weber's *Oberon* has left its mark on the action in many small ways, both musically and poetically, including the appearance of the King of the Fairies at the end. The ordeal scene in the final act, with its Chorus of Men of Bronze, and the earlier "purification" of the children of Ada and Arindal by what they think is death by fire (see SS 11:40–45) are clearly modeled on the penultimate trial undergone by Tamino and Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* (The magic flute). The last-named work has left its mark on *Die Feen* in other ways, too, with the scene between Drolla and Gernot in act 2 evidently inspired by the duet between Papageno and Papagena; other aspects of the scene can be traced back to Pedrillo and Blonde in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The abduction from the seraglio) and to Sherasmin and Fatima in *Oberon*. Even more important are the influences to which Wagner himself admitted: Beethoven (Ada's great *scena* and aria in act 2 is clearly based on Leonore's "Abscheulicher") and, above all, Weber and Marschner, whose Romantic operas inspired the words and music of *Die Feen*.²⁰

PRE-ECHOES OF THE LATER WAGNER

For all that *Die Feen* contains many reminiscences of Wagner's musical models, it goes far beyond the mere imitation of well-tried devices, not least as a result of its dramatic intensity, an intensity that has persuaded one commentator to write of "an impassioned young man with the strength of a wild animal mobilizing all the resources of the Romantic music theater."²¹ And, like Wagner's next opera, *Das Liebesverbot* (The ban on love), it also contains many presentiments, not to say pre-echoes, of his later works. The rising semiquaver figure in the introduction to the overture, for example, points the way ahead to what is arguably Wagner's most important purely instrumental work, his *Faust* Overture. And the unaccompanied *preghiera* (prayer) at the start of act 3 recalls the prayer before the single combat between Lohengrin and Telramund in act 1 of *Lohengrin* (in this case the model is almost certainly the unaccompanied *prière* in act 3 of *La muette de Portici*). Even Wagner's later use of the leitmotif for psychological ends is already adumbrated here, notably in the theme of Gernot's Romance about the witch Dilnovaz, which Gernot sings in an attempt to persuade Arindal to abandon Ada on the grounds that she, too, is no more than a sorceress. This theme returns in act 2 at the very moment when Arindal himself begins to doubt Ada as a result of the terrible trials that he thinks she has inflicted on him. Or take the braying horn calls at the beginning of Arindal's mad scene, a passage intended to imitate the sound of barking dogs and one that clearly anticipates Sieglinde's hallucinatory vision of a pack of snarling hounds in act 2 of *Die Walküre*.

According to Paul Bekker, “the youthful composer had suddenly struck down to the foundation of his own genius” in this scene.²² And, as Werner Breig has pointed out, it is significant that Wagner’s music gains in its “power of expression and originality in scenes where the border states of consciousness are characterized in musical terms.”²³ Among these scenes are some that are almost Kleistian in their ability to merge dreams and reality, notably in Ada’s first appearance before Arindal in act 1 (SS 11:19–20). Wagner’s interest in “border states of consciousness” is already clear from *Leubald*, which he wrote when he was only fourteen and whose titular hero spends long periods in a state of mental confusion. Wagner claimed that it was in order to set *Leubald* that he learned how to write music (ML 38), although it seems unlikely that he had anything more in mind than incidental music in the style of Beethoven’s music for Goethe’s *Egmont*. “I am no composer,” he told Cosima on 31 January 1870. “I wanted to learn enough only to compose *Leubald und Adelaide* [*sic*]; and that is how things have remained—only the subjects have changed.”

Far more important than these occasional pre-echoes of the music of Wagner’s later works are the ways in which themes and characters and their interrelationships are prefigured in *Die Feen*. No matter how much Wagner may have changed artistically and ideologically, certain prototypical scenes remain pivotal to his plots from his very first opera through to his last. A classic example of this is what we might call “the poetics of the glance”²⁴—to borrow a term from Jean Starobinski’s famous chapter on Racine.²⁵ In his mad scene, Arindal remembers pursuing the hind and how, struck down by his arrow, it had revealed itself as the fairy Ada.

O seht, das Tier kann weinen!
Die Träne glänzt in seinem Aug’!
O, wie’s gebrochen nach mir schaut!

(SS 11:48)

[Behold, the beast can weep!
A teardrop glistens in its eye!
Oh, how dullest it gazes up at me!]

This image of the animal’s dying glance directed at the huntsman is bound to remind the reader of the moment when Gurnemanz directs Parsifal’s gaze at the swan that he has killed: “Gebrochen das Aug’, siehst du den Blick?” [Its eye is dulled, do you see its glance?] (GS 10:335) At this point Parsifal feels the first stirrings of pity and breaks his bow. (Not until later does he acquire the maturity and experience to fathom the full depths of human suffering through the agony that Amfortas feels.) Thus, in Wagner’s mind the glance was associated with pity and compassion. Here it is worth mentioning an episode from Wagner’s own life, an episode, moreover, that occurred while he was working on *Die Feen*. During his time in Würzburg, Wagner frequented a local beer garden known as *Der letzte Hieb* (the place still exists), and on one occasion he became involved in a fight with a fellow reveler to whom he had taken a dislike. Wagner struck his opponent roundly on the skull “and caught the bewildered look he gave me.” The man’s gaze traumatized him, leaving him with an abiding sense of guilt and a loathing of all

forms of physical violence. In this context he describes how, even in his adolescence, he could already “empathize with the sufferings of others, especially with those of animals” (ML 83–84).

The hind’s dying glance wakens Arindal’s love of Ada. This too is a prototypical scene in Wagner’s works. Think of the moment when Isolde recalls how she once stood before Tristan, sword in hand, and how he gazed up at her from his sickbed.

Von seinem Bette
blickt’ er her,—
nicht auf das Schwert,
nicht auf die Hand,—
er sah mir in die Augen.

(GS 7:11)

[From his bed
he looked up,—
not at the sword,
not at my hand,—
he looked into my eyes.]

The sense of compassion kindled by this glance prevents Isolde from exacting revenge. The glance of the victim stirs a glance of compassion that turns to an expression of love. That compassion and love are always synonymous in Wagner’s works is clear from the look of suffering in the eyes of the portrait of the Flying Dutchman in Daland’s house, a look that arouses Senta’s compassion and love. “Kann meinem Blick Theilnahme ich verwehren?” she asks Erik [Can I prevent my gaze from feeling sympathy?] (GS 1:275). But Erik is right to suspect that Senta’s gaze expresses more than mere sympathy.

Another typical motif that links *Die Feen* with *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Die Walküre* can be described, in Thomas Mann’s words, as “sympathy with death,” albeit not yet in the sense understood by the *décadents*. Like Lohengrin, Ada hails from a timeless world, a “*paradis artificiel*,” and, like Lohengrin, she is prepared to renounce this world and her immortality for the sake of love. As I have already noted, a condition is attached to this decision, in that Arindal and Elsa are famously banned from asking about the origins and nature of their otherworldly partner for a certain period of time. Neither has the strength to stick to this condition. Lohengrin, in Wagner’s words, “admits to his divine origins and returns, annihilated, to his lonely state” (GS 4:296). Here, paradoxically, the character’s return to a timeless state from one of temporality signifies “annihilation.” Arindal, by contrast, is banished from the fairy-land paradise and transported to a “desolate rocky landscape” (SS 11:10). The speed with which this change takes place inevitably recalls the way in which Tannhäuser is suddenly transported from the Venusberg to the valley at the foot of the Wartburg. Although both the Venusberg and the fairy land are different worlds, there is a sense in which, being beyond time, they are also beyond space, which explains how the fairy world into which Arindal had stumbled while out hunting can penetrate the

human world in the second half of act 1 as suddenly as the Venusberg erupts into the valley of the Wartburg in act 3 of *Tannhäuser*.

Like Lohengrin, Ada remains behind, annihilated, in her lonely paradise: “Zu traurig hartem Lose/wird mir Unsterblichkeit” [Immortality is now my grievous fate] (SS 11:19–20). And there is the same paradox as before: for Ada, immortality means “being dead forever” (SS 11:20). But Arindal is given a further chance to win back Ada by means of a new ordeal, an opportunity not found in *Lohengrin*. In act 2, the two fairies Zemina and Farzana offer Ada a choice between the timeless fairy realm and the world of human mortality: “Hier langer Tod und dort ein ewig Leben” [Here lengthy death and there eternal life] (SS 11:35). But for Ada, this set of values no longer applies; for her, immortality betokens a “lengthy death,” whereas mortality is the equivalent of “eternal life.”

Ich könnte allem mich entzieh'n,
steht mir's nicht frei? In ew'ger Schöne
unsterblich, unverwelklich blüh'n!
Es huldigt mir die Feenwelt,
ich bin ihr Glanz und ihre Zier,
es ehrt ein unvergänglich Reich
mich, seine hohe Königin!
Ich könnte allem mich entzieh'n,
in Feenpracht unsterblich blüh'n!
Betrogen, Unglücksel'ge!
Was ist dir Unsterblichkeit?
Ein grenzenloser, ew'ger Tod,
doch jeder Tag bei ihm
ein neues, ewiges Leben!

(SS 11:36)

[I could withdraw from all of this,
Am I not free to do so? In endless beauty
I would bloom, immortal and unfading!
To me the fairy realm pays tribute,
I lend it sheen and luster,
A realm, imperishable, honors
Me, its high-born queen!
I could withdraw from all of this
And flourish in undying fairy splendor!
Deceived, unhappy woman!
Of what avail is immortality to you?
A boundless, endless death,
Yet every day with him
Is new, eternal life.]

In much the same way, *Tannhäuser* yearns to escape from Venus's timeless realm and rediscover temporality and mortality.

Wenn stets ein Gott genießen kann,
 bin ich dem Wechsel unterthan;
 nicht Lust allein liegt mir am Herzen,
 aus Freuden sehn' ich mich nach Schmerzen.

(GS 2:6)

[A god may know eternal joy,
 But, human, I am bound to change;
 My heart is set on more than mere delight:
 For in the midst of joy I long for pain.]

“O, Göttin,” he goes on, “woll’ es fassen, / mich drängt es hin zum Tod!” [Oh, goddess, try to understand, it’s death for which I crave!] (GS 2:11). It is not immortality that confers life on him, but mortality, with the result that he is alarmed when Venus threatens him with the same fate as Ahasuerus and the Flying Dutchman: “Wenn selbst der Tod dich meidet, / ein Grab dir selbst verwehrt” [When death itself avoids you, the grave is closed to you] (GS 2:11).

Siegmund, too, rejects Brünnhilde’s offer of “eternal bliss,” dismissing such joys as “hollow” (GS 6:53). Instead, he prefers a life of suffering at Sieglinde’s side, and his decision leaves the Valkyrie so shaken that she ceases to be the “unfeeling maid” that Siegmund takes her to be (GS 6:53). Abandoning the world of timeless, painless divinity, Brünnhilde violates Wotan’s decree out of her sense of solidarity with the suffering human couple before her and in that way becomes human and mortal in turn.

The fairies in Wagner’s first opera are likewise “unfeeling maids,” insensitive members of a world that knows neither mortality nor the experience of emotion and suffering bound up with it. Just as Brünnhilde abandons the Valkyries, so Ada, by becoming a sentient human being, leaves behind the unfeeling fairy band. Like the Nurse in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, Zemina and Farzana embody the lack of compassion of the fairy world and stake everything on the belief that Arindal will fail the tests imposed on him and that Ada will in consequence return to their own immortal world. (The eponymous heroine of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* is in many ways related to Brünnhilde: she too is moved by her sense of solidarity with suffering humanity to abandon the shadowless, timeless, and emotionless spirit world that she had once inhabited.)

In the case of *Die Feen*, immortality has the last word, thereby asserting a priority that is puzzling and at odds with Wagner’s “sympathy with death.” As such, this highlights the change in Wagner’s thinking since *Die Hochzeit*. Whereas Farruscad and Cherestani share a human fate in Gozzi’s *La donna serpente*, Ada and Arindal are removed from this “earthly dust” (SS 11:58) and welcomed into a world of immortality. This change makes sense only against the background of the myth of the artist that derives from the Orpheus legend and transfigures the end of the opera: through his singing and playing, Arindal has broken the spell on the stone statue of Ada, an artistic feat by dint of which he becomes “more than a man—immortal” (SS 11:57). By being transported to the fairy world, he undergoes the sort of apotheosis that is typically associated with the artist.

FROM *DIE FEEN* TO *DAS LIEBESVERBOT*

Die Feen was the only one of Wagner's thirteen completed operas not to be performed during his lifetime. He had already finished the libretto by the time he took up his first professional engagement as chorus master in Würzburg in January 1833. The post had been obtained for him by his brother Albert, who was already working at the theater as a singer and stage manager. On his way to taking up his new post, Wagner broke his journey in Bamberg and, according to his later account in *My Life*, "recalled E.T.A. Hoffmann's stay in the town and the genesis of his *Fantasiestücke* [Fantasy pieces]" (ML 81), a comment that indicates the extent to which Wagner was still in thrall to Romantic poetry at this time. He worked on the score of *Die Feen* throughout the twelve months that he spent in Würzburg, completing it on 6 January 1834 and possibly even arranging a concert performance of excerpts from it.

Wagner returned to his native Leipzig in January 1834 and for a time hoped that the local theater would stage his first completed opera, but the promised production was repeatedly postponed, and finally it was abandoned altogether. During his negotiations with the theater, Wagner was persuaded to provide the work with spoken dialogue in the style of an *opéra comique*,²⁶ although these passages of dialogue are limited to the comic scenes, in other words, to the ones that were largely improvised in Gozzi's original. Here Wagner followed his source far more closely than in the sung recitatives, thereby giving much greater scope to low comedy and parody.

In the event, *Die Feen* reached the stage neither in this nor in any other form at this time, a state of affairs that was due first and foremost to the fact that, according to *My Life*, Wagner had already lost interest in the work soon after completing the score: "The very act of starting on the composition of *Das Liebesverbot* put me in a frame of mind in which I soon lost interest in the older work" (ML 104).²⁷ This new frame of mind found unambiguous expression in Wagner's earliest writings from 1834, namely, in the essays "German Opera" and "Pasticcio by Canto Spianato." Although the authorship of the second article admittedly remains contentious, both attest to a sudden turning away from German Romantic opera or, as Wagner would later express it, his lapse into the shallow world of French and Italian opera of the most "frivolous" and "fashionable" kind (GS 4:256). Now he contemptuously dismisses his earlier model Weber, reserving his greatest scorn for the very opera to which he had previously owed so much and on which he was later to draw for inspiration: *Euryanthe*.

Wagner's aesthetic volte-face was closely connected with his conversion to the Young German movement of the 1830s, a movement whose leading spokesman, Heinrich Laube, had been a personal acquaintance of his for some time. Indeed, it was in Laube's *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* (Journal for polite society) that Wagner's first piece of journalism, "German Opera," was published on 10 June 1834. Wagner ends this article with the words "We must seize our chance and honestly seek to cultivate the age's new forms" (SS 12:4), meaning that he was now resolved to turn his back on the escapism and mysticism that he had glorified in

Die Feen, notably in the way in which Ada and Arindal are spirited away to fairyland at the end of the opera. This flight from the present was to be replaced by an active engagement with the here and now and, more especially, by a glorification of sensuality. In this spirit Wagner conceived *Das Liebesverbot* in 1834, completing its libretto later that year, only months after putting the finishing touches to the score of *Die Feen*. If readers were to compare the themes of his first two operas, Wagner wrote in 1851 in his *Communication to My Friends*, they would see that

there existed within me the potential for developing in one or other of two fundamentally different directions: the utter seriousness of my basic nature was now contrasted with a mischievous propensity for wild and sensuous abandon and rebellious pleasure that seemed to be in the starkest possible contrast to it. This contrast becomes particularly clear when I compare the music of these two operas. . . . Anyone who was to compare the music of my later opera with that of *Die Feen* would find it hard to believe that so striking a change of direction could have taken place in so short a time. (GS 4:255–56)

Wagner was guilty of a certain exaggeration here; just as there are occasional traces in *Die Feen* of the influence of Italian opera, especially Rossini, so the composer of *Das Liebesverbot*—unlike the author of the dismissive article “German Opera”—was far from denying the influence of Weber or Beethoven in a number of scenes in the work. (In the case of Beethoven, there are even thematic parallels between *Das Liebesverbot* and *Fidelio*: the second acts of both operas begin with a dungeon scene, with the prisoner then rescued by a woman and the opera ending with a deus ex machina that brings to an end the tyrant’s despotic rule.)²⁸ And there are also musical and literary links between *Das Liebesverbot* and *Tannhäuser*, the most striking of them being the Dresden Amen that is pre-echoed in the “Salve Regina” in act 1, scene 2 of *Das Liebesverbot*. I shall have more to say about the literary reminiscences in my chapter on *Tannhäuser*. Here it is sufficient to recall Isabella’s exclamation in the opening act of *Das Liebesverbot*: “O, wie so öde das Leben bliebe, / gab er [Gott] nicht Liebe und Liebeslust” [Oh, how barren life would be if God had not given us love and love’s pleasure] (SS 11:84). Her words are an almost literal anticipation of Venus’s great cry in *Tannhäuser*:

Ach! kehrtest du nicht wieder,
dann träfe Fluch die Welt;
für ewig läg’ sie öde,
aus der die Göttin schwand!

(GS 2:10)

[Ah! if you were not to return,
a curse would blight the world;
forever it would then lie barren
when forsaken by the goddess!]

But the most striking link between Wagner’s first attempt at a German Romantic opera and its “frivolously Italianate” successor is the fact that both derive at least

part of their inspiration from the commedia dell'arte tradition. In the case of *Das Liebesverbot*, this finds its most salient expression in the burlesque episodes such as the trial scene involving Brighella (whose very name recalls the commedia dell'arte style), Pontio, and Dorella in act 1, where the Italian tradition is far more palpable than in *Die Feen*.

Although Wagner later returned to the German Romantic tradition in *Der fliegende Holländer* and came to regard as an aberration his enthusiasm not only for French and Italian operas but also for the world of ideas associated with the Young German movement, he consistently refused—for the reasons suggested here—to agree to a production of *Die Feen* or even to the publication of the work during his lifetime. But although he excluded it from his collected writings, he regaled his friends with a reading of excerpts from it one year before his death.

Not until 1888, two years after the death of King Ludwig II, to whom Wagner had donated the full score of the opera in 1865, did *Die Feen* receive its first performance at the Court Theater in Munich, a performance that took place against the wishes of Cosima Wagner; but since she did not own the performing rights to her late husband's first two operas, her claim that Wagner had never wanted the work to be staged fell on deaf ears. The production was directed by Karl Brulliot, "with scenic arrangements, stage machinery, and lighting" by Karl Lautenschläger, and was a spectacular success, not least as a result of its unparalleled extravagance, remaining in the repertory until 1899. According to Theodor Helm's review of the first performance,

the final apotheosis was the most beautiful and magical sight that we have ever seen in this genre, indeed, it is impossible to describe the enchanting effect of the sculptural groups rising up to dizzying heights, the fantastical calyxes, seashells, and gemstone crystals opening up on every side, and, finally, the electric lighting that was used on such a massive scale.²⁹

A second production was mounted at the Prinzregententheater in 1910, conducted by Felix Mottl and performed as part of the Munich Festival, but on this occasion the work was a resounding failure. Of the handful of subsequent productions, it is sufficient to mention only the two most notable ones: in 1981, at the Wuppertal Opera, Friedrich Meyer-Oertel staged the work from an ironic perspective, seeing the Romantic fairy-tale world as an oneiric product of the nineteenth century, resonating with allusions to the real life of the times. As such, the opera was seen as the projection of a society that sought refuge from life's demands in a world of empty illusion.³⁰ In this way, the anti-Romantic stance that Wagner temporarily adopted under the influence of the Young German movement was projected back onto his first completed opera, with Romantic opera called into question by means of its own conventions. Meyer-Oertel restaged *Die Feen* at Munich's Theater am Gärtnerplatz in 1989, and on this occasion he adopted a different approach to the piece, turning it into what the German music critic Karl Schumann described as a "kind of delirium on the part of a Romantic *Zauberoper*."³¹ The postmodern sets and costumes by Dieter Flimm and Maria Lucas combined fairy tale and reality,

history and myth, in a virtuoso and often puzzling game of associations in which time and place were forever shifting. The fairy realm was a hermetically sealed world of women that rejected the importunate Arindal. Certain elements evoked the Romantic grotesquerie of E.T.A. Hoffmann, and others recalled a modern nightclub, with choreography by Ursula Linke based on the style of modern *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance). Arindal was part Orpheus and part Ludwig II, finally triumphing over the celestially cold world of womenkind and finding himself transported to the starry vault above. The opera, in short, was interpreted as an exploration of the ideology underpinning much of nineteenth-century art.

BEL CANTO OPERA AS AN EROTIC UTOPIA

In “German Opera” (1834), his first theoretical essay, Wagner stressed the “infinite advantage” that the Italians enjoyed over the Germans in *bel canto* opera—the voice-dominated opera that in Wagner’s view was then the only type of opera worthy of the name. He was “heartily sick of the endlessly allegorizing orchestral turmoil,” a complaint that sounds very similar to the anti-Wagnerian attacks that were later to be leveled at the symphonic use of the orchestra in the Wagnerian music drama. Rather, he yearned for “simple, noble singing” and decried “this wretched erudition—the source of every German ill” (SS 12:1–2). Dieter Rexroth has suggested, with some plausibility, that the musical theme that Wagner uses to symbolize Friedrich’s ban on love in *Das Liebesverbot*—the theme represents the governor’s antisensualist morality and almost amounts to a leitmotif—is treated as a textbook case of motivic fragmentation in the course of the opera in an attempt to parody this “German erudition.”³²

This preference for Italian *bel canto* opera and French *opéra comique* continued to leave its mark on Wagner’s writings throughout the next four years. In “Dramatic Singing” (1837), for example, we read: “Why should we Germans not openly and freely admit that the Italian has the advantage over us in singing, the Frenchman in terms of his lighter and livelier treatment of operatic music?” (SS 12:15). And in “Bellini: A Word in Season,” Wagner demands “Song, song, and once again song, you Germans!” Just how far he was capable of going in his enthusiasm for Bellini emerges from his remark that “in *Norma*, which is undoubtedly Bellini’s most successful work, even the poem soars up to the tragic heights of the ancient Greeks” (SS 12:20–21).

Wagner’s enthusiasm for Bellini stemmed, as we know, from Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient’s performance as Romeo in a production of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* in Leipzig during the early months of 1834. It was one of the seminal experiences of his youth, and one to which he repeatedly returned even at the end of his life. On 23 March 1878, for example, he told Cosima that he thought the “rapture” of the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* was due entirely to Schröder-Devrient’s performance in 1834. Throughout the mid-thirties Wagner’s imagination as a music dramatist was fired above all by Bellini and also, of course, by Auber, especially the latter’s *La muette de Portici*.

When Wagner superintended a collected edition of his writings toward the end of his life, he refused to include in it not only the texts of his pre-*Rienzi* operas but also the newspaper articles that he wrote before 1840. Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that this refusal went hand in hand with a rejection of French and Italian opera. For French opera in particular—especially the works of Méhul, Boieldieu, Auber, and Halévy, whose grand opera *La juive* (The Jewess) was, in his view, in the best tradition of French opera—he retained a remarkably high opinion that found expression in often surprising ways in his conversations with Cosima, so that Nietzsche's oft-repeated remark that Wagner's place was not really among the Germans but in Paris makes sense against the background of the abiding fascination French opera exerted on him.³³

“We must seize our chance and honestly seek to cultivate the age's new forms, and he will be its master who writes in neither an Italian nor a French—nor even in a German—style” (SS 12:4). With these words Wagner concludes his essay “German Opera,” repeating a demand that was typical of those made by the members of the anti-establishment Young German movement, most notably in Laube's novel *Das junge Europa* (Young Europe, 1833) and in various articles that appeared in Laube's *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*, in which Wagner too published some of his early articles. The Young Germans inveighed against obscurantism, reactionary church orthodoxy, ossified puritanical morality, and the recidivist policies of Germany's particularist states, at the same time championing the rebellions and revolutions of recent years, whether in the form of the Greek War of Independence, the July Revolution in Paris, or the Polish Uprising. They demanded that the artist play an active role in contemporary events and, rather than falling back on a mythical past, portray the realities of the present day. They praised a life of sensual beauty freed from the trammels of all conventions. And they espoused the Utopia of universal politics transcending all national boundaries. These were all ideas that Wagner, too, shared, just as he shared the general enthusiasm for Laube's literary model, Wilhelm Heine's 1787 novel, *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* (Ardinghello and the blessed isles). For the writers of the Young German movement, the eponymous hero of Heine's novel embodied their ideal of hedonistic sensuality and free love. At the end of the novel, this ideal is finally realized on the Utopian Blessed Isles of the work's title, a propertyless state in the Aegean where each individual is allowed to express his or her individuality in whatever ways he or she chooses.

Wagner, too, read Heine's novel, and, such was his enthusiasm, he retained a lively memory of it for the rest of his life, returning to it a week before his death in February 1883 in the context of ownership: “It's this that I liked so much about Heine's ‘Blessed Isles’—the people there owned no property, in order to avoid the many miseries bound up with it” (CT, 5 February 1883). One of the most striking aspects of Wagner's intellectual development is that, however much he may later have tried to deny them on ideological grounds, he was never entirely successful in breaking free from earlier enthusiasms, a characteristic that is palpably plain from virtually every page of Cosima Wagner's diaries.

Looking back on the 1830s from the vantage point of the 1860s, Wagner recalled the “exuberant Young German mood” of those years (ML 90), a mood to which he

abandoned himself wholeheartedly and that found immediate artistic expression in his self-styled “grand comic opera” *Das Liebesverbot oder Die Novize von Palermo* (The ban on love, or The novice of Palermo, WWV 38).³⁴ The work was finished in March 1836 and given its first—and only—performance under Wagner’s own direction in pitiful provincial circumstances at the end of that month. Wagner’s graphic account of the performance in his autobiography makes particularly entertaining reading. In his article “Pasticcio,” he had spoken of the need “to seize true warm life as it is” (SS 12:10–11); and this is the goal that he set himself in his “carnival opera,” a free adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* “but with the difference”—Wagner explained in his “Autobiographical Sketch”—that “I eliminated its serious elements and in that way remodeled it in the true spirit of Young Europe: free and open sensuality triumphed over puritanical hypocrisy simply by being itself” (SS 1:10).³⁵

The action was shifted from Shakespeare’s unhistorical Vienna to Palermo, and the governor Friedrich, who takes over the affairs of state in the absence of the king (rather than the Duke in *Measure for Measure*), is turned into a priggish German who, with his fanatical hatred of sexual love, embodies all the typically German vices against which the Young Germans fulminated. Wagner would have had an even more compelling reason than Shakespeare to locate the action in Vienna, except that—as Egon Voss has pointed out—the work would then inevitably have been regarded as a “critique of the reactionary and repressive policies of Metternich’s regime,” with Friedrich identified with Metternich himself. Wagner’s decision to transfer the action to Sicily was thus, in part, an attempt to sidestep the censor.³⁶

The ban on love imposed by the Teutonic moralist is ultimately subverted by the Mediterranean sensuality of the Sicilian population. Indeed, “love’s antipode,” as he is described in the libretto (SS 11:97), falls under the spell of love, consumed as he is by his passionate feelings for Isabella. These feelings undermine his entire moral system: “Wretch! What has happened to the system that you so carefully arranged?” (SS 11:106). In Friedrich’s self-accusation in act 2, we hear a remarkable pre-echo of the sufferings of another character who, hostile to love, suddenly falls victim to an erotic passion with catastrophic results; as a sign of his transgression, he is struck down by the same spear with which he had set out to destroy an infamous hotbed of passion—the magic garden created by yet another enemy of love, Klingsor, who had even gone so far as to castrate himself in an attempt to overcome sexual desire. In spite of—or precisely because of—the differences between the two situations, there is a striking parallel between Wagner’s “youthful transgression” (as he described *Das Liebesverbot* when donating the score to Ludwig II at Christmas 1866) and *Parsifal* (which he famously called his “farewell to the world”).

The first modern production of *Das Liebesverbot* since its disastrous premiere in 1836 took place at Munich’s Nationaltheater on 24 March 1923, when the conductor was Robert Heger. “This early Wagner,” wrote Alfred Einstein on that occasion, “seems to be a slap in the face for his later self; to judge by its aim, *Das Liebesverbot* is the very antithesis of *Parsifal*.”³⁷ Yet there is also a remarkable

dialectic link between these two antithetical works: the governor Friedrich is not only the hypocritical representative of a duplicitous morality, enjoying the very thing that he denies others, he experiences the power of sexual love as a demonic constraint that renders him unconscious of his actions (“I am not conscious of myself,” he says at one point in the opera; SS 11:84), so that, almost like Kundry, he desires sexual congress as much as he longs for “salvation” (SS 11:106). Here desire is depicted as a form of perverse salvation, as “God and hell” in one (SS 11:107). As such, it already looks forward to the ultimate paradox of Parsifal’s words to Kundry: “In höchsten Heiles heißer Sucht / nach der Verdammniß Quell zu schmachten” [To pine for the source of all damnation in ardent yearning for supreme salvation] (GS 10:361).

When Friedrich promises to spare the life of Isabella’s brother, Claudio, in return for her love, while in reality giving orders for his execution to be brought forward, it is impossible not to be reminded of Scarpia and Tosca. Yet the superficial parallel cannot conceal a more deep-seated difference between the two relationships. “Claudio, you’ll die—I’ll follow you!” Friedrich decides (SS 11:107); the law may not yield to passion, so that he is prepared to sacrifice himself to it and condemn himself to death. “Death and lust await me” (SS 11:107). First he will couple with Isabella, then have himself put to death.

This view of erotic love as a compulsive force that dooms the lover to death already contains within it a number of aspects of the erotic longing familiar from Wagner’s later works. In much the same way, the idea of a ban on love itself recurs in manifold variations, not only in *Die Bergwerke zu Falun* (WWV 67), where human love is banned in the name of art (symbolized by the paradis artificiel of the Mountain Queen), but also in *Tannhäuser*, where earthly love is proscribed in favor of its heavenly counterpart; in the *Ring*, where love is abjured in favor of power; in the unrealized project for *Die Sieger* (The victors, WWV 89); and in *Parsifal*, with its rejection of erotic love, which is seen as an expression of the “will” that causes pain and suffering.

The ban on love imposed by the governor of Sicily involves other elements that go far beyond questions of individual psychology, even though they remain closely associated with such questions. Friedrich is no “loyal servant of his master,” to quote the title of Grillparzer’s tragedy on a not dissimilar subject, but a man who out-Herods Herod. Although the populace accepts the absent king’s reign as a matter of course, Friedrich turns it into a form of gloomy, misanthropic despotism. Needless to say, the populace sees straight through him and realizes that the ascetic lifestyle that he tries to impose on them is not God’s but the Devil’s, precisely because his interest in morality is not an end in itself but a means to the end of power. When he tells the townspeople that he intends to hand them over “to the king pure and undefiled,” they mutter among themselves: “How unctuously the man speaks, the Devil must have got into him” (SS 11:81). The man who tries to create a world of pure virtue and yet refuses to accept that tares are bound to grow with the wheat will produce not heaven on earth but only hell. (In this context it is enough to recall the character of Robespierre in Büchner’s *Dantons Tod*.)

Although Friedrich regards himself only as the king's temporary replacement and as subordinate to the inviolable law, he is nonetheless a self-seeking careerist just like Goethe's Clavigo, on whose career his own is evidently modeled. Just as Clavigo has abandoned his mistress, Marie Beaumarchais, so Friedrich repudiated his wife, Mariana, as soon as he began to climb the ladder of success.

[D]och er, der arm und unbekannt
Sizilien einst betrat,
gewann des Königs Gunst, und stieg so hoch,
daß er, von Ehrgeiz nur entflammt,
der Liebe stilles Glück verschmäh'te,
und mich, die Gattin, bald verließ!

(SS 11:68)

[But he who once, unknown and poor,
Set foot on Sicily
Won his monarch's favor and rose so high that,
Fired by ambition alone,
He scorned love's silent happiness
And soon forsook me, who was then his wife.]

Unlike Clavigo, Friedrich had never really loved his wife, as he himself admits: "I've never loved—Mariana learned this for herself when, cold and faithless, I abandoned her" (SS 11:106). In Friedrich, the instinctive desire for power overrides all other considerations, including even love.

It is no exaggeration to claim that here there is already a trace of the opposition between power and love that constitutes one of the main themes of the *Ring*, even if in *Das Liebesverbot* the contrast is still colored by the ideas of the Young German movement. Here the power of erotic desire implies freedom in a moral and political sense, whereas puritanism is equated with reactionary despotism. After all, it has always been in the interests of authoritarian regimes to maintain a sense of "morality," a point on which we are once again reminded of the *Ring*, in which love figures as a seditious force, rebelling against custom and ossified laws. (In *Opera and Drama*, Wagner describes it as an "agitator"; GS 4:56.) Such love is represented above all by the Wälsungs, and, significantly, it is decried by Fricka, who upholds moral "custom" and who regards the "despotic nature" of love (GS 4:56) as a disruptive force, undermining the social and moral order to which she clings unwaveringly and legalistically. "Stets Gewohntes / nur magst du versteh'n," Wotan complains in *Die Walküre* [You understand only what you've always been used to] (GS 6:31).

Friedrich, too, clings to the "law," using it to combat "passion" (SS 11:107), against which he discharges the law like some fatal arrow at the very moment when he himself falls prey to desire. His attempts to enhance his own power and advance his career are inextricably bound up with reactionary and despotic laws and a morality that is hostile to both life and love. Wagner is implacable in exposing his hypocrisy, tempting one to recall Nietzsche's ploy of opening his reader's

eyes by exposing and laying bare “ascetic ideals,” especially in *Parsifal*. (“What does it mean,” he asks in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “when an artist like Richard Wagner pays homage to chastity in old age?”)³⁸

Remarkably, then, Wagner’s “youthful transgression” already anticipates the critical method that Nietzsche was to apply to the composer’s own “farewell to the world.” Yet Wagner was to rescind *Das Liebesverbot* in 1866—a year after his prose draft for *Parsifal*—and to do so, moreover, in the spirit of his final work. In the quatrain that he wrote for Ludwig II, when presenting him with the holograph score, he equated the earlier opera with Amfortas’s transgression while hoping that he might be absolved by Parsifal/Ludwig:

Ich irrte einst, und möcht’ es nun verbüßen;
Wie mach’ ich mich der Jugendsünde frei?
Ihr Werk leg’ ich demüthig Dir zu Füßen,
Daß Deine Gnade ihm Erlöser sei.³⁹

[I once transgressed and now would fain atone;
But how can I cast off this youthful sin?
I humbly lay its work before your feet,
That it may find redemption through your grace.]

Turning his back on the Young Germans’ glorification of erotic love, Wagner paid homage to chastity even here.

In *Das Liebesverbot*, the ban on love is directed not only at free love but at all forms of sybaritic pleasure, chief of which is its institutionalized manifestation in the form of the carnival: the anarchic expression of hedonistic pleasure is bound to be eyed with suspicion and regarded as dangerous by any despotic regime. Luzio’s Carnival Song, especially its last two lines, at least toys with the idea of rebelling against family and moral values and, as such, with anarchy.

Jetzt gibt’s nicht Weib, noch Ehemann,
tralalalalala!
Es gibt nicht Vater und nicht Sohn,
tralalalalala!
Und wer das Glück ergreifen kann,
la!
Der trägt es im Triumph davon!
La!—
.....
Wer sich nicht freut im Karneval,
dem stoßt das Messer in die Brust!

(SS 11:111)

[There are no longer wives or husbands,
Tralalalalala!
No longer fathers and sons,
Tralalalalala!

And he who can grasp good fortune,
 La!
 Will carry it off in triumph!
 La!—

 If a man won't take pleasure in the carnival,
 You should thrust your knives deep in his breast!]

Curiously enough, this Carnival Song was the first piece of Wagner's operatic music to be published, appearing in 1837 as a supplement to the periodical *Europa*.⁴⁰

Readers familiar with Goethe's writings will recall his description of the Roman carnival in 1788. The carnival, Goethe explains, derives from the Saturnalia, which was celebrated in ancient Rome as a reminder of the golden age of Saturn and for its duration accorded Rome's citizens the "privileges" of freedom and equality, which were believed to have existed in that mythical past: "The difference between high and low seems to be set aside for a moment; everyone draws closer to everyone else." Often the excitement threatens to descend into physical violence, and Goethe, with a certain horror, observed the narrow dividing line between violence and catastrophe in this "modern Saturnalia," which he describes as a "festival of universal license and unconstraint." His final remark that "freedom and equality can be enjoyed only in the frenzy of madness"⁴¹ reminds us that the French Revolution was to break out only eighteen months later. (Franz Grillparzer's short story "Der arme Spielmann" [The poor minstrel] likewise describes a Saturnalian celebration whose outward trappings remind the author of a revolutionary uprising.)

And it is as an uprising—a kind of love-driven revolution—that the carnival is meant to be seen at the end of *Das Liebesverbot*. Here Wagner offers an impressive display of the art of ensemble writing, an art that he had acquired from his knowledge of opéra comique. When Jean-Pierre Ponnelle staged this scene in his 1983 production for the Munich Nationaltheater, he drew on his own intimate knowledge of French and Italian musical comedy and created such a virtuoso stage picture that one was left wondering why so highly effective a work is rarely seen in the opera house. As before, Wagner modeled his own account of the uprising on Auber's handling of crowd scenes in *La muette de Portici*. Claudio, who had been condemned to death, is freed by the crowd, and the governor's puritanical dictatorship is brought to an end. Friedrich, as we know, has privately decided to have himself executed, and he now calls on the populace to carry this out: "Sentence me by my own law!" But they refuse: "No, the law is abolished! / We mean to be more merciful than you!" (SS 11:123).

In short, the revolution does not destroy the despot but frees him from his own tyrannical law, and at the end he is even invited to lead the procession of masks that sets off to meet the king on his return to Palermo. In *A Communication to My Friends*, Wagner described this moment as follows: "Shakespeare resolved the resultant conflicts by means of the public return of the Duke, who had secretly observed events: his decision is a serious one, based as it is on the judge's 'measure

for measure.' I, on the other hand, brought about the denouement by means of a revolution" (GS 4:254). Here the populace genuinely triumphs, and the carnival becomes a celebration of a free community ruled by sexual desire. "Let's hold a threefold carnival," the opera concludes, "and may its pleasures never cease!" (SS 11:124).

Even so, Wagner's comment that he "brought about the denouement by means of a revolution" is not to be taken entirely literally, as this is no real revolution. Not even the tyrannical Friedrich has a "knife thrust deep in his breast," for all that he "takes no pleasure in the carnival" (SS 11:111). A general wish to get married replaces the desire for political change. No Bastille is stormed. Instead the revelers announce their decision to tear down all the "houses of mourning," and the king, who had after all appointed Friedrich as his governor, is welcomed home, for, as Luzio explains to Friedrich, "he prefers lively jests to your own sad laws" (SS 11:124). At the end of the opera, the unpopular governor is unmasked, only for him to don another mask in the republican spirit of the carnival, whereupon a procession forms, with the reunited couple Friedrich and Mariana at its head. As it sets off to meet the king to the sound of cannon shots, pealing bells, and a military march, the revolution gives way to a legally recognized monarchy enlivened by a spot of saturnalian revelry. The final stage direction in the libretto reads, significantly: "At the end a salvo of rifles" (SS 11:124).

There is no doubt that if Wagner sought to take the sting out of the idea of a popular uprising, it was not least because of the censor. Yet it would be wrong to lose sight of the fact that for all his revolutionary views, the older Wagner was never an antimonarchist. (The same is true of many leaders of the earliest phase of the French Revolution.) In his address to the Dresden Vaterlandsverein, "How Do Republican Aspirations Stand in Relation to the Monarchy?" (1848), he was to demand that "the king should be the first and truest republican" (SS 12:225). This is an idea to which many revolutionaries subscribed, not only in 1789 but in 1848 as well. Wagner never really abandoned the notion of a popular republican king,⁴² and it continued to leave its mark on the hopes that he placed in Ludwig II and on his 1867–68 series of articles, "German Art and German Politics." Even the original version of *Siegfried's Tod* (Siegfried's death, 1848) is influenced by this idea of a republican ruler, an idea repudiated only a short time afterward, following Wagner's disenchantment with the conduct of the German princes during and after the revolution of 1848–49. "Allvater! Herrlicher du!/Freue dich des freiesten Helden!" [Father of the universe! Glorious god! Rejoice in the freest of heroes] (GS 2:227) is how Brünnhilde had originally ended her peroration.

Although at first sight *Die Feen* seems to be closer in spirit to Wagner's later "Romantic operas" than *Das Liebesverbot*, there are in fact more thematic pre-echoes of the great music dramas in this "youthful transgression," for all that they appear in unfamiliar surroundings. From a linguistic point of view, the text of *Das Liebesverbot* is—relatively speaking—the most carefully elaborated of Wagner's pre-1839 librettos, the commedia dell'arte scenes involving Brighella being some of the most inspired products of the composer's comic muse. As he noted in

A Communication to My Friends, *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* represented opposing “trends.” The need to achieve a “balance” between them was his chief concern during his “subsequent development as an artist” (GS 4:256). In advancing this view, he was conceding that the “sensuality” of Italian bel canto opera and French opéra comique was to a certain extent “preserved”—in the sense of the Hegelian “aufgehoben”—in the music dramas of his maturity.