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Wagner's use of Germanic and Norse sources in the *Ring of the Nibelung*. A clue to his Christian theology? Richard H Bell (University of Nottingham)

## I Introduction

Focus on Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs) and Icelandic sources (*Saga of the Volsungs*, *Prose Edda*, *Poetic Edda* (Elder Edda)).

## II Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung

*The Rhinegold*, *The Valkyrie*, *Siegfried*, *Twilight of the Gods* (*Götterdämmerung*).

## III Wagner's sources

1. *Nibelungenlied*. Hegel's critique of the *Nibelungenlied*: "it ascribes the ultimate bloody issue of all deeds neither to Christian Providence nor to a heathen world of gods." The work has "a stiff and undeveloped appearance, a tone of mourning, objective as it were and therefore extremely epic." "

Prünhilt: "if [Gunther] proves master in [the games], then I'll be his wife."

"... then [Prünhilt] became Gunther's wife. She said: 'Noble king, you must let me live! I will make full amends for all that I have done to you. Never again shall I defy your noble love. I have found out for certain that you can be a lady's master.' Sivrit stood back as if he wanted to take off his clothes, leaving the maiden lying there. He took a golden ring off her finger, without the noble queen ever noticing. He also took her girdle, a fine braid. I don't know if he did that out of his high spirits. He gave it to his wife; that was to cost him dear in time to come."

*Nibelungenlied*: Sivrit = Kriemhilt; Gunther = Prünhilt

Norse sources: Sigurd = Gudrun; Gunnar = Brynhild.

Ring: Siegfried = Guttrune; Gunther = Brünnhilde.

2. Icelandic sources.

*Thidreks Saga*: "And then [Sigurd] takes hold of Brynhild and quickly takes her virginity."

*Prose Edda*: "That evening Sigurd wed Brynhild. But when they got into the bed, he drew the sword Gram from its sheath and placed it between them. In the morning, after he got up and had dressed, he gave to Brynhild, as the linen fee, the gold ring that Loki had taken from Andvari."

*Sigurdarkvida in skamma* (short lay of Sigurd):

"That girl [Brynhild] loves me above every man,  
but against Gunnar I did no harm;  
I spared our kinship, our sworn oaths,  
so I shouldn't be called his wife's lover."

*Helreid Brynhildar* (Brynhild's Hel-ride):

"We slept and were happy in but one bed,  
as if he'd been born my brother;  
not at all for the space of eight nights  
did we lay one arm over another."

*Saga of the Volsungs*: “He stayed there for three nights and they slept in one bed. He took the sword Gram and lay it unsheathed between them. She asked why he put it there. He said it was fated that he must celebrate his marriage in this manner or else die.”

#### IV The Drama of *Götterdämmerung*

##### Act I Scene 3

Siegfried:

A hero who'll tame you,  
if force alone can constrain you.

Ein Helde, der dich zähmt –  
bezwingt Gewalt dich nur.

Brünnhilde:

A demon has leaped  
on to yonder stone; –  
an eagle came flying  
to tear at my flesh. (Cf Prometheus)

Ein Unhold schwang sich  
auf jenen Stein; –  
ein Aar kam geflogen  
mich zu zerfleischen! –

.....  
Siegfried:

Night draws on:  
within your chamber  
you'll have to wed me.

.....  
Die Nacht bricht an:  
in deinem Gemach  
mußt du dich mir vermählen.

Brünnhilde:

Keep away! Fear this token!  
You'll never force me into shame  
as long as this ring protects me.

Bleib' fern! Fürchte dieß Zeichen!  
Zur Schande zwing'st du mich nicht,  
so lang' der Ring mich beschützt.

Siegfried:

Let it give Gunther a husband's rights:  
be wedded to him with the ring!

Mannesrecht gebe er Gunther:  
durch den Ring sei ihm vermählt!

Brünnhilde:

Away, you robber!  
Impious thief!  
Make not so bold as to near me!  
(After Siegfried tears the ring from her)

Zurück, du Räuber!  
Frevelnder Dieb!  
Erfreche dich nicht mir zu nah'n!

Siegfried:

Now you are mine!  
Brünnhilde, Gunther's bride,  
allow me to enter your chamber!

Jetzt bist du mein!  
Brünnhilde, Gunther's Braut –  
gönne mir nun dein Gemach!

Brünnhilde:

How could you stop him,  
woman most wretched!

Was könntest du wehren,  
elendes Weib!

Then after Brünnhilde has returned to the chamber, he declares those words:

Siegfried:

Now, Nothung, attest  
that I wooed her chastely:  
keeping faith with my brother,  
keep me apart from his bride!

Nun, Nothung, zeuge du,  
daß ich in Züchten warb:  
die Treue während dem Bruder,  
trenne mich von seiner Braut!

To Röckel Wagner writes of “[t]he terrible and daemonic nature of this whole scene . . . everything collapses at Br.’s feet, everything is out of joint [Hamlet?]; she is overpowered in a terrible struggle, she is ‘Godforsaken’. And it is *Siegfried*, moreover, who in fact orders her to share his couch with him – *Siegfried* whom she (unconsciously – and therefore all the more

bewilderingly) almost recognizes, by his gleaming eye, in spite of his disguise. (You feel that something ‘inexpressible’ is happening here, and so it is very wrong of you to ask me to speak out on the subject!)”

#### Act II Scene 2

Gutrune:

So you overcame the intrepid woman?

So zwang’st du das kühne Weib?

Siegfried:

She yielded to Gunther’s strength.

Sie wich – Gunther’s Kraft.

Gutrune:

And yet she was wed to you?

Und vermählte sie sich dir?

Siegfried:

Brünnhild’ obeyed her husband  
for the whole bridal night.

Ihrem Mann [Gun] gehorchte Brünnhild’  
eine volle bräutliche Nacht.

Gutrune:

But you yourself were deemed her husband?

Als ihr Mann doch galtest du?

Siegfried:

Siegfried stayed with Gutrun’.

Bei Gutrune weilte Siegfried.

Gutrune:

But Brünnhild was at his side?

Doch zur Seite war ihm Brünnhild’?

Siegfried:

Twixt east and west – the north:

Zwischen Ost und West der Nord:

(*pointing to sword*)

so close was the distance between them?

so nah’ – war Brünnhild’ ihm fern.

#### Act II Scene 4

Siegfried: “It was not from a woman / the ring came to me, / nor was it a woman / from whom I took it: / I recognize clearly / the spoils from the fight / which I once won at Neidhöhl’ / when slaying the mighty dragon.”

Brünnhilde (in her “godforsakenness”):

Hallowed gods!

Heil’ge Götter!

Heavenly rulers!

Himmlische Lenker!

Was this what you whispered  
within your council?

Rauntet ihr dieß  
in eurem Rath?

Would you teach me suffering  
as none yet suffered?

Lehrt ihr mich Leiden  
wie keiner sie litt?

Brünnhilde (to what is she referring?):

He forced delight  
from me, and love.

Er zwang mir Lust  
und Liebe ab.

Brünnhilde: “Nothung, rested / serenely against the wall / while its master won him his sweetheart.”

Porges: her final words (“Wohl kenn’ ich . . . sich gewann”) “in which she voices her seething emotions in tones of biting irony fused with unutterable tenderness, should be veiled: she is referring to a secret known only to Siegfried and herself.”

## Act III Scene 1

Rhinemaids: "A proud-hearted woman / will be your heir today, you wretch / she'll give us a fairer hearing. / To her! To her! To her!"

## Act III Scene 3

Gutrune: "Brünnhilde's laughter / woke me up. - - / Who was the woman / I saw going down to the shore? - / (After seeing that Brünnhilde is not in her room): "So it was she / whom I saw going down to the Rhine?"

Brünnhilde:

Purer than sunlight  
streams the light from his eyes:  
the purest of men it was  
who betrayed me!  
False to his wife (i.e. Brünnhilde)  
- true to his friend - (i.e. Gunther)  
from her who was faithful  
- she alone who was loyal -  
he sundered himself with his sword.  
Never were oaths  
more nobly sworn;  
never were treaties  
kept more truly;  
never did any man  
love more loyally:  
and yet every oath,  
every treaty,  
the truest love -  
no one betrayed as he did!  
Do you know why that was so? -  
(*looking upwards*)  
Oh you, eternal  
guardians of oaths!  
Direct your gaze  
on my burgeoning grief:  
behold your eternal guilt!  
Hear my lament,  
most mighty of gods! [ie Wotan]  
By the bravest of deeds,  
which you dearly desired,  
you doomed him  
who wrought it to suffer  
the curse to which you in turn succumbed: -  
it was I whom the purest man  
had to betray,  
that a woman might grow wise.  
Do I know what you need?  
All things, all things, all things I know,  
I am free in respect to everything.

Wie Sonne lauter  
strahlt mir sein Licht:  
der Reinste war er,  
der mich verrieth!  
Die Gattin trügend  
- treu dem Freunde -  
von der eig'nen Trauten  
- einzig ihm theuer -  
schied er sich durch sein Schwert. -  
Ächter als er  
schwur keiner Eide;  
treuer als er  
hielt keiner Verträge;  
laut'rer als er  
liebte kein and'rer:  
und doch alle Eide,  
alle Verträge,  
die treuste Liebe -  
trog keiner wie er! -  
Wiss't ihr wie das ward?

O ihr, der Eide  
ewige Hüter!  
Lenkt eu'ren Blick  
auf mein blühendes Leid:  
erschaut eu're ewige Schuld!  
Meine Klage hör',  
du hehrster Gott!  
Durch seine tapferste That,  
die so tauglich erwünscht,  
weihtest du den,  
der sie gewirkt,  
dem Fluche, dem du verfieldest: -  
mich - mußte  
der Reinste verrathen,  
daß wissend würde ein Weib! -  
Weiß ich nun was dir frommt? -  
Alles! Alles! Alles weiß ich:  
Alles ward mir nun frei!

