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Old Norse Mythology and The Ring of the Nibelung

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Old Norse Mythology and The Ring of the Nibelung

I. Abstract

As an MFA student in New Media, I am creating stop-motion animated short films. Using puppets and mixed media sets, I draw from ancient mythological themes and create narratives in a contemporary context. In my series of vignettes, a trickster figure brings various forms of technology to the city. In order to inform my stories, I've conducted extensive research of the archetypes and structure of myth. Although it may appear ironic to study medieval literature in relation to New Media, I feel it is important to trace an historic path to the current worldview. To these means, I've focused on Old Norse and Germanic literature for two reasons. First, my ancestry is Scandinavian and I have a natural curiosity about my roots. Secondly, the University of Donau, Krems, Austria, accredits my degree. Therefore, I also have an inclination to learn as much as possible about historic elements of German culture. I am simultaneously studying German language, and quite a few of my sources are in the original German. I am fluent in modern Norwegian, and some of my sources are in this language, which is (I have lofty goals) currently as close as I can get syntactically to the original Old Norse.

In the past year I've written two research papers related to Old Norse myth and poetry, *Loki the Mythic Trickster*, and *A Semiotic Analysis of Mythological Trope in Old Norse Poetry and its Significance in Historic Nordic Society*. I read an extensive amount of Old Icelandic literature and analysis conducting the research for those papers, and some of that material will inform this thesis, in particular, the accounts relating to the pantheon of Nordic gods and goddesses known as the *Æsir*.

In this current study, in order to expand my knowledge of pan-Germanic literary sources, I move my focus down to the European continent and up the Rhine River to the centuries old city of Worms in order to research the medieval German poem *The Nibelunglied* in relation to Richard Wagner's famous nineteenth century opera *The Ring of the Nibelung*. I quickly establish that Wagner's sources are drawn primarily from Old Icelandic pagan oral tradition and he deemphasizes the traditional German Nibelungenlied epic. In addition, I discover that Wagner

created his own version of the narrative for the libretto by rearranging Old Norse heroic myth and sagas. Thereby, the topic provides an opportunity to research and continue to build a well-rounded knowledge of Old Norse literature, yet it is also an avenue - through the German Wagner and his more contemporary influences - to broaden my knowledge of German culture.

According to author and commentator M. Owen Lee, there are more than 22,000 publications about the composer of the *Ring* (99). What could possibly be added to this body of work?

Although the research questions involving my thesis are largely inspired to build my knowledge of the semantics and syntax of Pan-Germanic mythic narrative, I intend to bring something new to a critique of Wagner by contrasting and comparing in detail *The Ring of the Nibelung* and the Old Norse sources.

II. Introduction

As expressions of the human imagination, heroic tales that incorporate myth span centuries and are found around the globe. These narratives not only enlighten us about the people and societies that produced them, but they are also rich with symbolism and reveal a great deal about the general make-up of the individual and the collective psyche. The ring is but one symbol of a rich plethora found in heroic tales. As representations of reality, the stories are analogies that provide insights and continue to inform. Although these myths are found globally, the focus of this paper are those accounts of Nordic / Pan-Germanic origin. These poems and sagas are founded in oral tradition dating from pre-Christendom.

Poetry lends itself to memorization, and court poets had the task of retelling historic stories and events. The heroic lays are a blending of fact and myth. Often the poems were in praise of kings, and thereby embellished. Many of the kingdoms and historic figures referred to are real; however, tangible events are indeed exaggerated in order to elevate deeds and morals of the stories. Written sources are scarce, and most of those that do survive were recorded in Iceland, where Christianity arrived late. These transcripts, written in Old Icelandic, are merely fragments of the rich history of early Northern European myth and culture.

In the 1840's, Richard Wagner responded to a series of articles in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* calling for a national opera based on the *Nibelungenlied*, an anonymous epic poem from the 1200's that was rediscovered in the previous century and considered by many to be the German *Illiad* (Spencer 11). While researching the poem Wagner noticed that, although the German account alludes to mythic elements, the narrative is primarily an account of royal feuds, and on the surface it lacks the rich pagan symbolism of its origins. Probing further, he traced the legend to the fertile ground of Old Norse mythology. These poems and sagas sparked Wagner's imagination and expanded his narrative well beyond what was to be found in German medieval literature.

Most scholars assume the legends of Siegfried the Dragon Slayer and the Nibelung hoard originated on German soil. This is likely because the setting of the story is in the Rhineland. The tendency is to downplay the Norse sources as a "foreign" account that migrated north with oral traditions. In any case, scribes of the poets and sagamen of Iceland recognized the

importance of recording the lays benefiting future generations. The Icelandic sources are also the most vivid accounts of the pan-Germanic Nordic gods and goddesses.

Although during the long period of time he worked on the project Wagner added his own “issues” to the storyline, he primarily rearranged the Old Norse sources of characters and events and created a palatable nineteenth century storyline. While it is not possible to separate the text from the music in his overall work of art, in this paper I am setting the music aside and examining Wagner’s reconstructed text in order to compare it to his sources.

The ring represents the psychic life cycle. Although the birth – life – death process is examined on more than one level, the main focus of this paper will be the symbolic elements found in the texts. One of my arguments is that the curse of the ring is the effort entailed in individual development, i.e. emerging ego-consciousness and the struggle within the ego-self axis as described in Jungian analysis. This challenge is the hero’s journey, and the process of the conflict moves from inflation to alienation; ideally a rebirth results in a synthesis of growth, or individuation. (See Appendix I) Many scholars, including Carl Jung, Edward Edinger, and Robert Donington have made these observations, and I will quote from them extensively.

I will also examine symbolism in Wagner’s sources and the *Ring* based on theories from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Freud offers interesting insights regarding taboo and magic that are applicable to relationships and events in the narratives. In this context, I will investigate how beliefs related to polytheism and animism are related to the unconscious. Applying Lacan’s theories provides an alternative view of the symbolism of the ring. Based on theories regarding psychic development and the phallus, I will explore the ring as a signifier of desire.

In addition, the mythologies of the ring and the heroic sagas have sociological and anthropological aspects closely related to the psychological. Religious Studies scholars, such as Gro Steinsland in *Norrøn Religion*, point to the hero’s journey as an initiation and rite of passage. The origins of these myths in pagan society are an element that needs to be addressed in this study.

There are many volumes of critiques of Wagner, both pro and con, but most attest to his creative genius. In books describing the making of the *Ring*, most authors point to the Old Norse sources he drew from, but few in any detail. In fact, most don't provide any detail at all and continue on in the vein that the myth is Wagner's creation. Even though in his book *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols* Robert Donington acknowledges the Norse sources, he repeatedly ascribes them to Wagner, "It is because we respond intuitively to Wagner's symbols in the opera house that his audience continues to be so large and popular" (19). However, I argue that attributing the symbolism in the *Ring* to Wagner is inaccurate. The commentator M. Owen Lee writes, "He laid the groundwork for the structural analysis of myth. More than that, he anticipated the findings of this century's new science, psychiatry" (13). Indeed, it was a timely undertaking as shortly thereafter Freud founded the field of psychiatry in large part on the basis of his application of human nature to his reading of myths. However, a close reading of the Norse myths and sagas reveal that all of the symbols of the *Ring* were already manifest, ripe for interpretation, and Wagner adapted and rearranged them as he made them his own for the narrative element of his opera.

Nevertheless, what makes *The Ring of the Nibelung* an interesting comparison to the Nordic sources is manifold. As mentioned, there are numerous volumes of analysis to explore while conducting research, which creates a rich discourse. Also, the Norse myths and sagas are drawn from antique manuscripts that contain some overlap and at least one gap resulting in a somewhat perplexing storyline. The sagas are also more detailed and much longer than the *Ring*. Therefore, Wagner's truncated rearrangement with its clear beginning, middle, and end, provides a good structure for advancing through the material. Finally, Wagner's contemporary influences offer insights as to how he restructured the myths. Wagner is a controversial figure, primarily for his anti-Semitic views and by (after his death) being embraced by Hitler. Some authors offer apologies for the man by describing his dark outward actions as somehow balancing out his inward brilliance: "The same intemperance which served him badly in his outer life served him well in his inner life. This seems to be not an unusual way with genius" (Donington 30). In this paper I choose not to defend or lay guilt to Wagner as a person, but I draw from those who have written extensively about him.

The remainder of this paper falls into two main areas with a total of seven sections. In the first area, I concentrate on background information. First, I present the historic sources that Wagner drew from with considerable detail. Familiarity with this material is important in context with my thesis. Next, I provide some pertinent information about Wagner as it relates to his creation of the *Ring*. Those readers familiar with the source material and / or Wagner's background may wish to move directly to the second part, which contains my analysis. Four sections present each of the librettos of Wagner's four operas that make up the *Ring*, each with a brief synopsis and comparison of the Norse originals along with quotes from numerous scholars and my own analysis. Finally, in the conclusion I will recap the approach I've made in defense of my thesis: The collective archetypal symbols Richard Wagner used in his text for *The Ring of the Nibelung* were not a result of his creative genius, but were rearranged from existing Old Norse manuscripts and interpreted in a manner to present a truncated storyline that is shaped by some of Wagner's personal views and is simultaneously made suitable for a contemporary audience.

III. Wagner's sources

There are numerous sources and versions of the heroic legends surrounding Siegfried and the Nibelung treasure, making for a very complex and differing corpus of narrative material. The primary Germanic sources are the *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelung ca. 1200), along with the lesser-known *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* (The Song of Horney Siegfried ca. 1500), both anonymous, and the play by Hans Sachs, *Der hürnen Seufrid* (1557). Elements of the legend are also found in *Volksbücher* and *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* – the fairy tales compiled by the brothers Grimm. The Nordic sources are drawn from the *Poetic (Elder) Edda*, *Snorri's (Younger) Prose Edda*, *The Volsung Saga* (ca. 1200 Iceland) and *The Thidrek Saga*, a modified form of the *Volsung* compiled in Norway ca. 1250 (Spencer 30).

As mentioned above, the *Nibelungenlied* resurfaced and became immensely popular as a German national epic in the early 19th century. It developed into the subject of extensive study, inspired numerous artworks, and Wagner responded to a call for an opera to be made from it. A short synopsis of the first part of the classic follows:

Siegfried was a prince born of King Siegmund and Queen Sieglind of the Netherlands. He was brought up in a privileged manner, and he became adept as a warrior. He grew into a much admired hero, and when it was time to leave the nest he announced to his parents he would travel to win the hand of Kriemhild, the fair maiden of Burgundy. The Borgundian court was up the Rhine, in Worms, and was ruled by the three brothers of Kriemhild, the most prominent was Gunther, followed by Gernot and Gisselher. Another important player was Gunther's adviser Hagen.

As Siegfried approached the castle gates, Hagen told his lords about Siegfried and his background. Siegfried had slain the Nibelungs and taken possession of their treasure. Among the assets he acquired were the sword Balmung, with which he subdued several hundred men, and a cloak of invisibility, which he won from the dwarf Alberich, guard of the hoard. The hero also slew a dragon and bathed in its blood, 'from which his skin grew horny so that no weapon will bite it, as has been shown time and time again' (*Nibelungenlied* 28).

Siegfried became an ally of the Borgundians, proving his loyalty in battles and deeds. Gunther announced his desire for the Amazon Queen Brunhild as wife. Many a noble had perished courting her, for she would only accept a suitor who could defeat her in war-like games. Failure meant death. Siegfried advised against it, but he made a pact with Gunther that he would help the king win the hand of Brunhild in exchange for the gift of his sister Kriemhild.

An entourage from Burgundy set sail to Brunhild's court. When the games began, Siegfried stole away and rendered himself invisible with the magic cloak. Unseen, he assisted the weaker Gunther win the contests. Bound to her word, the warrior-like Brunhild very reluctantly agreed to become Gunther's wife. After the double ceremony things did not go well. When Gunther approached the wedding bed Brunhild hung him on a coat rack for the night. Gunther complained to Siegfried who suggested he once again use the cloak of invisibility to subdue Brunhild, this time in her bed. After a wrestling match in the dark that left Brunhild defenseless, Siegfried moved aside, but before Gunther stepped in Siegfried took Brunhild's girdle and a golden ring from her finger, which he made a gift to Kriemhild.

Siegfried took Kriemhild with him to the Netherlands, and they lived in bliss for several years. It was during a visit to Burgundy that disaster unfolded. The queens got into a spat over the rank of their husbands, and Kriemhild revealed to Brunhild the deception that led to her submission to Gunther. With the secret out, Hagen decided to guard the honor of Brunhild and Gunther and came up with a plot to assassinate Siegfried. Hagen tricked Kriemhild into revealing the only vulnerable spot on the back of Siegfried's body – unprotected due to a Linden leaf that fell on him as he bathed in the dragon's blood. After a day of hunting in the woods, Hagen drove a spear into Siegfried as he drank from a spring.

The second half of the *Nibelungenlied* is about Kriemhild's revenge. While important in the overall epic, chronologically it occurs after the end of Wagner's *Ring*, so I will refer to it only as needed. In fact, I include the basic plot of the first half of the *Nibelungenlied* to establish the German version of the theme, but also in part to demonstrate how little of it Wagner used in his libretti. In the following sections it will be evident that aside from parallels in the final acts, the *Ring* bears little similarity other than radically modified characters and events.

And why not? Even the German sources differ considerably. In *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* the hero rescues the maiden Kriemhild from the dragon. The play by Hans Sachs and popular German folk tales bear some similarity to the Old Norse versions by having Siegfried mentored or raised by a dwarf smith, in these cases named Mimir, a prominent character in Wagner's *Ring*. However, other than bits and pieces, Wagner abandoned the German versions, which are seeped with romanticism and chivalry and hold up *Treue*, or the notion of loyalty between vassal and lord, as the highest ethic. In his quest for the purely human musical drama Wagner was less interested in the courtly and turned to the mythic.

Wagner had access to German translations of all the Old Norse sources we know today as they relate to the Siegfried and Nibelung tales. Rather than providing a complete description of each mythic poem and describing the entire Norse pantheon, I will summarize that material as needed in the following sections while moving through the *Ring*. However, the tales are wide ranging enough to warrant a synopsis of the saga narratives and some background information, as Wagner drew from them all.

The *Poetic (Elder) Edda* is a manuscript of 31 poems found in Iceland transcribed in Old Norse by an anonymous author c. 1275 (Clunies Ross 7). It consists of two main parts: the mythological and heroic. The mythological poems describe the antics of the Norse gods and goddesses (the *Æsir*) and provide insights to the characteristics of the gods and goddesses through their behavior. The poems provide a loose chronology of the genesis of the universe continuing to the cataclysmic destruction of the era of the *Æsir*, called Ragnarok. Through these means the Poetic Edda provides a mythological history and geography of the cosmos (Acker 59). Although the Northern European tribes shared many heathen beliefs and deities, accounts such as these have never been found in Germany. A possible reason is Christianity arrived to the continent much earlier than Scandinavia, and the myths were discarded or absorbed into Catholic religious practices. In any case, whatever was written about the mythic gods in the continental Germanic regions is lost. Therefore, the *Poetic Edda* is to date the preeminent source of literature with themes of the oldest surviving oral tradition involving Pan-Germanic heathen religion.

The gods and goddesses in the *Poetic Edda* mythological poems of importance to the *Ring* are primarily Odin, Loki, Frigg and Freyja. Of secondary relevance are Thor, Frey and Jord. Wagner's spelling of these characters follow in parenthesis and are listed for further reference in Appendix II. Odin (Wotan) is the all-father, and together with his wife Frigg (Fricka) and daughter Jord (Erda), which translates to earth, he produced most of the Æsir. Odin is also all-knowing: he gave up an eye to drink from the well of knowledge, which symbolic significance we shall explore later in depth. Odin also became the main character in the *Ring*, while Wagner initially intended Siegfried to be the main protagonist. Loki (Loge) is a trickster figure. He was born of giants, but he became the blood brother of Odin and is welcome in Midgard, the realm of the gods. Loki is a mischief-maker, and he may be viewed as evil; however, he is both benevolent and malevolent. His antics bring disorder, but he is called upon to make things right, and in doing so he delivers benefits to the gods. Nevertheless, he and his offspring ultimately are the leaders of the destruction of the Æsir. Wagner portrays Loki quite differently, less the trickster and more the counselor of Odin, and I will explore this character more in depth in the following sections. Thor (Donner) is a very prominent player in Norse myth, but Wagner sidelines him in his libretto. Wagner confuses Idunn, whose apples bring the Æsir eternal life, with Freyja (Freia) who is actually the goddess of love. She and her twin Frey (Froh) are of the Vanir race - deities invited to join the Æsir - and are offspring of incest. Intermarriage of family and divine beings play a significant symbolic role in both the myths and the *Ring*. These Æsir, the role of giants as foes (but sometimes mates) of the Æsir, and their symbolic diversity will be part of this study as we move through Wagner's operas.

The *Poetic Edda* heroic poems are fragments of narrative events that depict in detail the background, events, and outcome of the Volsung family, its heroic prodigy Sigurd the Dragonslayer (Siegfried), and the encounters with Brynhild (Brünnhilde) and Gudrun (Gutrune) and their families. Odin frequently, albeit briefly, makes appearances in the heroic poems. Brynhild is a female warrior. If she marries, she will lose her skills in battle. She is a Valkyrie, one of twelve handmaidens who escort slain warriors to Odin in Valhalla. She provides Sigurd with knowledge of the runes in a symbolic rite of passage – another important aspect of this study.

The heroic poems are fragmentary and are missing a segment of the narrative. The *Volsung Saga* prose version of the plot, also of an anonymous author, fills this gap, and the storyline is more similar to Wagner's treatment than any other source. The differences between the *Volsung Saga* and the German *Nibelungenlied* are many. The *Volsung Saga* delves far back into Sigurd's lineage. There are explicit relations between the race of Volsungs and mythic gods and giants. Therefore, Sigurd's family tree is quite different and first-hand details are provided about his entire heroic journey. The mythic sources of the Nibelung treasure are provided. There is an account of Sigurd's slaying of the dragon. As mentioned, Brynhild is portrayed as a prophetic shield-maiden, and Sigurd is first betrothed with her. Although it is rather lengthy, it is important for my thesis that the reader is familiar with the text. Most of the important symbolism in the *Ring* is contained in the *Volsung Saga*: incestuous pairing, the curse of the ring, the origin of the dragon, its slaying by Sigurd and his taste of its blood, the awakening of Brynhild encircled in flames on the mountaintop and Sigurd's betrayal followed by their tragic end. All of these aspects will be covered in detail in the remaining sections, and how they are told in the original story is required for context. For a list of the pertinent characters in the *Volsung Saga*, their relationships, and the spelling of the names by Wagner, please refer to Appendix III. The following is a truncated synopsis of the *Volsung Saga* including the most important events:

Volsung was the great-grandson of Odin. When Volsung had grown up he married the giantess Ljod. First they had twins, the girl Signy and boy Sigmund, and then they had nine more sons. Volsung built himself a great hall in the center of which stood a large oak tree called Branstock. Siggeir, the King of the Geats, proposed to Signy. Both Volsung and his sons agreed, but Signy was against it and pleaded to no avail. The wedding was held in the hall when suddenly a wanderer, a tall old man with only one eye, appeared. He went to the oak tree, presented the sword Gram and stuck it deep into Branstock. The cloaked man, Odin, said, 'Whoso draweth this sword from this stock, shall have the same as a gift from me, and shall find in good sooth that never bare he better sword in hand than is this' (Volsung 22). Then he disappeared. One after another at the wedding tried to pull out the sword but only Sigmund succeeded. Siggeir, his new brother-in-law, offered three times its weight in gold for the sword, but Sigmund refused. This made Siggeir angry, and he returned home the next day with his bride plotting against the Volsungs.

Three months later, Siggeir invited Volsung and his sons to a banquet. They were met by Signy, who warned them that Siggeir intended them harm. They refused to retreat and fought bravely, but Volsung fell and his ten sons were captured. Staving off the inevitable, Signy requested of Siggeir that her brothers be held in stocks instead of immediately executed. Siggeir enjoyed the idea of torturing them and agreed. Night by night and one by one they were visited and eaten by Siggeir's witch mother as a shape-shifting wolf until finally only Sigmund remained. Signy wiped honey all over his face, and when the she-wolf came to him she began to lick his face and stuck her tongue in his mouth. Sigmund bit down and killed her. He fled to the forest, made himself an underground den and survived with the help of Signy.

Signy bore two sons with Siggeir. When the first turned ten she sent him to help Sigmund. As a test of strength, he was ordered to make bread from flour containing deadly "worms" (snake-like creatures). He failed the task and was slain. The same happened to the second son. With the help of a witch, Signy swapped skins and came to Sigmund in disguise. They lay together for three nights, and Signy became pregnant. She bore the boy Sinfjotli, and at barely the age of ten sent him to Sigmund. This time the boy passed the worm bread-making test. The boy could work the dough containing the venom, but he could not ingest it. Sigmund ate the bread without getting sick, but Sinfjotli could not. After living together for a while in the woods, Sigmund and Sinfjotli went to Siggeir to take vengeance for the slaying of their kinsmen, but they were quickly captured. Siggeir placed them in a pit with a tall, flat stone between them. Signy came at night and tossed them some meat, and in that meat was hidden Sigmund's sword. Gram bit into the stone and the two men sawed it in half. They escaped the pit and set fire to Siggeir's hall. Her revenge fulfilled, Signy chose to die in the flames to end her unhappy life, but Sinfjotli and Sigmund fled to restore his father's throne.

Sigmund married Borghild, and together they had two sons, but a blood feud erupted and Borghild poisoned Sinfjotli. Sigmund drove off Borghild and later won the hand of Hjordis; however, his rival suitor waged war against him. Sigmund fought fiercely, but the numbers were against him. (For reasons worth exploring) Odin stood against Sigmund in battle, and his sword Gram was split in half as it struck the bill of Odin's cap. The foe's men swarmed on Sigmund and he lay mortally wounded. Hjordis went to him after the battle. Before he died Sigmund informed

her she carried their son, Sigurd (Siegfried). Alf, the son of King Hjalprek of Denmark, rescued Hjordis and they married. Sigurd grew up in King Hjalprek's house loved by all and with many privileges. As he got bigger, Sigurd was sent to the smith Regin (Mimir) as a foster. Regin taunted Sigurd about his position in the court. He told Sigurd he should have a horse of his own. Once again, Odin appeared and advised Sigurd on his choice of horse, and in that way Sigurd got Grani, a horse derived from Odin's own Sleipnir. Next, Regin challenged Sigurd to do battle against Fafnir, the Orm (dragon) who sits upon a hoard of treasure. Regin told Sigurd his tale:

Hreidmar had three sons, Fafnir, Otter and Regin. Regin was good at working iron, silver and gold. Fafnir was the greatest and grimmest, and he wanted to possess everything around him. Otter was a good fisher, by day he swam and fished, and in the evening he brought his catch to his father. Odin, Loki and Hoenir came upon the river and saw Otter eating a salmon. Loki flung a stone and killed Otter. The three skinned him and brought him to Hreidmar's house. Hreidmar seized them and demanded they cover the skin with gold as compensation. Loki, always bailing himself and the gods out of trouble, sought the ransom payment. He borrowed Ran's net and caught the dwarf Andvari (Alberich), in the form of a pike, at the base of a waterfall. In exchange for his life Andvari gave up his cache of gold. He had only one ring left, but Loki demanded that from him, as well. As Loki departed, Andvari howled from the cracks of the rocks below: The ring, and all the treasure, shall be cursed and forever bring ill luck to those who own it. Loki returned and laid the gold on Otter's skin, which covered it save one of the muzzle hairs. Hreidmar was not content unless the hair was covered, so Loki took the ring and it was done. Thereafter Fafnir slew his father, took the hoard, and retreated to the woods. His wickedness grew and his body changed into its dragon state.

Sigurd demanded a sword. Regin smithed him one, but it was inferior, and Sigurd broke it on his anvil. Sigurd went to his mother and asked for the shards from his father's sword. She obliged and he brought them to Regin, who forged it anew. The sword Gram that Sigmund had pulled from the tree was now stronger than ever in the hands of his son. After venturing off to avenge his father, Sigurd returned ready to face the dragon. Regin advised him to make a hole in the path from the dragon's lair to where he drank at the river. Odin as a wanderer intervened again, and he counseled Sigurd dig many holes for the dragon's blood to flow into, less he drown from the

abundant flow. Sigurd lay in wait, and as the worm crept over he thrust the sword up under his left shoulder, killing him. At Regin's request, Sigurd roasted Fafnir's heart. When Sigurd put his bloody finger to his mouth he understood the language of the birds. They spoke: eat the heart and be wisest of all men; Regin is plotting to betray you; cut off his head and take the gold for yourself; ride to Hindfell and wake Brynhild (Brünnhild) to acquire runic wisdom. Sigurd took Gram and struck off Regin's head. He followed the trail to Fafnir's lair and found the sword Rotti, the Helm of Awe, the Gold Byrny, filled two chests of gold and slung them on Grani as he headed out to find Brynhild.

Sigurd rode far before coming upon a mountain that flamed up to the heavens. On top there was a castle with a warrior-clad figure lying asleep. He cut open the armor and Brynhild awakened, recognizing him immediately. She taught him the runes and before he left they swore a lovers oath. Sigurd rode on to Hlymdale, the home of Brynhild's sister and brother-in-law. The clairvoyant Brynhild arrived later and during this second meeting tried to ward off Sigurd and warned him of their ill fate: he shall marry Gudrun (Gutrune, Kriemhild). In disbelief, Sigurd swore himself to her anew, but he took out on the trip that resulted in the fulfillment of their destiny. The king Gjuki and his queen Grimhild had three sons, Gunnar (Gunther), Hogni (Hagen), and Guttorm, and a daughter named Gudrun. Gudrun had a bad dream and sought counsel from Brynhild. Brynhild interpreted the dream and also let Gudrun know of their ill fate.

Sigurd arrived at the hall of King Gjuki and became close to the family. Gudrun's mother Grimhild knew how Sigurd loved Brynhild, but she wanted him to marry her daughter. She served Sigurd a magic potion drink that wiped his memory of Brynhild. Sigurd married Gudrun, and Gunnar and Hogni swore brotherhood with him. Grimhild recommended to Gunnar that he woo Brynhild. Sigurd lent Grani to Gunnar, but the horse refused to leap the flames surrounding Brynhild's castle. Sigurd helped Gunnar deceive Brynhild by riding through the barrier in his semblance. She initially refused the man she saw as Gunnar, but was bound to the destiny to accept the man who rode through the fire. Her father insisted she marry him. After the marriage fest, Sigurd remembered his oaths to Brynhild, but he let them rest and things were good for a while.

While bathing in the river, the two queens Brynhild and Gudrun had a spat about the status of their husbands. Gudrun revealed to Brynhild how she had been deceived and cheated out of marriage with Sigurd. Brynhild withdrew and plotted revenge. She confronted Gunnar and refused to continue living. Gunnar sent Sigurd to her and nothing he said could sway her – even his offer to divorce Gudrun and marry her. When Gunnar later returned she demanded the death of Sigurd. Gunnar, who had sworn brotherhood with Sigurd, was in despair, but he conspired with Hogni to enthrall their youngest brother, Guttorm, who hadn't sworn an oath, and drove him to perform the nasty deed. Guttorm slew Sigurd in his bed. Brynhild could still know no peace and joined him in a funeral pyre.

The Volsung Saga continues, but the rest of the story is chronologically beyond the scope of Wagner's *Ring*. There are some discrepancies in the tale, primarily surrounding the role of Brynhild. She is first a Valkyrie sleeping on a mountaintop, but later a mortal with psychic powers. She repeatedly and accurately predicts the future but subsequently forgets. This is one of the elements of the plot that Wagner simplifies in order to make it more palatable to modern audiences. It will be clear what pieces, and there are many, that Wagner strung together from the varying Icelandic manuscripts as we examine his libretti. Additionally, it will become evident how the symbolism sprung from the sources themselves, only to be reshaped by Wagner. There is one more tale to consider. *The Thidrek saga* is an additional Nordic prose version, which provides an account closer to the German *Nibelunglied*, but with some significant changes - primarily of Sigurd's birth and upbringing, but his relationship with Brynhild also differs somewhat. The synopsis is available in Appendix IV.

Lastly, in addition to the sagas and the *Poetic (Elder) Edda*, Wagner certainly drew from *Snorri's Prose (Younger) Edda* for clarification of much of the source material. Snorri was an Icelandic scholar from the thirteenth century who wrote in prose form vivid descriptions of the Æsir's and heroes' characteristics and antics based on the poetic Edda and the saga oral tradition. While much of the meaning would otherwise be lost, Snorri's narratives fill the gaps in the fragmented poems. Snorri provides a thorough explanation of the Icelandic skaldic style of poetry. Wagner was also likely informed and inspired by the Old Norse use of poetic alliteration, or *stabweim*, while writing his librettos.

Clearly, there are so many versions of the Siegfried saga that Wagner could have constructed his drama together in countless ways. In the coming sections, I will refer to the sources above and demonstrate where Wagner drew from the original material directly in relation to the text of the *Ring*. I will simultaneously present theories regarding the symbolism in the narrative and analyze its meaning. Before examining the libretti, it will also be useful to examine those areas of Wagner's life that influenced his writing of the operas.

IV. Wagner's background and *The Ring*

Richard Wagner was a remarkable character and led a fantastic life. There is plenty of documentation of the events, actions and thoughts that make up his living days, and volumes about him written after. He wrote extensively about himself and numerous books and articles expressing his opinions and theories. His autobiography *Mein Leben* is quoted frequently by researchers, as well as the diaries of his second wife, Franz Liszt's daughter Cosima. He paused while writing the *Ring* to work through his theories and wrote *The Art of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*. These and his other books describe in great depth what he felt was bad about the contemporary art being produced and in turn how he saw this being corrected. However, he changed his views considerably as he moved on to the next stage of life.

In a study of Wagner's overall creative genius, it would be impossible to separate his musical theories and compositions from his libretti. However, this paper is concerned specifically with the narrative elements of the *Ring* and its symbolism. Therefore, I will present portions of Wagner's life, his character and his contemporary influences in that context. Throughout his days, Wagner was thoroughly driven in pursuit of his interests, usually manifested in promoting the success of his art. His values and attitudes that helped shape the *Ring* can roughly be divided into two periods separated by a mid-life crisis: the young revolutionary and the mature Wagner influenced by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Revolution was in the air throughout Wagner's early life. Although he had little interest in academics, Wagner liked to associate with university students due to his interest in politics. Wagner's sister Rosalie introduced him to Heinrich Laube (Millington 8). Laube was a 26-year-old journalist at the time who had become editor of *Die Zeitung fur die Elegante Welt*, a radical publication. By engaging with Laube, Wagner soon became involved in the Young German movement, a group promoting democratic ideals. The Young Germans wanted to rejuvenate their country following humiliating defeats in the Napoleonic wars. Germany still consisted of many small monarchies, and the group looked at the British parliamentary system and French socialism as models for a united republic. With youthful vigor they wanted to liberate the arts as an erotic, hedonistic expression. (Magee 23 –28)

As a fledgling composer, Wagner endured quite a bit of hardship. He finally had some recognition with his operas in Dresden starting in 1842, and he took on the post of Kapellmeister at the court. However, Wagner jeopardized his position by continuing to associate with revolutionary figures. Wagner's discontent with society was tightly bound with his slow gains of success as an artist. From the 1830's through the 40's his writings developed from a critique of the role of the performing arts in society to an advocacy of sweeping social change he saw necessary for what he considered its proper function – certainly a scenario where he saw himself in a high position. He met and collaborated with anarchists such as the famous Michael Bakunin with whom he read and discussed the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Along with them, he advocated the abolition of property and a society of voluntary cooperation. It seems naïve today, but the anarchism of early industrialization was a romantic revolt – a belief in human nature that was generally positive. However peaceful the intentions, Wagner's writings and involvement in the 1849 uprising in Dresden led to a narrow escape from arrest and a 12 year exile in Switzerland.

Wagner's political anarchist views and the Young Hegelian philosophy made their way into the *Ring*. Quite the opposite of the fascist views that Wagner has been associated with well after his death, as a young man he passionately embraced the idea of a socialist-anarchist utopia. He felt everything must be swept away so something new can be built, and drawing from the Old Norse apocalyptic myth *Ragnarok*, this is dramatically portrayed in the concluding act of *Götterdämmerung*. During the 1830's and 40's Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel prompted a revolution of ideas that saturated schools and German intellectual circles. His fundamental insight into that reality is not static but rather a process that brings new things into existence lent hope to idealistic youth hoping to destabilize the status quo. Initially at least, Wagner applied this thinking when he envisioned the youthful hero Siegfried as the one to bring down the corrupt state of affairs and his slaying as redemption, allowing the ushering in of utopia. (Magee 23 –32)

The idealist Hegel did not abandon the idea of a creator, but the revolutionary faction of the young Hegelians took a materialistic stance and rejected religion. In his book *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity) Hegel's student Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach parted with his professor. He theorized that higher beings are merely fantasized projections of the

human psyche – those traits that we attribute to moral values are made divine in man’s image. However, Feuerbach sees religion as revealing fundamental truths about ourselves, and he isolates the power of love as a liberating force. These concepts had a profound impact on Wagner, and they became core elements of his treatment of the Nibelung myths forming the most radical departures from the original sources in the storyline. As we will further explore, it is Alberich’s renunciation of love in order to obtain the treasure that sets in motion the action in the *Ring*, and it is the underlying human trials that the god Wotan endures that will allow for a redeemed world. (Magee 48 – 67)

Just before Wagner went into exile, he wrote a sketch for the *Ring* story titled *The Nibelung Myth as Scheme for a Drama* with these principles in mind. He had done his homework by studying the sources, but he stamped his personal modern experience into this original treatment. In the first version of the libretto for an opera, *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfrieds Death), which later became the prototype for *Götterdämmerung*, he portrayed Siegfried as the “perfect human” intuitively guided by instinct and uncorrupted by culture who would ultimately bring about a revolutionary egalitarian society. However, the conclusion he wrote was problematic, in that Brünnhild brought Siegfried before the gods and they stood triumphant together as bondsman and monarchy – far from a revolutionary change of guard. As he went into exile, Wagner’s notions were initially intensified. He believed revolution was the only answer. Greedy individuals had ruined everything by exploiting others and despoiling nature. He took a break from composing and wrote a couple of theoretical works, but then he returned to what was to become the *Ring*. Wagner first radically changed the end of *Siegfrieds Tod* to have the gods displaced by Siegfried, and by so doing reconciled his modern portrayal of world-shattering transformation. (Spencer 42)

But Wagner wasn’t content with only using the last days of Siegfried’s life and assassination as a backdrop for his vision of sweeping away the old to usher in modernity. He felt a need to go back to the mythic sources, but he didn’t yet know how far back it would take him. Thomas Mann writes about this stage of development:

But what he did know was that in his tireless backward journeying to find the ultimate depths and origins he had discovered the man and the hero that he was looking for, the hero whom he, like Brünnhild, loved before he was born – his Siegfried, a figure who in his timelessness delighted and satisfied his passion for the past no less than his yearning for the future: man – and here I quote Wagner’s own words – ‘in the most natural, sunny fullness of his physical manifestation, the male-embodied spirit of the one eternal creative purpose, the doer of real deeds, filled with supreme, naked power and indisputable charm’. This, then, was the mythical figure of light, bounded and restricted by nothing, man unprotected, totally self-reliant and self-sufficient, resplendent in freedom, the fearlessly innocent doer of deeds and fulfiller of destiny, who through the sublime natural phenomenon of his death heralds the twilight of old and outmoded world forces and redeems the world by raising it to a new plane of knowledge and morality – he it was whom Wagner made into the hero of the drama intended for music that he drafted, not in modern verse, but in the alliterative language of his ancient Scandinavian source, and that he called *Siegfrieds Tod* (180).

Yet in reaching back to the primordial, the emphasis on Siegfried ultimately diminished. At first Wagner added an extended prologue to *Siegfrieds Tod*, but in order to include more background he decided to add an entire additional opera titled *Der Junge Siegfried* (Young Siegfried). This began the process of ultimately writing four operas in reverse order. Wagner envisioned Brünnhild as the heroic modern woman. He felt he needed to tell Brünnhild’s story in order to counter-balance Siegfried, and while writing that he was compelled to develop Wotan’s character. Keeping with Feuerbach, Wagner humanized Wotan as a projection of man’s struggle with power, corruption and greed. With the leading part of the opera, Wotan overtook Siegfried’s importance. So, by 1852 the libretti for the operas *Rhinegold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were completed. The social revolutionary and the Feuerbachian philosophical content were still present, but by adding and convoluting more of the source material the opera contained even more than Wagner consciously set out to include. Additionally, he remained troubled with his ending – if Siegfried and Brünnhild were ushering in utopia, why do they perish?

Perhaps this question reflected Wagner's change in attitude toward the completion of the libretti. His exile eventually led to disenchantment with politics and with it, depression. Wagner's hopes for a change in society were tightly joined with his plans for success with his art. For a while it seemed to him that there was no hope for either. Nevertheless, he wrote the score for *Rhinegold*. Interestingly, the music for this introductory opera to the *Ring* trilogy is considered the last of the works in his early style.

In the fall of 1854, Wagner first read Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, and it changed his life and music. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to an explanation of Schopenhauer's philosophy, but I will bring up some points of how it influenced and changed Wagner. Although it did not cause Wagner's disillusionment with politics, *The World as Will and Representation* arrived at a timely moment. Schopenhauer's suggestion that reality is hidden, and the empirical world is an illusion that should be repudiated fit well with Wagner's recent disenchantment. Even though Wagner detested society, he had held out hope that things would change. Now, Schopenhauer's ideas stating that the human condition is essentially tragic and was doomed to remain that way resonated with him. (Magee 174 – 193)

Although Wagner wrote several potential endings for the *Ring*, even after Schopenhauer entered his life and he radically changed his views, in the end he did not change his narrative. He came to terms with the content by revising his reading of the text. It seemed to him it was as if he intuitively arranged the storyline in a manner that could be read in multiple ways. Seen through the eyes of Schopenhauer Wotan's tragic spirit gives up his will in a renunciation of power. Siegfried is slain, Brünnhild joins him in the funeral pyre but instead of ushering in utopia the cycle simply begins anew. (Spencer 46)

After being introduced to Schopenhauer's ideas, Wagner wrote the score for *Die Walküre* and experts agree that this marked a turn in his work. After that, he composed the remaining music for the *Ring* off and on for many years. In all it took 26 years to complete.

Friedrich Nietzsche as well indirectly influenced the *Ring* by the impact he had on Wagner's life. Nietzsche was only 24 when he took a post as professor of Philology in Basel and met the elder

Wagner. He'd lost his father, who was born the same year as Wagner, when he was only five. Nietzsche initially idolized Wagner, perhaps looking upon him as a father figure. They enjoyed long talks together about philosophy and at that time shared respect for Schopenhauer. It is most apparent that Wagner has a strong influence on Nietzsche. Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy* contains many of Wagner's ideas, and later after the relationship between the two soured Nietzsche wrote obsessively about Wagner, albeit most often in a derogatory manner. However unsymmetrical the relationship may have been, during the eight years the two were close it is certain that the stimulating discussions between the two men inspired Wagner as well. Wagner was putting the finishing touches on the *Ring* during in-between visits, and he was encouraged by the intelligent younger man's admiration.

Perhaps it isn't surprising that Nietzsche eventually rebelled against his adopted father-figure. Nietzsche probably didn't really agree with Wagner about a lot of things but repressed them, which led to resentments. Nietzsche was very critical about Wagner's apparent sell-out to the bourgeoisie class and his resulting "false" values as he grew in fame. In his quest for independence, Nietzsche also shed his affinity with Schopenhauer's philosophy. In fact, the philosophy Nietzsche developed held the opposite views: The empirical world is all there is, the *noumenon* doesn't exist; the inhibitions caused by morality are decadent, say yes to life – don't negate it; Life and art for its own sake. The one point where Schopenhauer and Nietzsche agree – that will is the underlying driving force – is also a point of departure. Where Schopenhauer sees the will as fundamentally evil and should be repudiated, Nietzsche finds absolute value. In a culture previously cemented in conventional Christian belief systems, such ideas stirred the imagination, and even though Wagner failed to embrace Nietzsche's independent development, his unconformity further stirred up the brewing intellectual environment from which the *Ring* was created. (Magee 286 – 342)

During these years recognition of Wagner's talents grew, and even though he had enemies, his popularity increased significantly. He was granted amnesty in Germany in all but Saxony in 1860, and in 1862 Saxony as well. He gained extensive support of the young King Ludwig II, and he was also able to find other benefactors. He dreamt of having a special location to house his productions of the *Ring* and heard of a theatre in Bayreuth. He deemed the proximity of the

town perfect because it was away from Munich, which he detested, but still within Bavaria. The existing theatre was too small, but he gained support from the locals to have one built to his specifications. Shares were sold around the country, and in spite of repeated delays the first three cycles were eventually performed there in 1876. After more than 25 years, the *Ring* and his goal to have a national theatre devoted to his works were accomplished. (White 82 – 173)

The Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg attended the first cycle of performances in Bayreuth and wrote as a correspondent for *Bergensposten*:

I would now like to get down to the subject of the sources Wagner has used for his *Ring* stories – for us Norwegians these have special significance in that Wagner has taken the *Volsunga Saga* and the Older *Edda* as well as the German *Nibelungenlied* and, with poetic license, has interwoven these elements all together for his drama. Wagner must be given credit for having kept to Nordic sources and, above all, to those of the older period, untainted as these are by the Christian outlook and ethic. Because of this we now have the myth in its true and original greatness. That is why this work is of importance to the Scandinavian (Hartford 62).

Although we will further examine how much poetic license and how close Wagner stayed to the true myth, Grieg is a qualified witness whose words support my thesis.

All of Wagner's successes were also tainted with elements of disappointment. In the case of the first season at Bayreuth, the productions ran a deficit and Wagner wasn't happy about how his work was received. Initially intended for the *Volk*, his themes representing the decadence of society and its annihilation weren't necessarily embraced by the bourgeoisie crowd it attracted – indeed the milieu he was now involved with. However, after recovering from the losses, the *Ring* resumed at Bayreuth two years later. Today the general public must wait eight years to get tickets.

The intention of providing this truncated biography of Wagner is to give the reader a sufficient overview of the events and people in his life to form an idea of the motives contributing to the way he assembled source material for the *Ring*. In addition to circulating revolutionary ideas, there were numerous skirmishes and wars between states during Wagner's lifetime. Conflict and uncertainty always seemed to surround him. Wagner's character reflects the tumultuous times he lived in. He never took the easy route. Always having one foot out of debtors' prison, hedonistically pursuing romantic relationships, obsessively pursuing to define his life and art, his creative genius took shape. Because of his intellectual curiosity, Wagner was involved in and absorbed the many breakthroughs in both socio-political thought and philosophy of the mid-nineteenth century, and each of these varying worldviews made it into his libretti. Although this curiosity may have been somewhat filled by repeated readings of Schopenhauer in the latter years of his life, I assert that it was his seeking nature that drove him back further and further to the mythic sources for the *Ring*, and what he found resonated with the intuitive, unconscious force that he harnessed for his creativity. In the remaining sections I will provide examples of the symbolism he uncovered and through contrast and comparison demonstrate the preexisting nature of its significance.

V. *Das Rheingold*: Mythological beginnings

The first of the four operas comprising the *Ring*, *Das Rheingold* – intended by Wagner to be the introduction to a trilogy – is so tightly woven into the narrative it may be considered the first of a tetralogy. There are no “human” characters in this exposition of the *Ring* cycle – all of the individuals are deities, giants, dwarves or sprites. Wagner takes great liberties with the source materials to initiate the mythic elements of his version of the Nibelung drama, yet in spite of contrasting representation the symbolism shares common themes.

The first scene establishes the theme of Wagner’s underlying anarchist and Feuerbachian motifs for the world’s ills – greed and the lack of love. The dwarf Alberich observes playful Rhinemaidens in the river depths and approaches them. In turn, the three tease and spurn him. Alberich notices the glow of gold, and the Rhinemaidens, thinking they have nothing to fear, inform him that whoever spurns love and fashions a ring from the treasure will win power to rule the world. Deflated by the treatment of the Rhinemaidens, Alberich curses love and takes off with the treasure.

Compared to the dream-like symbolism of *Andvari’s Force* in the *Volsung Saga* introduced above, the rape of the Nibelung treasure by Alberich as depicted by Wagner is considerably more contrived. Recall how the wandering gods Odin, Loki and Hoenir killed Otter, and Loki stole gold from Andvari in order to compensate Otter’s family. Loki didn’t stop at stealing the gold, but he also demanded Andvari’s ring. I argue these common elements of the source and Wagner’s adaptation – the wrongs committed to attain the submerged golden treasure from their guardians – symbolize a breach in the depths of the psyche. The subtlety of this message is made plain by Wagner’s first act of his libretti.

What the *Rhinegold* sets in motion are the initial breaks from infantile innocence that lead to individual and collective development. The conscious actions of the characters leave behind the comforts of unity. Robert Donington expresses this in *Wagner’s ‘Ring’ and its Symbols*:

It was if nature herself, in the persons of her three watery beauties, lifted her skirt just enough to reveal that she has values worth wresting from her so as to turn them into something which is no longer nature, but culture (60).

Analyzing Wagner, Donington points to Alberich's renunciation of love as the healthy adolescent break of the bond from the maternal, and he suggests that it is an expression of Wagner's need to mature in his lustful relationships with women and form more meaningful unions (61). While this is an interesting observation of Wagner's private character development, by bringing this analysis to Scene 1 of the first opera Donington jumps far ahead into the heroic journey. It is more reasonable to view the symbolic break from the maternal at an earlier stage of development at this point of the narrative. In subsequent scenes this split is represented symbolically in numerous ways.

The audience is introduced to the Nordic pantheon and giants in scene 2 of *Rhinegold*. To protect his realm, Wotan contracted with giants to construct a fortress. As payment he promised them the goddess Freia and her youth-giving apples with assurances from Loge, the fire god, that an alternative imbursement could be found. When the giants Fasolt and Fafner arrive demanding their wages, Loge appears and admits that he is unable to find a higher recompense than a woman's virtues. However, Loge has heard of Alberich's treasure, and as he speaks about it both gods and giants lust after the gold. The giants point to Wotan's rune-inscribed spear as the undersigned agreement between them and march off with Freia, but they allow the gods a limited amount of time to secure Alberich's hoard and turn it over. Deprived of their device for eternal life, the pantheon begins to wither as Freia and her apples are whisked away.

In this scene, Wagner combines two Old Norse myths found in *Snorri's Edda: The Master Builder From Giant Land and the Birth of Sleipnir* (50), and *The Theft of Idunn and Her Apples* (81). In the former, on Loki's counsel, the Æsir unwittingly contract with a giant (disguised as a smith) to build a fortress protecting Midgard, and they wager Freia along with the sun and the moon against the smith meeting the midsummer deadline. However, the builder employs a powerful stallion to haul the boulders, and as the date approaches it appears the smith will complete the task on time. At the last moment, Loki intervenes by changing himself into a mare

and distracting the stallion away from its job. By displaying his “giant rage” the smith reveals his true identity, and Thor casts his hammer and strikes him dead. The common element of this tale with Wagner’s appropriation is the contract with a giant to build the fortress and the subsequent renegeing of payment. The outcome of the Old Norse version is quite different: the cunning distraction and death of the giant. Wagner also borrows from the following tale and combines the two to create his version:

In *The Theft of Idunn and Her Apples*, Loki agrees under duress to kidnap the goddess Idunn and her apples, and he brings her to the giant Thazi. The Æsir discover the misdeed and demand Loki retrieve her. Loki borrows Freya’s falcon suit, flies to Thazi, changes Idunn into a nut, and returns to Midgard with her clutched in his talons. Thazi, in the shape of an eagle follows in hot pursuit, but after Loki passes the fortress walls the Æsir light a bonfire and Thazi is ignited as he passes over, plunging to his death. In his version, Wagner substitutes the goddess Idunn, responsible for the longevity of the gods, for Freia the fertility goddess, essentially combining the two. By taking two distinct archetypal deities and making them one he sets a precedence for oversimplification of the Old Norse pantheon.

Arguably, by eliminating Idunn Wagner streamlines his text with minor consequences to his overall text, but in other aspects of this scene he also distorts the archetypal characteristics of the gods. First of all, his glimpses of Odin’s behavior are out of step with the god’s role as ‘All-Father’. It is consistent that Odin represents culture and it’s laws and structure, but in the mythological realm rules are made to be broken, and in his quest of humanizing the deities Wagner does little justice to the anthropological foundation of the text. The gods would never let a contract get in the way of slaying a giant, and they would never allow a goddess to be dragged off by one. (It should also be noted that as above, so below: culturally in the medieval Norse honor and shame society nothing would be considered worse than the violation of a woman’s brethren.) Of course, in the Old Norse version the Æsir also take their agreement seriously. Much like a nightmare, the pantheon will take desperate measures to avoid the undesirable consequences of their agreement, but in this case they “wake up” by discovering the smith is actually a giant, and Thor simply eliminates him. Nevertheless, by first tricking and then slaying the giant a breach has occurred – deceptions such as these eventually lead to a catastrophic event.

In Wagner's version the gods allow the giants to walk off with Freia because they are bound to their agreement, but they steal the gold from Alberich. Perhaps the inconsistency simply reflects Wagner's restructuring of the storyline, but both versions of corruption eventually have the same karmic result: the downfall of the pantheon and their protégés.

Symbolically, instead of master of culture, Wagner portrays Wotan as caught in the role of arbitrator between culture and nature. In Wagner's text Wotan delays the inevitable Æsir apocalypse while ineffectively tinkering with things. Wagner makes use of the rune-carved spear to symbolize Odin's position. There are numerous sources testifying to the power of rune-carvings. For example, a 10th century tale describing the skald Egil Skallagrimsson's hostile retreat from Norway. Skallagrimsson landed on an island, scratched runic curses on a Hazelwood pole, studded a horse's head on its top, thrust it in the ground, and recited a magic verse:

“Here I erect a ‘spite-pole’, and this spite I turn against King Erik and Queen Gunnhild.” And herewith he turned the horse head toward the land. “ I turn this spite against the wights that inhabit this land, so that they may all go wilding ways, nor reach nor find their haunts ere they drive King Erik and Gunnhild out of the land” (Hollander 59).

The curse had its desired effect, as the royal couple were chased out within a year. Wagner borrows from this depiction of magic in his scenario: the power of runes delineate the agreements that seemingly prevent the world from slipping into chaos, and the spear represents the might to enforce the rules. For Wagner, the agreements have all the power to which Wotan is also subject. Hence, Wotan is also bound to fate. The Nordic sources don't explicitly relegate the gods in this manner, but their downfall is related to fateful forces. Implicit in their demise are broken contracts. Yet Wagner has Wotan lusting after the power he presumably already has, as he simultaneously is bound to compromise while staving off inevitable passing. Nordic gods are not entirely omnipotent, nor are they flawless – far from it – but Wagner has stripped Wotan of qualities belonging to his stature as a deity. There are many attributes exhibited by Odin that are deemphasized by Wagner in his portrayal of Wotan, such as his wisdom, leadership, wittiness and his role as educator.

Scene 3 opens in the caverns of Nibelheim: Alberich has enslaved the other dwarves and forced his brother Mime to smith him a magic tarnhelm that can render him invisible. Wotan and Loge arrive and Mime tells them how horrible Alberich has become since he forged the ring from the gold treasure. Alberich enters the stage, puts on the ring, the dwarf blacksmiths scatter, and his attention turns to Wotan and Loge. Alberich boasts of his powers and threatens to use them to overtake the gods and force his way with their goddesses. Loge challenges Alberich to demonstrate his abilities. Alberich puts on his tarnhelm (magic helmet) and changes first into a dragon, and then he transforms into a toad. Taking advantage of his vulnerability, the gods seize him.

Here Wagner draws from the *Nibelungenlied* and develops more about the actions and character of Alberich. In fact, all we know about Alberich from the *Nibelungenlied* we learn from Hagen when he tells the court about Siegfried – how Siegfried subdued Alberich, won the magic tarnhelm from him and how he was made treasurer of the hoard. In view of so few details, it is reasonable to assert that Wagner invented more about the participation of this character in the *Ring* than any other. Wagner places a lot of significance on Alberich as the perpetrator of the “original sin” and the cruel master of the Nibelungs. “Dark Alberich” has been described as the shadow side of Wotan and the struggle for agency represented by the ring.

What Alberich then goes on to do when he has forged his ring runs exactly parallel to what Wotan had done when he fashioned his spear: he imposes order on a race of beings which had hitherto lived carefree in a state of Nature. In his case the new subjects are his fellow dwarfs, the Nibelungs (Magee 114).

Magee elaborates by describing the two as a side of the same coin, specifically in politics: violent tyranny on the one hand and the corruption of ethical compromise resulting in broken promises, lies and theft on the other. This point is well taken in view of Wagner’s anarchist political leanings, and it does not contradict the mythological construct of the Norse pantheon. As displayed by their conduct the gods are far from being faultless, in particular the antics of Loki.

Although Wagner has toned down Loki's adventures and practically eliminates displays of his mischievous nature, the trickster figure has retained his mediating role in the *Ring*. In both *The Master Builder From Giant Land and the Birth of Sleipnir* and the *Ring* Loki urges the gods to contract the building of the fortress while he simultaneously promises to find a way out of the agreement. In the former, Loki sees to it that the master builder can not meet his deadline, and in the latter he resorts to the abduction of Alberich and the treasure. Regarding the theft of Andvari's gold, Loki's role is described in *The Problem of Loki* by Jan de Vries, "Loki as the cunning god may have been chosen for the part of the person who gives advice in a difficult position" (44).

However, apart from being a cunning counselor the Loge of the *Ring* and the Loki of Old Norse mythology bear little resemblance. Wagner portrays Loge as a fire god, presumably due to etymological associations of the name Loki with the Old Norse word *logi*, which means fire. However, there are no tales that have Loki brandishing flames and it is a stretch to connect his dual nature with the positive and destructive aspects of the element. Yet in the source material, it is this ambivalent status that sets Loki apart. Whereas in the *Ring* Loge is simply Wotan's second hand man, in the sources Loki the blood brother of Odin is an ambiguous figure. Although he is a culture-hero who brings gifts to the pantheon and bails them out of trouble, Loki also deceives, insults, and even plays a part in the murder of Odin's favorite son – to cap it off he has a leadership role against the gods in the apocalyptic Ragnarok. Carl Jung disappointingly describes such a complex archetype: "In his clearest manifestations he is a faithful reflection of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level" (260). I argue that Loki represents the catalyst for the split of that very subject – the spark required by the psychoanalytic model of a collective unconscious left behind by the conscious development of the psyche. In Old Norse mythology, it is Loki's mischief that drives the narrative forward. Without him the cosmos would be static. This peculiar aspect of Loki is sorely missing in the *Ring*, while less complex symbolism of duality is delegated to Alberich and Wotan as 'Schwarz-Alberich' and 'Licht-Alberich'.

In the fourth and final scene of the *Rhinegold*, Wotan and Loge refuse to untie Alberich until he has relinquished all of his treasure, including the ring Alberich desperately wishes to retain.

Retreating, Alberich curses the ring, “It will bring anxiety and death to whoever owns it; those who possess it will be racked with torment, those who do not will be consumed with envy” (Spencer 55). The giants return with Freia and demand a pile of gold so high that she is hidden. The gods comply, but Fafner spots the ring on Wotan’s finger and insists it be added to the heap. Initially Wotan refuses, but Erda, the earth goddess, appears and warns Wotan about the consequences of retaining the ring. Wotan acquiesces and reluctantly tosses it on the pile. The giants struggle over it, and the gods witness first hand the curse of the ring: Fafner kills Fasolt and takes off with the hoard. Donner swings his hammer and a rainbow bridge appears leading the way to the Valhalla fortress. The pantheon ascends as the Rhinemaidens cry out below.

Just like Andvari, as described in the *Volsung Saga* (45) and in the *Poetic Edda* introduction to *The Lay of Regin* (151), Alberich curses anyone who comes into possession of the ring. As Jan deVries states regarding the Old Norse etymology of the name Andvari, “The ring was really an *andvaranautr*, literally, ‘a precious object which causes terror or grief’” (42). This defines the article, but does not address the semantics. It is interesting to note that in both cases, Andvari and Alberich are willing to give up the rest of their hoard without such a bitter spell, presumably because the ring would allow them to acquire more wealth, and it is not only a source of power but also holds power over them. Additionally, in both versions those who are paid ransoms aren’t satisfied with the treasure without the ring in tow – it seems excessive greed is to their detriment – but symbolically is it really a downfall?

In his book *Ego and Archetype*, Edward Edinger compares the myths of Adam and Eve and Prometheus, demonstrating how they both represent the birth of consciousness out of the unconscious. In the case of Adam and Eve their crime alienates them from god and preconscious unity:

Eating the forbidden fruit marks the transition from the eternal state of unconscious oneness with the Self (the mindless, animal state) to a real, conscious life in space and time. In short, the myth symbolizes the birth of the ego. The effect of this birth process is to alienate the ego from its origins. It now moves into a world of suffering, conflict and uncertainty (18).

Similarly, Prometheus endures eternal punishment for stealing fire from the gods. Moreover, Zeus sends Pandora to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus and from her box springs all the world's ills. The forbidden act carried out in Eden and by Prometheus' theft of fire has parallels with the Nordic abduction of the gold – daring crimes that initiate ego development with all of its consequences. In mythological terms, Edinger maintains the necessity of this inflated act of hubris as an assertion of autonomy against the symbolic powers-that-be. Without the performed separation the psyche is static. The inflated ego is the first step in the heroic journey.

Mention of another aspect of psychoanalysis is warranted here. As the infant is bonded with his or her mother, there exists a unity that once split by subject / object awareness can never be fully returned to. The recognition of mother as a separate entity invokes the phallus. The satisfied demands of the infant and the frustrations that induced the split are replaced by desire. The first thing the child notices is that he or she is not the sole focus of the parent, so it follows that the initial desire is to be the locus of attention: to be desired. Of course, this is not fully possible; hence, the phallus also symbolizes lack. Castration occurs with the child's failed attempt to obtain everything from the mother, who initially stands in as the phallus, or signifier for desire. The situation forces the child to seek fulfillment elsewhere and move out into the world. As the psyche develops, other objects of desire substitute the mother as original signifier of phallus.

In the *Ring*, Freia, as a mother archetype, is one symbol for the phallus. She is held in a tug of war between the gods and the giants. She is desired by both but ends up being substituted by being covered with treasure. This action of “covering up” represents the illusory substitution of the core origin of desire. Additionally, Wotan must give up the ring in order to entirely cover her. Hence, the ring becomes a symbol and a displaced signifier of desire.

The fortress represents another split from nature. Valhalla is erected (pun intended) and the system, laws and conventions of culture are in place. The psyche now has a symbolic structure to navigate in search of what it desires, but:

Desire, strictly speaking, has no object. In its essence, desire is a constant search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capable of satisfying

it, in other words, extinguishing it. Desire is fundamentally caught up in the dialectical *movement* of one signifier to the next, and is diametrically opposed to fixation. It does not seek satisfaction, but rather its own continuation and furtherance: more desire, greater desire! It wishes merely to go on desiring (Fink 90).

Whether it is symbolized by Loki acquiring the ‘andvaranautr’ or the consequences of the theft of Alberich’s ring, the separation from innocence that occurs in infancy leads to lack in what Jacques Lacan refers to as the Symbolic. As the split subject navigates through the domain of culture in the Symbolic, nothing is found that consciously repossesses an irretrievable memory buried in the unconscious. As the psyche gains awareness of the other, what ensues is a neurotic quest for reunion. The ring, the treasure, and the powers associated with it are imaginary objects of desire. For better or worse, as the *Rhinegold* ends, the recently born world leaves its infancy and enters the next stage of the life cycle.

VI. *Die Walküre*: Odin's intervention in worldly affairs

The audience is first introduced in the *Ring* to humans and half mortals during Act 1 of *Die Walküre*. The action begins in Hunding's hall, as the fatigued Siegmund arrives and is tended by Hunding's wife Sieglinde. Hunding arrives shortly thereafter, and Siegmund is prompted to tell his story. It is revealed that his life has been full of bad luck: One day after hunting with his father, Wolfe, they returned home to find his mother murdered and his twin sister abducted. He later lost his father and became a misfit because he had no family or place in society. Siegmund tells how he is on the run from a family with whom he'd quarreled in defensive of a maiden, and how he sadly failed to save her. Hunding recognizes those folks as his own clan, and challenges Siegmund to a fight to the death the next morning, but by hospitality custom allows him to overnight. Sieglinde drugs Hunding's nightcap, leaves their bedchamber and rejoins Siegmund out in the hall. She makes it clear that she married Hunding under duress. She adds that on the wedding night a hooded stranger planted a sword deep in the ash tree around which the hall is built, and no one has been able to pull it out. Exchanging extensive vows of love, Siegmund claims his right to be Sieglinde's husband and pulls the sword from the tree.

Once again Wagner rearranges existing elements of the *Volsung Saga* to form his narrative. First of all consider Siegmund's life story. In the *Volsung Saga*, Volsung's daughter Signy is forced to marry Siggeir. Volsung's hall has an oak tree in which Odin plants the sword Gram during the marriage feast. Signy's twin Sigmund is the one who can pull it out. Sigmund rejects Siggeir's offers for the coveted sword. As a result, Siggeir's greed and spite leads to the demise of the Volsung brethren except for Sigmund, who is saved by Signy. In order to produce a son to aid Sigmund in revenge for their father, Signy shape-shifts and sleeps with her brother for three nights. Later, Sigmund and their progeny, Sinfjotli, run around in wolf skins hunting, robbing and creating havoc in the kingdom prior to their vengeful slaying of Siggeir.

The common elements suggest that the genetically divine infiltrated clans are both endowed with the gift of being exceptional and chosen to experience hardships from being marginal. Interestingly, both positions build on the idea of inflation brought about by the formation of the ego as initiated in the *Rhinegold* and the subsequent alienation due to difficulties in negotiating

the dialectic. Having made the split from nature and navigating the terrain of culture, the psyche alternates between inflation and alienation. Edinger provides a circular diagram titled *The Psychic Life Cycle* (Appendix IV) and explains,

As indicated in the diagram, psychic growth involves a series of inflated or heroic acts. These provoke rejection and are followed by alienation, repentance, restitution and renewed inflation. This cyclic process repeats itself gain and again in the early phases of psychological development, each cycle producing an increment of consciousness. Thus, gradually consciousness is built up (42).

In this manner the ring in the *Ring* cycle symbolizes the inflation / alienation succession in ego-self identity. In the birth – life – death cycle the initial split that occurs from consciousness is followed by development revolving around the Self-axis propelled by the division. At this point in the texts, pulling the sword from the tree signifies inflationary movement; while interactions with quarrelling clans symbolize social objectification and the cultural framework that produce alienating challenges. Both scenarios represent, albeit quite differently, advancement in the heroic process.

Although they produce different individuals in the Odin / Wotan sired heroic band, in both cases there are offspring as a result of brother sister incest. Sinfjotli is significant in the *Volsung Saga* as faithful companion to his father and in helping revenge his grandfather. Sigmund is the father of Sigurd the Dragonslayer, but with his second wife – not his sister. Wagner simplifies the family tree and history of the clan by eliminating several generations of god-mixed blood. Wotan and an unknown mortal unite and their twin offspring, Siegmund and Sieglinde, in turn directly generate Siegfried. Although it plays out differently, this common symbolic element of incest warrants further investigation.

Every good tale presents obstacles to overcome, and incestuous union is the first in this heroic analogy of the development of the psyche. In his book *Totem and Taboo*, Freud provides extensive evidence of the powerful impact of incest on the psychological make-up of humanity. He examines the correlation between the taboos of non-westernized peoples and the symptoms

of neurotics that are linked to repressed desire. Freud reasons that there is no cause to prohibit something no one desires to do, and those things that are most forbidden are those most wished for. He argues that incest is taboo precisely because it is one of the most powerful human desires: “Taboo is a primeval prohibition forcibly imposed (by some authority) from outside, and directed against the most powerful longings to which human beings are subject. The desire to violate it persists in their unconscious; those who obey the taboo have an ambivalent attitude to what the taboo prohibits” (35). In terms of psychological impact, he points out that if wishful impulses are repressed they result in symptoms of anxiety. He claims these symptoms of anxiety vary according to the psychic development of the individual, with maturity the individual is liberated from incest longing, while the neurotic invariably displays some infantile retention. Hence, the repressed desires are indirectly expressed.

In spite of Freud’s rather condescending comparison of “savage” taboos and the behavior of neurotics, his arguments do succeed in establishing the powerful influence of incest on the unconscious. No wonder then that these relations are commonly found in myth. Although, in myth an apparent contradiction occurs where incest is not only condoned, but at times viewed as sacred. Like Sigmund and Signy, these unions are often between brother / sister twins.

Donnington writes,

This is very often the case in mythological incest, as it is with Siegmund and Sieglinde. One implication is that the incest is as close as it is possible for the brother-sister variety to be, we might almost say as close as the primary mother-son incest itself. Isis and Osiris were lovers even in their mother’s womb. But all such legendary improvements on the merely biological possibilities have an ulterior purpose: to stress the symbolic interpretation at the expense of the literal interpretation (123).

Also common to myth are the exceptions to taboo allowed to gods and goddess and those, such as our pairs, with combined divine and mortal heritage. When portrayed as sacred, the regenerative aspects of the merger are emphasized. After consciousness has developed enough to lose track of its primordial roots, a reunion may be considered healthy and warranted. Jung

outlines this psychic phenomenon with what he refers to as the recognition of the anima and animus. As a man becomes aware of the female aspects of self and a woman her masculine, the result is a more balanced individual. The hermaphrodite pair also symbolizes this positive aspect of the sacred marriage. In this context, the forbidden act prohibited to mortals is most sacred to more than mortals and signifies expansion.

However, there is also a retrogressive aspect of mythic incest as symbolic development of the psyche that fits better with Wagner's storyline. Although social problems exist in contemporary society due to incest, the prohibition has become so conventionally ingrained that it poses little threat and is regarded as not only unthinkable but also unnatural. Quite to the contrary, as demonstrated by numerous species, nature has no objection to incest. In this sense, Freud's research showing the conscious prominence of the taboo among those peoples living closer to nature validates this. The prohibition demonstrates a particular menace exists. In order for this logic to apply, one must equate the mother archetype with nature and the father archetype with culture. In primitive societies few gains have been made in the latter, so any pull back to the mother puts these achievements at grave risk. Overcoming that pull – moving out into the world to form alternate unions – has built civilization. In this light, the union between Siegmund and Sieglinde is a threat to the recent parting from the "mother" that occurred in the *Rheingold* and an obstacle to psychic development.

Act two of *Die Walküre* begins with Wotan and his Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde on a mythic mountaintop. He instructs her to guard over Siegmund in his ensuing fight with Hunding. Wotan's wife Fricka approaches angrily and Brünnhilde withdraws. As guardian of marriage, Fricka demands the adulterous, incestuous pair be broken up along with Wotan's guarantee of Siegmund's demise. She exposes Wotan's plan of ultimately repossessing the ring through the heroic acts of his illegitimate son. Wotan allows Fricka's confrontation to sway his pick in the fight, and when Brünnhilde returns to his side he laments his position and orders her to see to it that Siegmund is slain. Brünnhilde unsuccessfully tries to dissuade him – she acts according to his will – and in this case she knows better than Wotan what he really wants. Things are already falling apart when Brünnhilde arrives at Hunding's hall. After their night of love, Sieglinde is experiencing torment from guilt. Brünnhilde tells Siegmund he must follow her to Valhalla.

Siegmond is able to convince her otherwise, and Brünnhilde disobeys Wotan's orders. Brünnhilde tries to protect Siegmund, but Wotan appears and shatters Siegmund's sword with his spear. Hunding proceeds to kill Siegmund, Wotan slays Hunding and Brünnhilde takes off with Sieglinde with Wotan in pursuit.

Wagner continues to take liberties with the character development of the deities by projecting his personal issues and inserting human qualities that wash out the archetypal characteristics.

Although, the most accurate portrayal of the sources comes from the notion that the valkyries act on Wotan's will. This parallels the Old Norse literature describing the valkyries as spirits in the battlefield transporting those who die bravely to Valhalla where they reside as *Einherjar* – those heroes who will side with Odin during Ragnarok. However, it is somewhat ambiguous as to how much Odin's outward will plays part in the actual decision of who is slain. According to Snorri:

They are sent by Odin to every battle, where they choose which men are to die and they determine who has the victory. Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, named Skuld, always ride to choose the slain and to decide the outcome of the battle (45).

Skuld, as seer of the future, can see those assembled on the final battlefield at Ragnarok and therefore it is implied that she can pick them out in previous combat. In Snorri's description, Odin sits on a high throne in Asgard from where he views the universe. He determines who will win battles, but it is inferred that the valkyries determine the individuals who will die. In both the source mythology and the *Ring*, the symbolic function of the valkyries as the feminine intuitive aspect of Odin's psyche applies. In the less explicit Norse sources this function is clearly unconscious – as an extension of Odin's will the valkyries make the decisions. In the case of Wagner, Wotan is faced with a surfacing conscious dilemma and conflict with the anima. Wagner reveals this through character development by taking the base figure from the sources and creating a personality not found in the originals. One example of this is the father daughter relationship between Wotan and Brünnhilde. There is no reference in Snorri's Edda that the valkyrie are the offspring of Odin, however, if this is Wagner's invention it isn't too big of a stretch given Odin's title as "all-father". In any case, Wagner uses this relationship to humanize

Wotan and dramatize his struggle for outward power in conflict with a balanced inward recognition of Self.

The portrayal of Fricka as the enforcer of wedlock is totally out of whack with the Old Norse sources. It is even more unlikely that Wotan would be hen-pecked by his wife and forced to change his behavior. Snorri presents Frigg as the highest-ranking goddess and wife of Odin. Together they produced most of the Æsir, and therefore she is prominently a fertility goddess. However, it was with Erd (earth) that Odin produced his first son Thor. In addition, Odin has many sexual encounters with giant women, usually in order to acquire something from them. Promiscuous unions are rampant among the Æsir, and although it is at times treated as scandalous there is very little expression of jealousy among them. In all of the sources Frigg is tolerant of Odin's escapades or simply overlooks them. Another goddess negotiated matters of marriage:

The eighth goddess is Lofn [Loving]. She is so gentle and so good to invoke that she has permission from All-Father or Frigg to arrange unions between men and women, even if earlier offers have been refused and unions have been banned. From her comes the word *lof*, meaning permission as well as high praise (Snorri 43).

In light of all this, it seems ridiculous to see Fricka riding up in her ram driven chariot claiming to be answering Hunding's prayers as wedlock's guardian and chastising Wotan:

If you think breach
of wedlock worthy of praise,
then go on boasting
and deem it holy
that incest springs
from the bond of a twin-borne pair!
My heart is quaking,
my brain is reeling:

as bride a sister
embraced her brother!
When was it witnessed
that natural siblings loved one another? (Spencer 142)

Not only is this speech contradictory with what is known of the pantheon and Fricka's goddess archetype, but also Wotan's predicament and reaction is similarly absurd. After designing a plot to sire a hero not bound, as Wotan is, to the laws and contracts of his own design and providing Siegmund with the upbringing, sword, and opportunity to succeed on the path to obtaining the coveted ring, why would Wotan allow Fricka's intervention to derail the whole thing? Wotan ends up splintering the sword he has just passed on to his son. In the *Volsung Saga* Siegmund lives a full life between pulling the sword from the oak and Odin smashing his sword on the battlefield. Siegmund dies knowing in his acquired wisdom that his wife is bearing his son Sigurd and it is time to pass on the heroic tasks ahead. Perhaps Wagner removed content to yield yet another ellipsis of the *Volsung Saga*. As a reflection of Wagner's own experiences, Donington observes that the relationships between Wotan and Fricka run parallel to Wagner's personal frustrations with his first wife Minna. In terms of plot analysis, the likely answer to Wotan's change of heart is the truth behind Fricka's charge that Siegmund is not truly a free agent, but he is merely a proxy for Wotan and the whole scheme is fraudulent. In this scenario Wagner's treatment stands in considerable contrast to the *Volsung Saga*, where Odin is a mysterious wanderer periodically aiding his offspring in their fateful heroic journey and doing so without incrimination or remorse.

In act three the common symbolism between the Old Norse sources and Wagner is Brünnhilde's sleep on the mountaintop. The scene begins with several of the valkyries assembling in the heights. Brünnhilde arrives with Sieglinde and the shattered sword fragments. The other valkyries distance themselves from the defiant Brünnhilde, and Sieglinde escapes to the forest without further aid. Wotan enters angrily and sentences Brünnhilde to sleep on the mountaintop until a man awakens her, upon which she will become mortal. Brünnhilde pleads her case: how she sympathized with the Wälsungs and knew that Wotan truly favored Siegmund. Brünnhilde asks she be spared the punishment of discovery by a mere man. In response Wotan instructs

Loge to create a ring of fire around the mountaintop through which only the noblest of heroes will pass. Wotan kisses her eyelids and solemnly retreats.

In the *Volsung Saga* we learn of Brynhild's past in the chapter *Of Sigurd's Meeting with Brynhild on the Mountain*. In the *Poetic Edda* the same account is called *The Lay of Sigrdrifa*. In both sources Brynhild describes herself as a valkyrie and tells the story of how she defied Odin in favoring a certain King Agnar and saw to it his opponent named Helm Gunnar was slain. As punishment Odin pricked her with a sleep-thorn and announced she should be given away in marriage. Brynhild swore she would only wed a man who knows no fear. Brynhild's story and her part in the saga are delayed until Sigurd finds her. Snorri also refers to Brynhild as a valkyrie. None of the versions go into further detail of the relationship between Brynhild and Odin.

At this point the common elements are Brünnhilde as valkyrie, her defiance, and now her punishment and loathing of ordinary mortal men. As mentioned above, Brünnhilde represents Wotan's anima, hence a symbol for this aspect of the collective archetype. After citing case histories and numerous examples from mythology and religion in *Concerning the Archetypes and the Anima Concept*, Jung writes:

We can hardly get round the hypothesis that an emotionally charged content is lying ready in the unconscious and springs into projection at a certain moment. This content is the syzygy motif, and it expresses the fact that a masculine element is always paired with a feminine one (65).

Particularly if repressed, the anima expresses itself in an aggressive fashion. Its mechanism as an unconscious drive clearly has an impact on the will, as observed when people act without accordance to their conscious intent. The Norse sources and the *Ring* provide an excellent example of this phenomenon, as the image and deeds of a female warrior fit well with this role. Expressing an irrational creative urge, the anima may bring out dark aspects of the psyche but also brings meaning to life. To paraphrase Jung, as man does battle with his instincts and demons the anima emerges from the soul both shrouded in dark mystery and basked "as an angel of light".

As an analogy of budding consciousness, the *Ring* has so far exemplified the split from nature with the theft of the gold and the making of the ring. The obstacle threatening the expansion of consciousness symbolized by incest has been thwarted. Now the feminine aspect, in the form of the warrior Brünnhilde, is repressed by being put to sleep lying dormant in the unconscious and is waiting to express itself. The hero Siegfried will pass through other trials in the next opera before consciousness is developed enough to recover her.

VII. *Siegfried*: The hero's journey

In Wagner's third opera of the *Ring* cycle he finally introduces Siegfried. Originally titled *Der junge Siegfried*, it covers the events leading up to and including Brünnhilde's awakening. Act one of *Siegfried* is set in Mime's cave. Mime is a dwarf smith, and he's working on a sword for Siegfried so the boy can use it to slay Fafner, who has transformed into a dragon guarding his hoard in the adjacent forest. Siegfried enters with a bear he has caught in the woods and sets it loose on Mime, laughing at his fright. Siegfried takes the sword Mime's been working on and shatters it on his anvil. He reprimands Mime's efforts and taunts him until he is willing to tell the truth of his parentage. Up until now Mime has claimed to be his progenitor and has portrayed himself as a self-sacrificing parent with only the boy's interests in mind. The truth is he has plotted to use the boy all along to retrieve the Nibelung treasure and keep it for himself. By observing the animals in the woods, Siegfried is now old enough to realize he must have a mother, so Mime reveals to him it was Sieglinde who died in childbirth. Demanding proof, Mime shows him the shattered sword. Siegfried demands the dwarf reconstruct the fragments to make it whole once more, and he happily returns to play in the woods.

Wotan, in his guise as the Wanderer, enters the cave as Mime sits despondingly in front of the pieces of sword. They agree to wager their heads in a question game and the Wanderer proceeds to answer Mime correctly about the beings that inhabit the three levels of the mythical world: The dwarves live below; the giants on its back; the gods in the heights, and all are ruled by Wotan. In turn, the Wanderer's questions are more pointed: What clan is loved the most yet treated the harshest by Wotan? What is the name of Siegmund's sword? Mime answers these correctly but is unable to answer the third: Who will re-forged the sword? Wotan provides the answer – it is one who has never known fear – and informs furthermore that person will be the one who collects on the bet. Wotan departs and the shaken dwarf plots to teach the boy fear. Additionally, he plans to drug the boy with a magic drink after Siegfried slays the dragon and kill him with his own sword. Siegfried returns from the forest, pushes Mime aside and forges the sword Nothung anew. He swings it down on the anvil and splits it in two.

In this introduction of Siegfried, Wagner sets up the scenario for his nineteenth century version of the hero. Recall how at the time of its writing Wagner was recently exiled for revolutionary involvement, and he was still envisioning Siegfried from an anarchist viewpoint as a “whole human” instrumental in ushering in social change. In order to create Siegfried with as pure an origin as possible, Wagner draws from the *Thidrek Saga* in the instance that Siegfried is unaware of his parentage and kept from the rest of society during his initial years. Wagner eliminates having the baby placed in a glass chest, sent down the river and suckled by a doe, but he retains the upbringing by the smith Mimir and the boy’s unruly temperament. It is this untainted fighting spirit that has potential for bringing about the, albeit naïve, notion of idyllic culture Wagner believes his opera not only represents but will also inspire. However, in the *Volsung Saga* Sigurd is not only aware of his past, he also goes to his mother to retrieve the broken shards of his father’s sword. Furthermore, he avenges his father prior to embarking on his other heroic acts. While symbolic similarities remain in Wagner’s adaptation, this difference is a more outward manifestation of his worldview that is contrary to the sources. The Old Norse medieval society is entrenched with honor, shame and revenge, which is self-perpetuating. In contrast, Wagner’s vision of utopia tends to set this aspect aside in favor of social transformation.

Mime is the younger brother of Alberich, and he corresponds to the role of Regin in the *Volsung Saga*. In the Norse epic, Regin is the younger brother of Otter and Fafnir and becomes the smith who mentors Sigurd. Regin plots similarly to use Sigurd to slay his dragon brother and steal the treasure. Andvari initially possesses the ring in the Old Norse sources, but the similarity to Alberich ends there. Wagner developed Alberich from the German *lieder* where he is referred to as the king of the Nibelungen dwarves. In some versions Siegfried overcomes Alberich and in others Alberich is the guardian of the treasure in Siegfried’s absence. In his version, Wagner develops Alberich as a counterpoint to Wotan’s wrestling for power. After acquiring the gold, Alberich enslaves the Nibelungs. Alberich’s younger brother Mime is first resentful and envious of his abusive power, and now seeks it for himself. Although Regin and Mime have the same position in the texts, this is where the similarity of their personalities end. Although conniving, Regin is quite capable where Mime is not. Regin is able to forge the broken shards and reconstruct Gram. In Wagner’s version, it is up to Siegfried to perform the task.

Although the mentorship corresponds with the *Volsung Saga*, Wagner has invented so many additional character traits and complexities in the relationship between Siegfried and Mime that it otherwise bears little resemblance. Regin and Mime are both schemers, but Mime is also weak. Wagner develops this aspect of his character to emphasize Siegfried's uninhibited strength. The initial action, where Siegfried sets the bear on Mime immediately makes the point. Mime's inability to weld the sword back together is another example of his weakness. Mime tries unsuccessfully to win Siegfried's respect by constantly reminding him of his unselfish parenting. Instead, Siegfried demonstrates an intense loathing. Such a powerful emotion implies Siegfried is projecting an unconscious aspect of himself on Mime. The young brazen Siegfried is totally unaware of any faults in himself. This is expressed in both the *Volsung Saga* and the *Ring* as Siegfried being "the one who knows no fear." The aspect of Siegfried that he projects on Mime is his shadow, the dark fearful aspect of Self. Jung writes,

The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly – for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies (285).

As will be further developed, this element of projection of the shadow plays a role in inflation of the ego, essentially the hero's outward expression ultimately leads to his symbolic encounter with the monster.

The humanization of Wotan by Wagner has so far been set up by his plans of interference in fate gone awry. Wotan was seen remedying his ways by eliminating Siegmund, but now he is asserting himself again with Mime. Wagner, by making Wotan's answers about cosmic geography include Wotan's boast that he rules over everything is an ironic misrepresentation. Not only does Wagner portray Wotan as essentially powerless over others, but also the persona Wagner creates isn't really Wotan's mythical role. Odin is the chieftain's god insofar as his qualities reflect those needed by a leader. His connection with wisdom, war, death, and knowledge of the runes are among the attributes sought after by princes and kings. Odin had a part in the creation of man, but other than the fateful selection of victors at war, he has no absolute power. Rather, he is a seeker and bringer of knowledge. He hung himself in the world

tree, Yggdrasil, for nine days, died, and was resurrected with the ability to read and write the runes. He gave up an eye at the spring of knowledge bubbling from the roots of Yggdrasil, from which every day he drinks. He has journeyed to the underworld realm of the dead and spoken with the prophetic in order to learn fate. Odin chants, remote views, leaves his body in order to perform magic, and demonstrates shaman-like abilities. In the *Ring*, Wotan's reappearance at Mime's cave is a turning point in his power seeking ways: he begins to turn inward while he outwardly boasts of his powers; however, Wagner never fully develops the mystic qualities of the archetype.

Act two of *Siegfried* takes place outside Fafner's lair. Alberich has been stalking the ring, and he is surprised by the approach of the Wanderer. Wotan tells him about Siegfried and Mime's plans. Alberich is even more stunned when Wotan asks Fafner to surrender the ring. Fafner refuses, Wotan waxes philosophical and leaves the scene. Mime warns Siegfried about Fafner's lethal tail and venom, but he impatiently wants to get on with the deed and plunge his sword in the dragon's heart. Left alone, he blows his horn to arouse Fafner. After an exchange of words Siegfried lethally stabs the dragon. Licking its blood off his hand Siegfried understands the language of a Woodbird who advises him to retrieve the ring and tarnhelm from the cave. Alberich and Mime encounter one another and argue over their claims to the treasure. As Mime cajoles Siegfried the latter can read Mime's thoughts and his evil objectives. Aware of his intentions, Sigfried kills Mime. The Woodbird tells Siegfried about Brünnhilde and leads him to a mountain ringed in fire.

In the *Volsung Saga* things unfold a bit differently. Alberich doesn't exist. Regin leads Sigurd to the lair and prior to retreating advises him to dig a hole in which to hide and kill the dragon from below. An old man (Odin) appears as Sigurd digs the hole. He advises Sigurd to dig many holes in which to allow the blood to flow, lest he drown. There is no dialog between Odin and Regin or any other intervention on the part of the god. The rest is quite similar: the birds warn Sigurd about Regin, so when he returns Sigurd slays him and after retrieving the treasure rides off to Brynhild. There is an element missing in both Wagner's version and the *Volsung Saga* that is present in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Thidrek's Saga*, namely Siegfried's bathing in the dragon's

blood turning his skin to armor, less the one vulnerable spot on his back. Perhaps Wagner felt it unnecessary to include this in his plot.

Interestingly, in Wagner's version Wotan's transformation from power-seeker obsessed with acquiring the ring to a fatefully resigned informant occurs hand in hand with Siegfried's rise in heroic glory. This fits well with Wagner's revolutionary idea of the old guard being replaced by the new. As stressed above, this really doesn't fit in with the god's archetype. It is much more fitting for the god to slip in and out while playing a mysterious hand in fate.

While Siegfried projected his shadow on Mime in the form of loathing and disrespect, it is now time for him to overcome his inner demons. Siegfried is relieved that he isn't related to the dwarf. He has learned the truth about his mother, and he is now ready to entirely break away and reach his adolescence. The ego, in conflict with the obscured, unfavorable content of the psyche known as the shadow is represented in mythology as the fight between the archetypal hero and the demonic monster – in this case the dragon. In his essay in *Man and His Symbols*, Joseph Henderson writes,

For most people the dark or negative side of the personality remains unconscious. The hero, on the contrary, must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon – i.e. before the ego can triumph, it must master and assimilate the shadow (120-21).

In the case of our dragonslayer actions seem to speak louder than realizations. There are no behavioral indications that the naïve hero Siegfried has actually matured in this fashion. He still knows no fear, and he hasn't seemed to gain any self-awareness expressed outwardly by his personality. This pertains to both the Old Norse sources and Wagner's portrayal of the saga. However, symbolically there are indications that Sigurd has gained some advancement of consciousness. Of course, the slaying of the dragon may be considered only for its symbolic content without deferring to character development. Yet, another event happens: in the process

of slaying the dragon and exposure to its blood and flesh, Siegfried magically understands the language of birds.

In *Animism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thoughts* Freud provides an interesting background to magic that fits well amid mythical communication with animals (75). He draws from numerous scholars such as anthropologist E. B. Tylor and fellow psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in order to expand on what they consider the original spiritual system of thought: animism. Fundamentally, animism structures reality with the idea that spiritual beings benevolent and malevolent animate both biologically living and non-living matter. This begins by forming the idea of soul and then extending it to objects in the outside world. Freud quotes the British philosopher David Hume whom I paraphrase: Animism is the tendency to conceive all things like ourselves and transfer our qualities to the familiar (77). Tylor describes magic as mistaking an ideal situation with a real one.

Describing it as associative theory, Freud outlines two essential acts of magic: those produced by similarity or by contiguity. The former is imitative. An example is making an effigy of someone – whatever is done to the effigy will happen to the person. Another example is a rain dance – by simulating rain it is brought about. The latter fits the Old Norse and Wagner's retelling of understanding the language of birds quite well. By, for example, obtaining a piece of someone's hair or using someone's name the magic of spatial continuity occurs. In this vein, you are what you eat. In particular, by eating a person in the case of cannibalism, animal or thing one acquires its attributes. This act is also called contagious magic. Symbolically, Siegfried integrates his shadow by eating it. The self-awareness that occurs is represented by understanding the language of birds. The birds tell him of Mime's true intentions, i.e. provides Siegfried with insights that come from psychic development resulting in maturity.

The phrase 'omnipotence of thoughts' coined by Freud fits well with the worldview in Old Norse pagan culture. Magical influences occur through the association of subjective ideas that are mirrored in objective nature. In heathen culture psychological structures govern what are in modern western societies regarded as scientific laws of nature. Magical practices are motivated by an individual's wishes. Add to the formula a belief in the power of wishes and it adds up to

the manifestation of the will. Given this belief system, it is no wonder the struggle between will and fate has such a prominent part in the heroic journey and power struggles found in the texts. Freud sums this up nicely:

The fact that it has been possible to construct a system of contagious magic on associations of contiguity shows that the importance attached to wishes and to the will has been extended from them on to all those psychical acts which are subject to the will. A general over-valuation has thus come about of all mental processes – an attitude towards the world, that is, which, in view of our knowledge of the relation between reality and thought, cannot fail to strike us as an over-valuation of the latter. Things become less important than the idea of things: whatever is done to the latter will inevitably also occur to the former. Relations which hold equally between the idea of things are assumed to hold equally between the things themselves (85).

The concept that ideas shape reality in the external world extends to symbolic actions in the Old Norse sources and the *Ring*. The lust for the ring by Mime is ill fated – he is a dwarf smith, not a sorcerer. Wotan has seen his fate and his will to possess the ring is fading. However, Sigfried's will is untainted; he knows no fear. By slaying the dragon, tasting its blood, understanding birds and killing Mime he integrates part of his shadow through contagion. He is not only a hero, but also an unwitting magician. In an inflated state, he will continue to acquire the needed tools in order to move through his journey.

In the final act of *Siegfried*, Wotan awaits the hero in his path toward Brünnhilde. Wotan talks to Erda, the earth goddess prophetess, regarding the state of affairs. Wotan declares his change of heart – he no longer desires the ring nor fears the gods' impending doom – he entrusts to the goodness of Siegfried the undoing of Alberich's evil aspirations. When Siegfried comes along, he asks Wotan the way. Wotan questions Siegfried and things escalate into conflict. Wotan mocks Siegfried who in turn is disrespectful. Wotan tries to first warn him away and finally blocks him with his spear. This time Siegfried is able to shatter the spear with the sword Nothung and Wotan retreats. Siegfried makes it past the wall of fire and finds a warrior in full armor

under the trees. He takes off the helmet and then he cuts the armor loose with his sword – only then does he recognize the womanly body of Brünnhilde. He invokes his mother and for the first time feels fear. Not knowing what else to do he leans over and kisses her. With that Brünnhilde awakens. As Siegfried passionately woos her, she is at first vulnerable and reluctant, but she ultimately accepts his love and consequentially her mortal status. Together they are ecstatic in love. Brünnhilde disavows the gods and laughs in glee of their love in the face of doom. Siegfried praises everything that is light: the day, the sun, and the love that Brünnhilde brings him. They vow eternal love and together laugh in the face of death.

In the *Volsung Saga*, Sigfrid doesn't encounter Odin on the way to awaken Brynhild. This meeting in the *Ring* is Wagner's last emphasis of Wotan's making way and stepping aside for the hero. This is made clear by Wotan's dialog with Erd the prophetess and his half-hearted attempt to prevent Siegfried from reaching Brünnhilde. I argue the representation of Wotan's political downfall and Wagner's ideas regarding the changing of the guard as less important in the texts than the common symbolism invoked by the awakening of Brünnhilde. It follows that the content in the Old Norse sources differ and are richer in anthropologic and psychoanalytic context.

The initial actions of awakening Brünnhilde are quite similar – her resemblance to a man and the cutting of the armor. Yet in the *Volsung Saga* and the Poetic Edda *Sigrdrifasmal*, although there is an exchange of vows the emphasis is more on teaching. The hero has passed his initial outward test by overcoming an obstacle in the form of the dragon, but now it is time for him to be introspective and absorb his gains. This is best described in anthropology as a rite of passage involving the liminal phase. Arnold Van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* describes this cultural ritual as a three-step process. First, when a child is ripe to move from adolescence to adulthood, the initiate withdraws from society seeking a vision that will help formulate a mission in life. The period of transference is the liminal stage, one where spiritual teaching is passed on and identity is revealed. Once the vision is attained, the indoctrinated returns to society with a life goal and reinvigorated. This process is made explicit by the Old Norse sources. When Sigurd awakens Brynhild, he doesn't experience fear but rather a continuing curiosity. Brynhild recognizes him as the one who knows no fear and proceeds to create a sacred space by hailing the sun, the moon, the gods and goddesses. She passes on to Sigurd the wisdom of the runes –

among them the healing arts – and she also passes on conventional modes of ethical behavior important to a mature individual in the middle ages. In short, she tells him how to grow up. Brynhild's words are spoken out of love, and Sigurd is smitten. Although Brynhild's clairvoyance warns her of their ill-fated plight, the two make vows to one another prior to Sigurd's departure. Most of these important aspects are missing from Wagner's text; as he focuses almost entirely on the romance between the two, the enlightened Brünnhilde is subdued.

It is common to analyze the hero's journey from the male perspective. In that scenario, Sigurd passes through the boundary of fire into the womb-like enclosure and through the encounter with the feminine he reconvenes with nature, appropriates its natural wildness, and returns enriching culture. As an alternative it is worthwhile to view this from Brynhild's perspective. Annis Pratt writes,

Feminist archetypal theorists, encountering the powerful archetype of the nature goddess at home in her green world and answerable to no man, wonder if the construct is entirely a male invention. Feminist theory veers between decrying the male assumption that women are natural and hence culturally devalued, and affirming our allegiance to the natural world and the psychological strength we gain from it. Some women anthropologists and archetypal critics alike work within the academic establishment, receiving our training and permission to teach and conduct research from a culture that is male, we risk internalizing our culture's distaste for the delights of being a woman (111).

In regard to Brynhild, the key words here are 'answerable to no man'. It isn't that she is unable to appreciate her femininity, but rather her integrated masculine side, her animus, is her strength. In the Volsung Saga, Brynhild is an enlightened warrior: she knows the runes, in addition to knowing nature, she knows culture and is a fully balanced individual. Brynhild also knows the future, and hence the fate of the pair. Sigurd goes through the motions of initiation and enters the world with teaching, but for now he remains blind to his destiny. Pratt notes that in primordial cultures the goddess and priestesses could remain a virgin by being true to nature and instinct; chastity wasn't the issue. She likens this to a virgin forest, ripe in fertility and transformation. "It

is virgin because it is unexploited, not in man's control" (110). The Old Norse patriarchal worldview makes Brynhild's coupling with a man an issue in the saga, one that strips her of her immortality. In this sense the saga is certainly a male construct. However, a close reading demonstrates that she hasn't really lost her power. Her teaching, knowledge of fate and ultimately her control over everyone around her demonstrates this.

VIII. *Götterdämmerung*: Twilight of the gods

The prologue to Wagner's final opera brings background information to the audience that is a somewhat redundant. Multiple critics note that this exposition is a remnant of *Siegfried's Tot*, the original version of the last opera of what became four libretti. As previously mentioned, the four were written in backward order. At the time of writing, prior to adding the first three as separate entities, it would have been necessary to bring the audience up to date with the extensive background in the narrative. Perhaps after writing the three libretti preceding it, Wagner left the retelling due to its symbolic elements. Three *norns*, known respectively in Old Norse mythology as the seers of past, present and future act as narrators while they weave a rope of destiny. The rope breaks and the norns descend into the earth. Dawn arrives and Siegfried and Brünnhilde appear. He gives her the ring as a symbol of his troth, and after reaffirming their vows, she sends him off on an excursion down the Rhine.

There are numerous references to norns in Old Norse mythology as the determiners of human fate. In the *Volsung Saga*, Brynhild directly refers to them as the ones who rule over the characters' destinies. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that Wagner present the norns as narrators not only retelling past events, but also as agents foreseeing the future. The rope breaking signifies the pending undoing of the lovers' vows and the essence behind the new title of the opera: translated as "the doom of the gods". As the Old Norse and Wagner's narratives unfold, there is a growing chasm in how events develop. In the *Volsung Saga* Sigurd gives a ring to Brynhild at the end of their second meeting. After leaving the mountaintop Sigurd is in the height of his glory and is described with splendor. His fame as a hero is renown and is reflected in his demeanor and physical stature. The first stop for Sigurd is at Brynhild's brother-in-law's court in Hlymdale. Brynhild arrives there shortly after Sigurd. During their second meeting, Brynhild bluntly tells Sigfrid that he is destined to wed Gudrun. Sigfrid will hear nothing of it and persuades Brynhild to swear their oath anew. This rendezvous never occurs in the *Ring*. At the end of the prologue, Siegfried presents the ring to Brünnhilde as proof of his love. Spectator and characters alike know the curse that follows the ring, and its transfer from Siegfried to Brünnhilde makes explicit the disastrous future for the couple. In the *Volsung Saga* it is

Brynhild's ability to foretell the future that spells out their doom, but the curse of the ring is subtler.

In act one of *Götterdämmerung* the audience is introduced to the Gibichung court. The king Gunther and his sister Gutrune sit on their thrones. Their half-brother Hagen advises them to find mates and marry. He entices them with the tale of Brünnhilde, and he tells how only Siegfried can awaken her. Hagen hatches a plot to have Siegfried drink a potion that will make him forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with Gutrune. The three Gibichungs conspire to trick Siegfried into winning Brünnhilde for Gunther and have a double wedding. Siegfried arrives at the court, and the plan works. Gutrune dispenses the drink, and after making a toast to Brünnhilde, Siegfried immediately forgets her and is smitten with Gutrune. As compensation for her hand, Siegfried offers to help win Gunther a bride. Siegfried agrees to use his magic tarnhelm in order to take Gunther's shape, ride through the flames surrounding Brünnhilde, and claim her for Gunther. As the hero and king head up the Rhine, Hagen remains behind pleased with the progress in his plan to win power. He intends to trick everyone and come into possession of the ring.

In the meantime, Brünnhilde is approached by her sister Waltraute and is told about the plight of the gods. Wotan, his spear shattered, is totally resigned to the god's demise and the pantheon are slowly fading away. Waltraute begs Brünnhilde to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens in order to save the gods – that is the only thing that can reverse the trend. However, Brünnhilde refuses to surrender Siegfried's love pledge, and Waltraute leaves without accomplishing her task.

Disguised as Gunther, Siegfried crosses the flames and demands Brünnhilde's hand. Brünnhilde resists, but Siegfried forcibly overcomes her. Siegfried seizes the ring from her finger and spends the night with her but he places his sword between them as proof of chastity.

In this act Wagner uses some bits and pieces from the German *Nibelungenlied* for the first time. However, most of these references have parallels with the Old Norse and everything becomes rather convoluted, likely in order to have fewer characters and shorten the narrative. The most notable character within the German tradition is Hagen. In the source material, he has no mythic relation as the son of Alberich – nor is Hagen related to the three brothers who share the rule, but he is a cunning and most powerful advisor to the kings. Recall how in the *Nibelungenlied* the

story starts with Siegfried's arrival at the Worms court. All we know about him is a brief description by Hagen. He tells how Siegfried is a dragonslayer with riches and a magic tarnhelm that allows him to change shape and become invisible, but there is no mention of a cursed ring. Siegfried seeks the hand of Kriemhild (Gutrune), and through chivalrous acts wins an alliance with the kingdom. At first Hagen has no evil plot against Siegfried, but he does take advantage of the naïve hero in hatching a plan for Siegfried's assistance in wooing Brünnhilde. Siegfried agrees to help in order to win the hand of Kriemhild. Siegfried and Brünnhilde have never met previously. Brünnhilde is portrayed as the queen of Iceland. She is an amazon figure who can only be won by a man able to beat her in warrior games. A small party sails off from Worms, and using the tarnhelm Siegfried is able to assist Gunther in winning the contests. Returning to Worms, there is a double wedding, but things get off to a rough start between Gunther and Brünnhilde – she refuses to sleep with him and hangs him on a coat hook. Learning of this plight, Siegfried offers to step in and subdue her. He puts on the tarnhelm, goes to their bed, wrestles with Brünnhilde, and he takes her undergarment and ring, which he in turn gives to Kriemhild. Although Siegfried claims to have been chaste, it is somewhat ambiguous. After this episode, Brünnhilde no longer resists dominance by Gunther.

In the *Volsung Saga* there are an elderly king Gjuki and queen Griemhild who pass rule onto their two sons Gunnar and Hogni. They have a sister named Gudrun. Sigurd arrives and wins their respect. There is no court advisor named Hagen. It is the queen mother Grimhild who plots to arrange marriages to her liking and dispenses the amnesiac potion to Sigurd. Some time passes before Sigurd marries Gudrun and becomes blood brother to Gunnar. Grimhild suggests to Gunnar that he win the hand of Brynhild. Sigurd rides with him and after Gunnar's failed attempts to traverse the ring of fire, they switch places. Sigurd, impersonating Gunnar, is once again able to cross. Brynhild is obliged to succumb to Sigurd disguised as Gunnar. They lay together with his sword between them. She surrenders the cursed Andvari ring given to her by Sigurd, and the impersonator gives her another from the hoard.

Amidst all these varying and somewhat dizzying details, there are two important factors: Siegfried's hubris, which lead to exploits triggering his alienation, and the roles of Hagen or Grimhild as Sigfried's nemesis manipulating him into acting blindly. Hubris is an act of inflation

necessary in the process of the split of consciousness as a crime against nature, i.e. the mother, to go off into the world and form culture. However, part of the initiation to adulthood involves accruing the wisdom to realize one is not invincible and to act in society with awareness. In the *Volsung Saga*, Brynhild passes on this wisdom both explicitly and implicitly to Sigurd during their first meeting on the mountaintop. In verse and prose she tells him to be aware of tainted drinks, a maiden's love, evil counsel and the importance of keeping one's word. Of course, Sigurd later disregards all of this in his inflated state. Interestingly, Brynhild also says: "Give kind heed to dead men, - sick-dead, or sword-dead; deal heedfully with their dead corpses" (91). This has a direct correlation to the original Greek notion of hubris as a mortal crime. In contemporary times hubris is tied directly to exaggerated self-confidence, pride and arrogance, but this is an outgrowth from the initial meaning of the crime in ancient Greece of treating a victim or dead enemy with irreverence or humiliation. Not that Sigurd is specifically guilty of hubris in the ancient context, but disregarding the rest of the Brynhild's teaching symbolically incriminates him. The link to Greek culture and myth demonstrates the universality of the collective hero archetype. Edinger points to the myth of Icarus as an example of the hero's literal downfall due to hubris. Icarus disregarded his father's warning not to fly too high lest the wax of his wings would melt. The same inflated attitude is what gets Siegfried into trouble. The Greek goddess Nemesis gives what is due in punishment for acts of hubris. The nemesis role is one's enemy much in the way that Hagen is portrayed as the anti-hero in opposition to Siegfried. Similarly, Grimhild in the *Volsung Saga* plays that role by instigating the hero's alienation. By foolishly accepting the memory-drink from Grimhild, Sigurd starts his descent that leads to his pact of deception with Gunnar. When Sigurd assumes Gunnar's identity and demands Brynhild's hand on his behalf, he breaks his vow to her, which is another initiation warning left unheeded. Finally, he takes back the ring, and by doing so brings its curse back onto himself. The wax on his wings has melted. Edinger writes,

Although there are times when an inflated act is necessary to achieve a new level of consciousness, there are other times when it is foolhardy and disastrous. One cannot presume to set his own course safely until he knows what he is doing. Dependence on the superior wisdom of others is often an accurate appraisal of the reality situation. [...] I have spoken of a necessary crime of inflation, but it is a

real crime and does involve real consequences. If one misjudges the situation he suffers the fate of Icarus (27).

Siegfried's 'plunge into the sea' is yet to come, but it is this inflationary act of deception and not living up to his word that starts his downfall. By taking on Gunnar's identity, it is an act of both inward and outward dishonesty. Siegfried is not being true to himself and is lacking in self-awareness when he deceives Brünnhilde.

Act two of *Götterdämmerung* begins with Hagen getting a late night visit from his father, Alberich, who urges him to procure the ring. This has been the plan all along, but Hagen makes it clear he is acting for himself. Siegfried returns alone to the court, having switched places with Gunther and returned to his original form. Later, with everyone assembled for the wedding feast, Gunther leads Brünnhilde into the gathering. Gunther greets Siegfried and gives Gutrune to him. Upon hearing his name, Brünnhilde's mood changes from dejected to enraged. She demands to learn how Siegfried wears the ring that Gunther snatched from her. Siegfried segues and swears he's done no wrong by his blood brother. Brünnhilde responds by saying his sword hung on the wall and not between them, and she accuses Siegfried of perjury. Siegfried brushes off the charge and leads Gutrune away. Left alone with Hagen and Gunther, the betrayed Brünnhilde joins them in a plan to murder Siegfried.

If it wasn't obvious before, Wagner's parallels between the pairs Wotan and Siegfried and Alberich and Hagen are now quite clear. Wotan's grandson Siegfried has embarked on a heroic quest and acquired the ring, yet he isn't even aware of its power. His naiveté has got him in trouble along the way, but generally his intentions have been "good". As he developed he pushed his heredity aside (smashed Wotan's spear) in his move toward independence. Wotan, sometimes referred to as "Light Alberich", has voluntarily stepped aside to allow his grandson to usher in a new, better world. Hagen, on the other hand, has been sired and groomed all along by "Dark Alberich" to steal the ring, and he is quite aware of its powers, which he now covets for himself. There is little in the sources that resemble these relationships, and it is safe to say that this scenario is largely Wagner's rearrangement and invented character development. It is during *Götterdämmerung* that Wagner's anarchist political beliefs fully come out. The idea of a pending

utopian society fits well with the struggle between light and dark forces and simultaneously makes for a more modern narrative where conflict is frequently reduced to good versus evil. Perhaps this was fitting for Wagner and his message, but historic anthropological symbolism is lost in his rendering.

For example, Wagner's rearrangement does little justice to the character of Gutrune. Not only is her role reduced, in none of the sources is she the nemesis who dispenses a drink or deliberately deceives Siegfried. Quite to the contrary, in the *Volsung Saga* Gudrun, and in the *Nibelungenlied* Kriemhild, she becomes involuntarily enamored with and fiercely loyal to her husband. As the story continues, she contributes to Siegfried's downfall inadvertently, which adds complexity to her persona. Following his murder she plots retribution against her brothers and the ongoing stories largely revolve around her revenge. Granted, Wagner's *Ring* ends before her character would be fully exposed, but having her as part of a deceptive plot against her husband demonstrates a lack of integrity not found in the sources. Furthermore, in the sources, through the dramatic events in Gudrun's life the woman's role in medieval pan-Germanic culture – both her subservience and her power – are illuminated. In her obsession for revenge she manipulates everyone around her.

Wagner once again truncates the plots of the sources by having an immediate and direct confrontation between Brünnhilde and Siegfried. In both the German and the Old Norse originals Brünnhilde remains quiet until later points in the narratives. In these cases, Siegfried's ill fate arises from a spat between the two queens Brünnhilde and Gutrune. Essentially, they argue over the status of their husbands and as a result Siegfried's misdeeds are brought into light.

In the *Nibelungenlied* the issue isn't a breach of vows, while no previous relationship between Siegfried and Brünnhilde explicitly existed. Rather, the crime was Siegfried's secret interventions disguised as Gunther and how that brought dishonor. Ironically, Gutrune, while defending her husband, reveals his theft of Brünnhilde's ring and undergarment. The whole deception involving Siegfried's use of the tarnhelm to aid Gunther comes to light. As long as the actions were hidden it was not such a threat, but once out in the open it is intolerable due to the implied sexual contact. Hagen, as protector of Brünnhilde and out of loyalty to Gunther takes it

on himself to plot the assassination. This response is highly reflective of the Germanic honor shame society during the thirteenth century where “Treue” or loyalty to superiors is a highly esteemed value. Also, the chivalry involved is an extension of the same worldview where shame is cast upon the family of a wronged woman. Clunies Ross writes, “If an unauthorized male gained sexual access to the woman, her honour and that of her male kin would be tarnished” (41). In spite of sworn oaths and agreements between Gunther and Siegfried, dishonor has been brought to Brünnhilde’s male kin, in this case the king, his family and his advisor Hagen, who are supposed to protect her from extra-marital sexual relations.

The historic cultural traditions are clearly important symbolic elements in the plots of the source material. The *Nibelungenlied* was recorded during and describes a largely Christian German medieval setting. The Old Norse sources, although transcribed in a converted Iceland, reflect pre-Christian societal oral tradition. Steinslund provides a good explanation of the main aspects of folk religions in general, and how these elements apply to the Norse pagan culture. She describes pagan religion as a cult community that one is born into and essentially binds the people living in a given area together. The emphasis is in the cult, not dogmatic beliefs. Myths and cosmologies are developed, but the anchor is conservation of the group. Rituals are designed to secure life’s necessities: fertility, harvest and good health. Earth religions such as these are worldly in the sense that the focus is on living; although there may be talk of an afterlife, it is not necessarily spoken of as eternity, as in Christianity where the worldly is denied and transcended with the reward found in eternal life. Rather, it is believed that fate provides the explanation for the direction of an individual or family’s destiny. Steinsland writes:

Fate is a keyword; the northern heroic poem dramas stand side by side with the Greek tragedies. The double threesome relationships that play out between Sigurd, Gudrun, Brynhild and Gunnar frame the major passions: love, honor, betrayal and jealousy. No woman in the real world would behave like Brynhild or Gudrun: get their loved one killed in a gruesome way or kill their children and serve them in a soup in order to revenge and punish their husband. These are tragic possibilities that exist in the pre-Christian society family systems, in the

merciless honor-shame-morality that is revealed and is acted out in this poem (45 translation mine).

The core belief of fate is woven throughout the *Volsung Saga*, and primarily through Brynhild events are foretold. However, at this stage in the epic Brynhild seems to lose her psychic gifts. After the deceptive wooing of Brynhild, her foster-father insists she marry Gunnar. She goes along with it and she doesn't encounter Sigurd until later. First, Gudrun produces the cursed ring during her argument with Brynhild. Meant as proof of Sigurd's higher valor and status than Gunnar, the action opens old wounds. Brynhild had on numerous occasions foreseen the inevitable, but now that the betrayal is brought into the open she falls into a depression that can't be rectified. She cannot live with any solution: not with continuing the marriage with Gunnar or divorcing him, nor with Sigurd's eventual offer of leaving Gudrun and marrying her. Instead, she demands that her husband Gunnar orchestrate Sigurd's demise, and Gunnar's youngest brother Guttorm is called to the task. What is particularly interesting here is the final dialog between Sigurd and Brynhild. They have switched mindsets. Up until now, Brynhild has been the soothsayer: she has accurately foretold the major players their destiny. However, she is now overcome with passion, and coupled with that is a lack of objectivity required for clairvoyance. She has seemingly lost her previous insights. Sigurd now is the wiser and knows his fate. The drink of forgetfulness wore off during the wedding of Gunnar and Brynhild, and Sigurd chose to let things be and make the best of it. As he reasons with her in vain, Sigurd makes it clear he is aware he won't live much longer. Through his words, Sigurd also demonstrates he has integrated a previously missing part of himself due to his process of inflation to alienation, and the cycle is nearing its end.

This brings us to the third and final act of *Götterdämmerung* and the *Ring*. Hagen has called for a hunt along the wooded banks of the Rhine, where he intends to implement his dirty deed. Siegfried is distracted by the Rhinedaughters. They are imploring him to return the ring to the river before it is too late. Siegfried will have nothing to do with it, and he rejoins the rest of the party. He is asked to tell the story of his life. Hagen gives him a potion drink to restore his memory. Siegfried gets to the part about wakening Brünnhilde with a kiss. Gunther acts as if he's shocked and Hagen spears Siegfried in the back. Siegfried dies and is carried back to the court

where Gutrune in turn dies of grief. Hagen makes a move to take Siegfried's ring, but Gunther steps between them. Hagen slays Gunther and once again goes for the ring, but this time Siegfried's arm lifts, stopping him in his tracks. Brünnhilde enters and orders a funeral pyre. Sending Wotan's ravens to Valhalla with the tidings, she blames the god for dooming Siegfried to the curse, and she bids Wotan to now also rest in peace. She claims to have grown wise due to the tragedy. She promises the ring will be returned to the Rhinedaughters, and the fire is lit. Declaring at last a blissful union with her beloved, she rides her horse into the inferno, the whole court catches fire and the Rhine floods its banks. Hagen is dragged down by the Rhinedaughters who are finally in possession of the ring. The pantheon is seen assembled in Valhalla, which catches fire and they also burn – the end of the gods has come.

It is clear that Wagner's melodrama ties the end of Siegfried – the nineteenth century new age hero – with the end of the gods – the aristocratic rule. Through Siegfried's sacrifice a new world order may come into existence. At the same time Wagner returns the cursed ring to the Rhinedaughters, the guardians of the depths. Presumably for Wagner the ring represents the greed and corruption that needs to be cleansed from utopian society. This was Wagner's likely initial intent, but after his discovery of Schopenhauer he viewed it differently. At that point Wagner saw Siegfried's death and the return of the ring as a renunciation of worldly illusion, and the culmination of the gods as a reworking of the will in repudiation of desire. Of course, the ring cycle can be interpreted in numerous ways, including more than one psychoanalytic model.

As in each of the acts of the four operas, there are numerous variances from the sources. As mentioned above, Wagner simplifies Gutrune's character. In both the German and Old Norse references she lives on to be a central figure in the texts. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried has a thick, impenetrable skin due to having bathed in the dragon's blood. Tricked into thinking Hagen wants to protect Siegfried in battle, Kriemhild (Gutrune) reveals that he has one vulnerable spot on his back, which the dragon blood didn't cover. Hagen uses the information to stab Siegfried in the back during the hunt. He kills Siegfried to protect Brünnhilde's honor, and quite unlike Wagner's version, she shows no remorse. In the *Volsung Saga*, while sleeping next to Gudrun Sigurd is stabbed by Gunther's youngest brother Guttorm. Brynhild commits suicide and while she dies requests that she lie next to the side of Sigurd in a funeral pyre. With that, this chapter in

the *Volsung Saga* ends similarly to the *Ring*. A marked difference, however, is the correlation in the *Ring* to Ragnarok, the final battle and end of the gods as described in the Old Norse sources. This entirely different event, unrelated to the *Volsung Saga*, is the cataclysmic uprising of the giants and their allies against the gods leading to the death of Odin and most of the pantheon.

Ragnarok has nothing to do with Sigurd's murder, but similarly it ends a cycle. It is fitting that Wagner tied the two events together because he interweaves Wotan's character development throughout the story to the point where the god and his hero offspring are ripe for transformation. Both have engaged the world in an inflated manner, had encounters with their anima and shadow, and experienced alienation. With the events immediately leading to and including their deaths, they express or act out elements of humility, repentance and sacrifice. Edinger describes this next step in the development of the human psyche as acceptance leading to a reconnection with the self. In the *Ring* this is symbolized by their death, but in the *Volsung Saga* it is made clear due to Sigurd's last communication with Brynhild. As previously mentioned, he attempts reconciliation with her using his gained wisdom, and he foresees his demise.

From a Jungian perspective, the hero's journey is a process of individuation. It results in a healing integration of the split that began with initial consciousness. Achieved is recognition by the ego of the unconscious resulting in a questioning of ego-self identity that allows for a dialog between inner and outer experience. The ego is transcended to the extent that there is an awareness of other aspects of self that contribute to, if not determine, one's experience and existence. Edinger writes,

The repetitive cycle of inflation and alienation is superseded by the conscious process of individuation when awareness of the reality of the ego-Self axis occurs. Once the reality of the transpersonal center has been experienced a dialectic process between ego and Self can, to some extent, replace the previous pendulum swing between inflation and alienation. But the dialog of individuation is not possible as long as the ego thinks that everything in the psyche is of its own making (103).

I argue that the hero's journey is not final, but it is a step forward. The cycle repeats itself. Each new level of integration is progressively transformed in order for psychic development to proceed. Hence, the process spirals toward personal growth.

The ring is an integral symbol of the texts. Its looped form suggests a cyclical process of another kind. From a Lacanian standpoint the ring is the chain of signifiers deriving from the phallus. As noted above, the phallus is the signifier of desire, and as such it is the signifier for lack. The phallus is not, however, the cause of desire. The cause of desire resists symbolization because it came into existence before the fact. Take, for example, the instance of a mother's breast. The infant who has yet to separate from identifying with the mother only knows her breast as part of one's self. The child has not yet made a split into consciousness and formed a subject object differentiation. After the split occurs, the memory of the nurturing gratification lacks an object because it never previously existed as one. The primal breast can never be consciously realized, and it is a cause of desire that cannot be represented in the symbolic realm. Lacan calls this the object a. The phallus, on the other hand, is symbolized. It is the other's desire – what is desired by the other – and again, the mother comes into play. As the child notices that he or she is not the only desired object in her sphere, the mother's desire becomes a commodity (Fink 101). Along with this realization comes castration: the limit, lack and loss of said desire. Julia Kristeva describes this:

Castration puts the finished touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable, which is to say, separate, always confronted by an other: *imago* in the mirror (signified) and semiotic process place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of gratifications; she is, in other words the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependencies on the mother, and the perception of this lack [*manque*] makes the phallic function a symbolic function – *the* symbolic function (101).

So, the mother may be the first signifier of the phallus, but as the child moves out into the world the symbol is displaced or takes new forms. These may be lovers, goals, consumer goods; golden treasure, swords, tarnhelms or lust for dominion over the world. These “objects” are imaginary

and as signifiers of desire they are also lacking, never a source for fulfillment. They form an endless cycle, a curse of sorts, represented in the mythic economy as the ring. The constituted band encloses a void – that which resists symbolization – the cause of desire.

IX. Conclusion

I have made deliberate choices in the organization of this paper. By presenting the medieval Germanic and Old Norse sources first, I have sought to make a similar impression on the reader as my own. I became familiar with the Norse pantheon and mythic poems before I read Wagner's libretti. As I went through Spencer's translation of the operas I found myself thinking, "Wait a minute, that's not right!" On the other hand, most if not all of the research material I have come across regarding the *Ring* has clearly investigated Wagner's sources second – they've already given him the credit for the rich symbolism he's weaved into his text.

Next, by introducing some details of Wagner's life in the context of the years he spent writing and composing the *Ring*, I have introduced the reader to some of the causes for his version of the myths and heroic sagas. In particular, the political turmoil brewing in Germany when Wagner was a young man, and the authors he associated with and read are important factors in his shaping of the storyline. These influences prompted Wagner to fashion the myth with issues that concerned him in the contemporary nineteenth century, particularly regarding the abuse of power, greed and corruption. Another important aspect was the rejection of conventional thoughts about religion, which Wagner applied by humanizing the deities – especially Wotan. When Wagner wrote the libretti he was still an idealist, hoping that the pending political revolution would usher in a utopia where his art form would reign supreme. With his exile he became disillusioned and shortly thereafter embraced the philosophy of Schopenhauer. In spite of a tremendous change in his worldview, Wagner was able to read his *Ring* text differently and chose not to change it. This is very important because it shows even though he changed details in his restructuring of the sources; the core symbolism is still present.

Through numerous examples, I have demonstrated that the symbolism in the *Ring* preexists in the Old Norse sources that Wagner drew from. Not only does the source material contain the representations so often attributed to Wagner, but also these elements are often more complex and developed in the medieval manuscripts. The gods and goddesses as projections of the psyche have a broader spectrum and are more clearly defined as archetypes. The human counterparts also encounter and tackle more issues than what are often reduced to largely romantic relationships in the *Ring*.

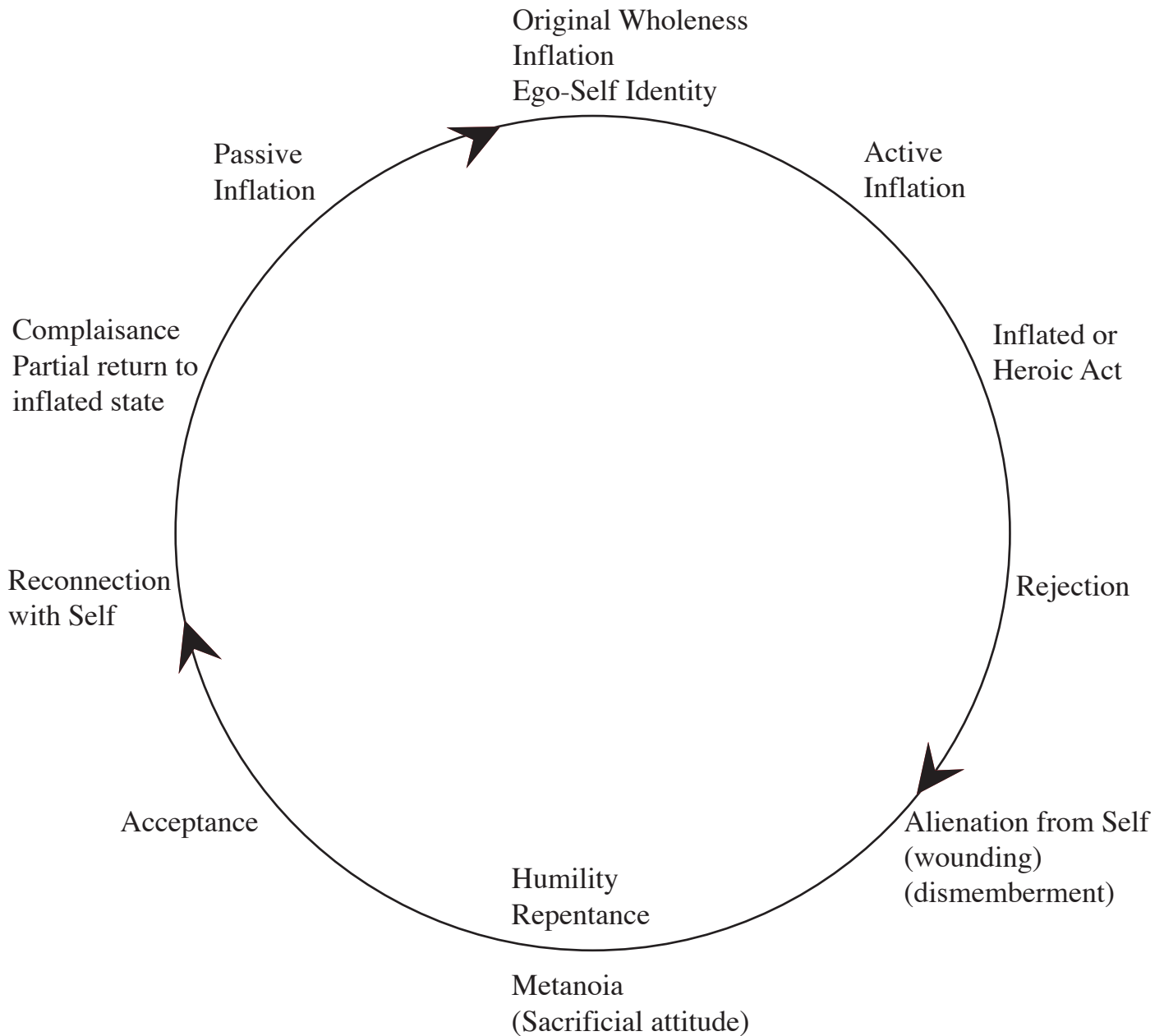
Norse pagan myth and religion offer insights into the human psyche that can be investigated in numerous ways, and I have not attempted to make a single theory. Rather, I have provided a spectrum of views from various thinkers and applied it to the symbolism common to the *Ring* and its sources. I have shown that Jungian depth psychology, with its emphasis on symbolism in dreams and myth, along with Edinger's model of psychic development fits well with the heroic journey. Freud's logic regarding taboo and magic is also fitting with elements of the texts. Lacan's insights concerning the split subject and the phallus as signifier of desire also begs mention in connection with the symbolism in the material. I have pointed to anthropological aspects symbolized, such as the patriarchal structure of the honor – shame society and the role of women within it, and also the developmental stages involving initiation and rite of passage rituals.

Although I believe I've made successful arguments in order to defend my thesis, in summary, the content of the *Ring* is so vast that it seems unreasonable to offer a satisfactory encompassing conclusion beyond my purpose of exposing and analyzing the sources of the symbolism. Indeed, Roger Hollinrake ends his essay *Epiphany and Apocalypse in the 'Ring'* by stating, "If, in the end, the trilogy cannot be reduced to any single level of meaning, this may well be a measure of Wagner's achievement and of the *Ring's* significance" (Spencer 47). The *Ring* is certainly an operatic stage work of genius, and Wagner did a compelling job of shaping elements of the Old Norse sources for nineteenth century and future audiences. However, I assert that the heroic journey depicted in the *Volsung Saga* and the character archetypes found in the *Poetic* and *Prose Edda* present considerably more symbolic insights than the *Ring* in terms of complexity, depth and a diverse representation of life's mysteries.

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Appendix I -The Psychic Life Cycle as described by Edward Edinger:



The repetitive cycle of inflation and alienation is superseded by the conscious process of individuation when awareness of the reality of the ego-self axis occurs. Once the reality of the transpersonal center has been experienced a dialectic process between ego and self can, to some extent, replace the previous pendulum swing between inflation and alienation. But the dialogue of individuation is not possible as long as the ego thinks that everything in the psyche is of its own making (103).

Source: Edinger, Edward F. *Ego and Archetype*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York. 1972. Illustration p. 41.

Appendix II. Noteworthy Old Norse mythical deities

Most of the figures listed are also characters in the *Ring*.

Some are found only in the *Ring*.

Old Norse gods and goddesses (Æsir):

Odin, the all-father, the wanderer aka many names

Frigg, foremost goddess, wife of Odin

Freyja, goddess of love and fertility, sister of Frey

Jord; earth, daughter and wife of Odin

Thor, son of Odin and Jord, strongest of all beings

Loki, Norse trickster, blood brother to Odin

Frey, god of peace and prosperity, brother of Freya

Idunn, goddess who keeps the apples of youth

Lofn, goddess of arrangements of union, i.e. marriage

The approximately two dozen additional gods and goddesses in the pantheon have no role in the *Ring*.

Old Norse giants:

The Master Builder from Giantland is a giant disguised as a smith. The giant is contracted by the Æsir to build a fortress.

Old Norse sprites:

The Rhinedaughters in the *Ring* have no direct relationship to sprites mentioned in Old Norse mythology.

Name and relation in Wagner's *Ring*:

Wotan; Wanderer, chief of gods

Fricka, guardian of marriage, wife of Wotan

Freia, goddess of love, provider of longevity

Erda, earth prophetess

Donner, god of thunder

Loge, god of fire, counselor to Wotan

Froh, brother of Freia

Fasolt
Fafner } contract the building of Valhalla

Woglinde
Wellgunde
Flosshilde } watch over the Rhine gold

Please refer to Appendix III for names and relations of other characters relevant to this study.

Sources:

Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda*. tr. Byock, Jesse L. Penguin Classics, 2005.

Spencer, Stewart. *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*. Thames and Hudson, New York. 2000.

Appendix III. Noteworthy names in *The Volsung Saga*

Most, but not all of these names are mentioned in the provided synopsis of the *Volsung Saga*.

Characters included in the *Ring* are in bold. Names and relations in the *Ring* and *Nibelungenlied* are included.

Volsungs:

Sigi, son of Odin

Rerir, son of Sigi, king of Hunland

Volsung, son of Rerir

Sigmund, son
of Volsung

Signy, daughter

Sinfjotli, son of Sigmund and Signy

Helgi, son of Sigmund by Borgny

Sigurd Fafnir's-Bane,
posthumous son of Sigmund by Hjordis

Swanhild, Sigurd's daughter, by Gudrun, Gjuki's daughter

Name and relation in
Wagner's *Ring*:

Siegmund, son
of **Wotan**

Sieglinde, daughter

Siegfried,
son of Siegmund and Sieglinde

People who deal with the Volsungs before Sigurd meets Brynhild:

Siggeir, king of Gothland, husband of Signy

Borgny, first wife of Sigmund

Hjordis, Sigmund's second wife

King Eylimi, her father

Hjalprek, king of Denmark

Alf, his son, second husband of Hjordis

Andvari, a dwarf, first owner of the hoard of the Niblungs, on which
he laid a curse when it was taken from him by Loki

Alberich, brother of Mime

Regin, the king's smith

Mime, adopts and raises Siegfried

Fafnir, his brother, turned into a dragon

Fafner, a giant turned into a dragon

Otter, his brother, slain by Loki

Hreidmar, the father of the three brothers

Continued on next page:

Appendix III. Noteworthy names in *The Volsung Saga* (continued)

Gjukings or Niblungs:

King Gjuki

Queen Grimhild, Gjuki's wife

Gunnar,

Hogni,

Guttorm,



the three sons of Gjuki

Gudrun, daughter of Gjuki,
married to Sigurd Fafnir's-Bane

Name and relation in
Wagner's *Ring*:

Gunther, king of Gibichungs

Hagen, advisor to Gunther,
son of Alberich

Gutrune, sister of Gunther,
married to Siegfried

Name and relation in
Nibelungenlied:

Gunther, senior king of Burgundy

Hagen, senior advisor to the court,
no significant family
relations

Kriemhild, sister of Gunther,
married to Siegfried

Budlungs:

King Budli

Brynhild, daughter of Budli,
(problematic because she is also a Valkyrie)
first betrothed and love of Sigurd,
wife of Gunnar

Brünnhilde, Valkyrie,
daughter of Wotan,
first betrothed to Siegfried,
married to Gunther

Brunhild, Queen of Iceland,
married to Gunther

Sources:

The Volsung Saga. Anon. tr. Magnusson, Eirikr and William M. Morris. Norraena Society, London, 1908. p. 29-30.
Spencer, Stewart. *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*. Thames & Hudson Inc. New York, 1993.
The Nibelungenlied. Anon. tr. Hatto, A. T. Penguin Classics. London, 2000.

Appendix IV – Summary of *The Thidrek Saga*

King Sigmund left his wife Sisibe in the care of two traitorous nobles. They made advances toward her, but the queen spurned them. In order to cover up their misdeeds they rode out to the returning king and claimed she had been adulterous with others in his absence. The duped king instructed them to take her into the forest and kill her. In a struggle they all fell dead, but not before she gave birth to a son and placed him in a glass case. The babe got shoved into the river and floated downstream. Eventually the casket smashed against some rocks on shore. A hind came out of the woods and suckled the boy until he grew tall and strong. One day the smith Mimir came across the boy, took him home as foster-son, and gave him the name Sigfrid. The situation didn't work out well, as Sigfrid was unruly and proved poor at smithying.

Mimir had a brother, Regin, who had been changed into a dragon and killed everyone who came upon him. Things were going so poorly that Mimir sent Sigfrid into the woods to burn charcoal hoping Regin would slay him. But when the dragon approached, Sigurd took a branch from the fire and beat the dragon dead. Sigfrid bathed in the dragon's blood, which gave him skin of armor save the spot on his back he couldn't reach. Sigfrid was hungry, so he cut up the dragon and began to cook it. He scalded his hand, and when he took it to his lips he began to understand the language of birds. The birds told him of Mimir's treachery and how Regin was Mimir's brother.

Sigfrid took the dragon's head with him home and scared off everyone except for Mimir, who tried to soothe him. Mimir gave him a suit of armor and a sword and recommended he travel to Brynhild in order to get the horse Grani. Sigfrid smote the head off of Mimir before heading off and later fought his way into Brynhild's palace. He was well received by Brynhild, who told him of his true parentage and gave him the horse. They swore an oath and were betrothed.

Sigfrid went on his way and eventually met up with the Nibelung clan. Sigfrid set aside his oath to Brynhild, married Grimhild (Gutrune), became ruler over half the kingdom, and he recommended to Gunther that the latter should marry Brynhild. When confronted by Brynhild about their troth, Sigfrid simply told her that he changed his mind and thought it

better to marry into the Nibelung family. Brynhild agreed to marry Gunther but wouldn't let him have his way with her on the wedding night. In a pact with Gunther, but unknowing to Brynhild, Sigfrid took Gunther's place in bed, wrestled her into submission, took her maidenhood, and left with her ring. The rest of the saga plays out nearly identical to the *Nibelungenlied*: a spat between the queens led to Brynhild's revelation that she was betrayed by Sigfrid, she demanded his death, and Hagen speared Sigfrid in the back.

Source: *The Volsung Saga*. Anon. Tr. Magnusson, Eiríkr and William M. Morris. Norraena Society, London. 1908. pp 167-75.

