Carole M. Cusack, "Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: Medieval, Pagan, Modern," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 3, no. 2 (2013): 329–52.

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org
ISSN 1179–7231

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception 3, no. 2 (2013): 329–52

Carole M. Cusack

Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

Medieval, Pagan, Modern

Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a Romantic work that draws on medieval narrative and thematic elements (e.g., the *Poetic Edda*, the *Völsunga Saga*, and the *Nibelungenlied*). Wagner's cycle is a polyvalent work of art and can be interpreted as exemplifying both secularisation, as the gods of Valhalla give way to humanity, and re-enchantment, in that its performance allows the gods of Germanic myth to "live" on stage. This article addresses the issue of reception by looking at Wagner's medievalism, the modern Heathenry movement and its use of the Pagan past as a source of legitimation, and finally by examining attendance of performances of the *Ring* as a significant secular ritual activity that engages with Pagan gods and brings them to modern audiences, Heathen and otherwise.

Wagner's epic operatic tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (henceforth the *Ring*) is a nineteenth-century romantic work, which incorporates a

Carole M. Cusack is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney.

range elements of medieval Germanic mythology into its narrative.[1] This article explores the relationship between the *Ring* and modern Germanic Heathenry. The Heathenry discussed is principally Anglophone Ásatrú, which emerged in the early 1970s as a modern Pagan response to this same seminal mythology. The *Ring* and Heathenry are alike in important ways: both are products of the modern era, yet draw upon medieval sources for legitimation; both exist in tension with modernity, and are capable of being interpreted in both modern and anti-modern ways; and both foreground the drama of the Norse gods and argue for its contemporary relevance. The supposed perennial wisdom of the ancient Norse myths and sagas informed both Wagner and contemporary Heathens, who participate in a creative valorization of the medieval past whilst residing in (and seeking to address) the modern era. Although not all Heathens approve of Wagner's approach to medieval texts or vision of the gods, there is a fascinating congruence between the approach to the past and its perceived relevance to the present, which both the *Ring* and Heathenry exhibit through their (particular and selective) reception of the Norse medieval texts.

The *Ring* demonstrates that mythology continues to have relevance for contemporary, technological, broadly post-Christian Western audiences. Luc Brisson argues that myth is a "testimony to a stage of development of the human mind, its discursive organization, and even its logic."[2] In the *Ring* Wagner modernized medieval myths in a manner relevant to his nineteenth-century public. The libretto combines sources from Norse mythology (the *Poetic Edda*, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*), Icelandic heroic sagas (*Völsunga Saga*, *Thidreks Saga*), Middle High German epic (*The Nibelungenlied*), and early modern ballads (*Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*).[3] The *Ring* depicts narrative and thematic concerns from these sources, including: the relationships between gods, giants, dwarfs and humans; warrior figures such as the Wälsung father and son duo Siegmund and Siegfried; oaths, honour, and the

[1] My thanks are due to my research assistants Simon Theobald, who did initial library searches and note-taking for this chapter, and Zoe Alderton, who assisted with editing and incorporating referee feedback. I am grateful to Don Barrett, whose tireless encouragement has contributed in no small way to my research over the years, and who has been my companion at seven *Ring* cycles to date (and Melbourne in December 2013 will be eight). May there be many more.

[2] Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 165.

[3] Stanley R. Hauer, "Wagner and the Völospá," *19th-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (1991): 52–63.

struggle between love and duty; and human fate and the ultimate eclipse of the gods.[4] Over time, productions of the cycle have communicated the myths anew to fresh audiences through changed aesthetic presentations of the operas (for example, the controversial "steampunk" staging by Patrice Chéreau at Bayreuth in 1976, with the Rhine Maidens by a huge dam, and the stage set dominated by a hydro-electric power station).[5] For scholars of contemporary religion, Wagner's cycle can be understood as exemplifying both secularisation (defined by Berger as "the process whereby sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols")[6] and the death of God and also re-enchantment and the rebirth of the gods—as a polyvalent work of art, which can be interpreted in multiple, contradictory ways.[7]

The *Ring* is a paradigmatic example of secularisation, as the gods of Valhalla give way to the dominance of humanity, exemplified by Siegfried and Brünnhilde.[8] This parallels the historical shift in the reception of texts like the medieval *Eddas*. In their original context, the *Eddas* contained ritual and religion, but they later came to be valued as art and literature, rather than for their theological content. Yet the *Ring* is also a site of re-enchantment, in that its performance caused the gods of Germanic myth to "live" on stage and to inspire modern Pagans, who began reviving their worship around the same time that the *Ring* first dazzled audiences at Bayreuth, in 1876.[9] The medievalist aesthetics of subsequent productions, and the mythic and archety-

[4] Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding An Ending: Reflections on Wagner's* Ring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–12. When Wagner's version of the tale is compared to more traditional treatments (e.g., music ensemble Sequentia's *The Rheingold Curse* [Marc Aurel Edition No. 20016, 2001], a setting of the Eddic poems), the extent of his innovation and modernisation of the narrative is apparent (particularly in his portrayal of the tragic deity Wotan, and his beloved daughter, the heroic Valkyrie Brünnhilde). See Edward R. Haymes, "The Germanic *Heldenlied* and the Poetic *Edda*: Speculations on Preliterary History," *Oral Tradition* 19, no. 1 (2004): 43–62; and Michael P. Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (2006): 629–48.

[5] Carmel Raz, "Wagnerpunk: A Steampunk Reading of Patrice Chéreau's Staging of *Der Ring des Niebelungen* (1876)," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2011): 91–107.

[6] Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969 [1967]), 107.

[7] Mark Poster, "What Does Wotan Want? Ambivalent Feminism in Wagner's *Ring*," *New German Critique* 53 (1991): 131–48.

[8] John Deathridge, "Wagner and the Post-modern," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992): 143–61.

[9] Jonathan Carr, *The Wagner Clan* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 43.

pal significance that the cycle has acquired within popular discourse, along with the ritual dimensions of attending performances of the *Ring* worldwide, make it one of the most significant sites of aesthetic medievalism and representation of the Norse Pagan gods in modern culture.[10]

In order to elucidate the *Ring* in tandem with Heathenry, this article is comprised of three sections. The first introduces Richard Wagner's debt to medieval sources in the creation of the *Ring*, and his own contribution to modern medievalism. Medievalism refers to "how and why various individuals and institutions have chosen to engage with the Middle Ages," and it is acknowledged that very different motives may inspire, and outcomes may result, from such engagement.[11] The second part sketches the history, beliefs and practices of revived Northern Paganism, variously known as Heathenry, Ásatrú, Odinism, and a range of other names.[12] When considered together, these two sections reveal interesting consistencies between the ways both Wagner and contemporary Heathens have utilised medieval culture. The third section draws on the author's attendance at performances of Wagners *Ring* cycle in Australia, Europe, and the United States from 2004 to 2012, and on insights from modern Heathens, who exhibit strikingly different approaches and reactions to the *Ring*. These range from outright rejection of the *Ring* as divergent from the medieval sources and tainted by nineteenth-century Romanticism, to acceptance of it as a powerful representation of the deities and cosmology of the Norse Pagan religion. It is clear that—whether their evaluation of the *Ring* is positive or negative—Heathens value medieval narrative and Norse mythology highly, and perceive these texts as major sources of identity. This is especially important in terms of their eclectic uses of the medieval and ambivalent attitude to modernity. The Heathen community may not have a unanimous view of Wagner's work, yet the relationship the *Ring*'s narrative has with medieval Norse texts is similar to that which Heathens have developed the medieval past and the recreated rituals and beliefs that they deem relevant in the contemporary world.

[10] Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). See especially chapters 5, 6, and 7, on productions of Wagner operas from the composer's death in 1883 to the 1930s.

[11] Elizabeth Emery, "Medievalism and the Middle Ages," in *Defining Medievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso, Studies in Medievalism 17 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 78.

[12] Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1997), 53.

The *Ring*: Wagner and the Medieval Sources

The *Ring* at its premiere in 1876 comprised four operas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. Richard Wagner (1813–83) began work on an opera called *Siegfrieds Tod* in 1848, but in 1849 he was exiled for taking part in the failed Dresden uprising and fled to Switzerland. Until Ludwig II of Bavaria became his patron in 1864 Wagner endured financial hardship and domestic upheaval. When he completed the *Ring*, the god Wotan, rather than the hero Siegfried, had become central to "the drama, a figure of immense complexity, a compound of idealism … ruthlessness and cunning, a huge appetite for adventure together with a strong sense of responsibility."[13] This change in emphasis from Siegfried to Wotan was in part due to Wagner's increased interest in Icelandic sources: the twelfth-century Middle High–German *Nibelungenlied* ("Song of the Nibelungs") tells the story of Siegfried in the context of a medieval Christian world from which the Pagan gods are absent, whereas the *Prose Edda* and the *Völsunga Saga*, both thirteenth-century Old Norse texts, place Sigurd in the mythological world of the Scandinavian gods. Scholars are agreed that Wagner's use of mythological sources in the narrative of the *Ring* is unique, due to his "linking of the death of Siegfried with the fall of the gods … [enclosing] the story of the Wälsungs [within] … 'a synthetic world-myth,' placing the heroic story in an epic frame."[14] The plot of the *Ring* is summarised in the Appendix.

Wagner conceived the *Ring* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) and, as Jonathan Carr has observed, he had "some original ideas about how this colossus should be displayed; over four evenings before an audience that did not have to pay, and in a wooden building designed along the lines of a Greek theatre, which would be burned down after the last night."[15] To produce a coherent narrative, Wagner adapted and altered his sources. Some of these changes are minor; for example, Snorri Sturluson's account of the construction of Valhalla features a sole giant assisted by a powerful horse.[16] He had been promised the goddess Freyja, the sun, and the moon as payment, and was cheated by the trickster Loki (one of two figures that Wagner merged in the character of Loge), who transformed himself into a mare and seduced the

[13] Michael Tanner, "Wagner's *Ring*—How it developed," in *Ring Cycle: Mariinsky Theatre/Cardiff Millennium Centre*, ed. Caroline Leech (Cardiff: 2004), 43.

[14] Hauer, "Wagner and the Völospá," 57.

[15] Carr, *Wagner Clan*, 17.

[16] Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Tales From Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992 [1954]), 66–68.

stallion, so the giant could not complete the fortress in time. Wagner gives Freia guardianship of the apples of youth, while in Norse myths they are the responsibility of the minor goddess Iðunn, wife of the poet deity Bragi. The single giant becomes the brothers Fasolt and Fafner, and while Loge assists Wotan to cheat them of Freia, he does not transform into a mare. Greater changes include the relationships that Wagner sets up in *Rheingold*, in which Freia (Freyja), Donner (Thor) and Froh (Freyr) are the siblings of Wotan's wife Fricka (Frigg), where in the Icelandic texts the Vanir deities Freyr and Freyja are siblings and Thor is the son of Óðinn and the giantess Jorð.[17]

Jorð is etymologically identical to Erda (earth). Wotan, however, calls Erda *wala*, the equivalent of the Norse *völva* (sibyl, seeress), and his summoning of her from the subterranean depths recalls Óðinn's encounters with the sibyl in the Eddic poems *Völuspä* ("The Sybil's Prophecy") and *Baldrs draumar* ("Balder's Dreams"). The former poem, without suggesting that the *völva* is their mother, tells of the three Norns who tend the World Ash, and Wagner takes the *völva*'s refrain, "Know ye further, or how?" and adapts it in the Norns' song at the start of *Götterdämmerung*, where they ask each other, "Do you know what will become of it?," "If you know yet more," "Do you know what will come," and "If you want to know."[18] The ring itself has been adapted from *Draupnir* ("the dripper"), an arm-ring forged for Óðinn by the dwarfs Eitri and Brokk, "from which eight other rings dropped every ninth night,"[19] and which was placed by Óðinn on the funeral pyre of his son Balder.

The first three operas of the *Ring* are indebted to the medieval Old Icelandic texts, and *Götterdämmerung* is based on the *Nibelungenlied*. Edward R. Haymes has noted that the

> cursed ring is present in both the *Poetic Edda* and the *Saga of the Volsungs*, although it never plays the pivotal role that it does in Wagner. The building of the fortress is derived from Snorri's *Edda*. The love story of *Die Walküre* is derived largely from the

[17] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61, 121, 126, and 128.

[18] Lee M. Hollander (trans.), *The Poetic Edda* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004 [1962]), 4–5; Stewart Spencer (trans.) and Barry Millington (ed.), *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen: A Companion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 280–84.

[19] Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981 [1964]), 42.

> *Saga of the Volsungs*, while the conclusion of the same opera is expanded … from some clues in a song of the *Poetic Edda*.[20]

Thus, although some elements of the plot are Wagner's own (the Rhinemaidens and Alberich's fathering of Hagen, for example), it is reasonable to claim that the *Ring* is broadly faithful to the medieval sources. Haymes observed that the author of the *Nibelungenlied* "set out to explore ethical and political questions of his time using a traditional story."[21] For Wagner, similarly, "the Middle Ages, the world of the sagas, the *Edda*, and the *Nibelungenlied*, were not fairy-land, a realm of escape … [but] rather a field in which to explore contemporary—and eternal—problems."[22] This conviction is important as it parallels the Pagan tendency to seek answers to modern human questions of meaning in the medieval past, however that past may be imagined.

While Wagner did not deliberately embellish the content of his medieval sources, it is important to recall that he was concerned to promote the contemporary relevance of Norse mythology for the nineteenth century, which meant that it was presented in a Romantic manner. Romanticism is a complex historical and cultural movement, beginning in the eighteenth century as a reaction to the Enlightenment. The Romantic may involve, but is not exhausted by, phenomena such as "a love of the exotic, a revolt from Reason, an exaggeration of individualism, a liberation of the unconscious, a reaction against scientific method, a revival of pantheism, … a rejection of artistic preferences, a preference for emotion, [and] a movement back to nature."[23] Modern Pagan movements owe much to Romanticism, in that members were influenced by Romantically tinged counter-cultural values of the 1960s, including the "tendency to privilege internal over external authority and experience over belief."[24] Medieval Norse texts functioned, both for Wagner and for modern Heathens, as a prism through which feelings and actions in the world might be comprehended. Wagner made small changes to the sources, due to his conviction that the stories therein embodied wisdom. This perception is shared by the Heathen community, and has informed their ideas on both the value of Norse mythology and the construction of the past.

[20] Edward R. Haymes, "*Ring of the Nibelung* and the *Nibelungenlied*: Wagner's Ambiguous Relationship to a Source," in Fugelso, *Defining Medievalism(s)*, 220–21.

[21] Haymes, "*Ring of the Nibelung*,"' 238.

[22] Hauer, "Wagner and the Völospá," 63.

[23] Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic, and Modern* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 13.

[24] Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 22.

Modern Heathenry: The Return of the Norse Gods

The Pagan revival has its roots in Romanticism and the nineteenth century fascination with the occult (and thus shares a common milieu of origin with the *Ring*), but took on definite forms only in the mid-twentieth century. Modern Witchcraft (known as Wicca or the Craft), an organized revival of Celtic Paganism, is directly traceable to Gerald Brousseau Gardner (1884–1964), a civil servant who retired to England in 1936 after living and working in Borneo and Malaya. He was a folklorist, naturist, and Rosicrucian, who claimed to have been initiated into a traditional coven in the New Forest in 1939. Wicca as founded by Gardner was a form of Paganism focused on the worship of the Goddess and her consort the Horned God, organized in covens led by a High Priest and High Priestess, and with three levels of initiation.[25] Gardner's books, including *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), made Wicca more widely known, and the 1960s and 1970s saw the rapid expansion of Paganism. Gardner claimed that Wicca was an authentic survival of pre-Christian religion, but Wicca and its daughter Pagan traditions are now acknowledged to be "invented religions.'[26] This does not usually pose problems for modern Pagans, nor does it render questionable the authenticity of contemporary Pagan praxis. This is an interesting parallel with contemporary medievalism, which also emerged from both Romanticism and the 1960s counter-culture, and offers a rich and nuanced alternative to modernity.

Ásatrú ("those true to the gods"), a form of modern Germanic Heathenry, emerged in America in the early 1970s, when Stephen McNallen decided consciously to worship the Scandinavian gods and goddesses. He has reminisced about his religious quest:

> I decided to follow the gods of the Vikings in either 1968 or 1969, during my college years. This decision arose from two things: my perception that the God of the Bible was a tyrant and that his followers were willing slaves, and an admiration for the heroism and vitality of the Norsemen as depicted in popular literature.… My devotion to Odin and the other gods and god-

[25] Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–2.

[26] Michael York, "Invented Culture/Invented Religion: The Fictional Origins of Contemporary Paganism," *Nova Religio* 3, no. 1 (1999): 135–46.

> desses remained a private and lonely faith for about two years.... Soon, however, I felt the need to find others like myself.[27]

McNallen founded the Viking Brotherhood in 1972, and this group was recognised as a religious organization for tax purposes in the United States in 1973. In 1976 the Ásatrú Free Assembly was inaugurated, after McNallen encountered the term *Ásatrú* in Magnus Magnusson's popular historical work, *Hammer of the North*.[28] At much the same time, groups in Britain and Iceland also formed, and over the last forty years Heathenry has spread throughout the Western world.

Other modern Germanic Pagan groups include: the Runic Society (1974, founded by N. J. Templin); the Ring of Troth (1987, founded by Edred Thorsson and James Chisholm); and the Ásatrú Alliance that succeeded the Ásatrú Free Assembly (1987, founded by Valgard Murray).[29] British organizations include the Odinic Rite (1973, founded by John Yeowell), which divided into two groups of the same name in the 1990s, and the Icelandic group the Ásatrúarmenn (1973, founded by Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson).[30] There is also Theodish Belief, founded in 1976 by self-appointed sacral king Garman Lord, which relies less on Scandinavian sources, and seeks to revive the traditions of the Anglo-Saxons.[31] Some of these organizations are involved in right-wing politics and espouse racist beliefs;[32] yet, even in those that are not, there is debate between "universalist" Germanic Heathens and "folkish" Germanic Heathens, with the former asserting that the religion should be made available to all who wish to convert, and the latter favouring a "cultural" fit between the adherent and the faith.[33] This dispute maps onto the issue of

[27] Stephen A. McNallen, "Three Decades of the Ásatrú Revival," *Tyr: Myth, Culture, Tradition* 2 (2003–4): 205–6.

[28] McNallen, "Three Decades," 203.

[29] J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale, 1999), 806–7, 826–27.

[30] Jenny Blain, "Heathenry, the Past, and Sacred Sites in Today's Britain," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 193.

[31] See Garman Lord, *The Way of the Heathen: A Handbook of Greater Theodism* (New York: THEOD, 2000).

[32] See Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997) and Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) for the situation in the United States.

[33] Lauren Bernauer, "The Division of Modern Germanic Heathenry," honours dissertation, University of Sydney, 2004.

whether ritual and belief can be based on eclectic sources, or be strictly determined by the surviving, culture-specific, resources (and thus involves the issue of reception of the medieval Norse texts by modern Heathens).

Of importance for Heathen attitudes to the primary sources for the religion is the fact that in Germanic Heathenry academic excellence and painstaking scholarship are respected, and in some groups, explicitly encouraged. There is an emphasis within Heathenry on the careful use of medieval texts in ritual and theology. Edred Thorsson (co-founder of the Ring of Troth) has a doctorate and is a published scholar on runes and related subjects under his birth-name Stephen Flowers, and Kveldulfr Gundarsson, under his birth-name Stephan Grundy, is a best-selling novelist and holds an Oxford doctorate on Óðinn as lord of death.[34] Stephen Flowers argues that in revived Germanic Paganism there are three sources of authority: "1) historical tradition; 2) environmental observation; and 3) personal experience."[35] Despite this professed openness to sources other than medieval texts, Heathenry is a learned form of revived Paganism, with enthusiasm for ritual conducted in medieval languages, and a commitment to "live the ancient faith of Odinism is all its holy manifestations."[36] It is acknowledged that all forms of modern Paganism are "invented traditions,"[37] but in terms of scruples regarding sources, the position of Heathenry (in contradistinction to Paganism generally, or the New Age) is one that emphasises careful and scholarly, rather than liberal and eclectic, engagement with the medieval texts.

Heathenry has common roots with Wicca, as both are traceable to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nature- and craft-oriented groups like the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry and the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.[38] However, Heathens generally demarcate their faith sharply from both Wiccans and Eclectic Pagans (who are often closer to the New Age in their attitude to a wide range of inspirational texts and practices, drawing upon fiction, indigenous rituals, multiple pantheons, Eastern religious concepts,

[34] Graham Harvey, "Heathenism: A North European Pagan Tradition," in *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman (London: Thorsons, 1996), 59.

[35] Stephen Flowers, "Revival of Germanic Religion In Contemporary Anglo-American Culture," *The Mankind Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 283.

[36] Flowers, "Revival of Germanic Religion," 286.

[37] Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

[38] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162–170, 216.

and other alternative spiritual ideas). Heathens usually stick closely to the sources of tradition, and minimise those elements of play and inventiveness that characterize Eclectic Pagans and New Agers. Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis acknowledge the variety within Heathenry, and the existence of "unusual personal gnosis" among members, but concentrate on those elements shared by all Heathens; they argue that the nine-world cosmology of the *Eddas*, the Aesir and Vanir families of gods, the World Tree, and the Norns as spinners of fate, are crucial tenets.[39] The existence of land spirits testifies to the widespread conviction that the physical world is spiritually charged, and the celebration of the three ancient seasonal festivals that are attested in the medieval sources, *Vetrnaeter* ("winter nights"), *Jul* ("Yule"), and *Sigrblót* ("victory sacrifice") also unites modern Heathens.[40] Harvey also notes that priests facilitate ceremonies, and runes (*galdr*) and *seiðr*), a form of magic taught to Óðinn by Freyja and interpreted by contemporary Heathens as shamanic trance-work, are important ways of connecting with the divine.[41]

Michael Strmiska's research emphasizes certain elements of the Nordic Paganism that enable fruitful dialogue with Wagner's operatic cycle through the lens of reception. He describes the rituals of *Blót* and *Sumbel*. The *Sumbel* is a drinking ritual, in which assembled Heathens drink mead or some other alcoholic beverage, and

> a series of toasts are made, offering verbal tribute first to the Norse gods and supernatural beings, then to others. Oaths may also be made … [which] are considered consecrated and powerful and are visualized as entering the Well of Wyrd, the matrix of time and fate in Norse cosmology.[42]

This description calls to mind the scene in *Götterdämmerung*, when Gutrune gives Siegfried a drink that causes him to fall in love with her, and to forget Brünnhilde. Later, during the hunt that ends with Siegfried's death, Hagen presents Siegfried with a draught that restores his memory, and he sings of the events of the first three operas.[43] In the modern context, drinking ap-

[39] Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, "Heathenry," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 416–17.

[40] Flowers, "Revival of Germanic Religion," 291.

[41] Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 61–62.

[42] Michael F. Strmiska, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 129.

[43] Spencer and Millington, *Wagner's Ring*, 339–43.

pears to be simply that, drinking. Yet in Germanic and Celtic traditions, Michael Enright has argued that it carries the greatest significance, in that when the prophetic priestess or wife of a chieftain offers drink to him and his warband she acts as oracle and "luck" of the community.[44] Further, the drinking rituals that feature in both the *Ring* and modern Heathenry are receptions of incidents like the Valkyrie offering drink in the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* ("sayings of the victory-bringer"), and Weahltheow's ritual offering of mead to all the warriors in Heorot, the hall of her husband Hrothgar in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*.[45]

The same pattern of reception can be identified when the issue of sacrifice to the gods is compared in the *Ring* and modern Heathen practice. The *Blót* involves quite similar elements to the *Sumbel*, but is presided over by a priest (*góði*) or priestess (*gyðja*), and the mead is sprinkled on participants, altars and representations of the gods, then "poured into the ground or into the fire as a final offering to the gods or ancestral spirits."[46] In Act 2, Scene 3 of *Götterdämmerung*, Hagen draws attention to the cult of the Norse gods; he advises the warriors of the Gibichung hall to slaughter "stout-limbed steers … on the altar-stone … for Wotan … a boar for Froh … a sturdy goat slay for Donner: for Fricka … you must slaughter sheep, so that she gives a goodly marriage!"[47] Models for these incidents in the surviving corpus of medieval sources include the ox sacrificed to the god Freyr in *Víga-Glúms Saga*, and the archaeological evidence of ritual feasts and horse sacrifice during the Viking Age from the Baltic island of Öland.[48]

Further areas of potential dialogue between Heathenry and the *Ring* that Strmiska notes are: Heathens drawing upon the whole corpus of surviving Germanic heroic and mythological literature, including the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, Snorri Sturluson's legendary history of the Norwegian kings, *Heimskringla*, spells like the *Merseburg Charm* and the *Nine Herbs Charm*, Tacitus's *Germania*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and works that exhibit Christian influence and offer different versions of Norse myths, such as Saxo Grammati-

[44] Michael Enright, *Lady With a Mead Cup* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996).

[45] Hollander, *Poetic Edda*, 233–40. See also Michael Swanton (ed. and trans.), *Beowulf* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997).

[46] Strmiska, "Asatru," 130

[47] Spencer and Millington, *Wagner's Ring*, 317.

[48] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (New York: Syracuse University Press), 53–55.

cus's *Gesta Danorum*.[49] This openness within the Heathen community to the full range of sources vitiates any calls for an authoritative reading of the Norse myths and a creed or statement of "official" articles of faith. Rather, it affirms a multiplicity of receptions of the surviving medieval texts, which blunts the case for Heathen disapproval of Wagner's innovative use of the texts and inventive approach to the Norse Pagan narrative.[50] A final aspect of Heathenry that merits attention is that, despite the fact that many modern Pagans are not committed to the existence of the gods and goddesses as supernatural beings in the manner that Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism claims of its God, Heathens are usually inclined to believe in the ontological reality of the Norse deities and to assert "the value and power of a self-consciously polytheistic tradition."[51]

Yet Strmiska acknowledges that some Heathens "see the gods as culturally coded symbols of important aspects of life and human nature, with Odin representing wisdom and mystical insight, Thor symbolizing valor, Tyr integrity, Frigg women's intuition, Freyja female strength and sexuality, and so forth."[52] He also notes that American Ásatrúar desire a more personal relationship with the gods, which may be influenced by evangelical and pentecostal Christianity, whereas Icelandic Heathens are "more focused on devotion to their cultural heritage."'[53] When reporting on his interviews with American Heathens, Strmiska discusses Mitch Zebrowski's founding of the Brotherhood of the Sacred Hunt (BOSH), a group dedicated to reviving the hunting rituals found in Norse texts such as the *Volsunga Saga* and *Gisli's Saga*. These rituals are viewed as initiations, and likened to Sigurd's gaining "magical powers of perception after tasting the blood of the slain dragon Fafnir."[54] The texts that underpin activities such as modern Heathen hunting are the same texts that were employed by Wagner as the basis for the lengthy hunting scene in Götterdämmerung, at the climax of which Siegfried is killed by Hagen, the half-brother of his blood-brother Gunther. Thus, for modern Heathens, the medieval motifs of the *Ring* are an important part of the con-

[49] Strmiska, "Asatru," 139–41.

[50] Stefan Arvidsson, "Greed and the Nature of Evil: Tolkien Versus Wagner," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (2011). Arvidsson discusses the different uses of the Norse tradition by Wagner, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien, and the different uses of Wagner by Lewis and Tolkien respectively.

[51] Harvey, "Heathenism," 62.

[52] Strmiska, "Asatru," 143.

[53] Ibid., 165.

[54] Ibid., 153.

struction of personal and communal identity (the gods, rituals of drinking and hunting, weapons, blood-brotherhoods, trance-work by seeresses, the power of the Norns to shape fate, and so on). Jenny Blain argues that Wagner turned the "heroic legends of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun … to his own ends, including concepts of race and nationalism that are not generally shared by Heathens today."[55] However, as has been noted, there are Heathen groups that are keenly interested in both race and nationalism, and the next section will demonstrate that some Heathens, at least, are very positive in their responses to the *Ring*.

Modern Heathens and the *Ring*

It is apparent from the sketch of Heathenry above that revived Nordic Paganism (and all manifestations of modern Paganism) manifest a tense relationship with mainstream Western culture, which is derived from Christianity and characterized by modernity. This article contends that Heathens valorise the medieval past and assert the existence of a re-enchanted world in which there is magic, and supernatural beings such as "dwarves and [other] landwights," which, as Harvey observes, "are denigrated in the disenchantment that is modernity."[56] These spiritual beliefs coexist with Heathens living contemporary lives, interacting with science, technology, medicine and finance. Krei Steinberg, a young Ásatrú woman Michael Strmiska interviewed, firmly stated her views on societal models and government, "I do NOT want to live in a ninth-century Thing system in twenty-first century New York City!"[57] This tension is congruent with that expressed in the *Ring*, in that Wagner simultaneously "herald[s] modernism, express[es] the quintessence of Romanticism, and evoke[s] primeval experience."[58] Wagner and contemporary Heathens both retain an understanding of their modern environment. Rather than rejecting modernity and retreating into fantasy, they are best read as synthesising the Romantic and the primeval into a modern framework. In this context, Norse myth and medieval sources for Germanic culture in gen-

[55] Blain, "Heathenry," 185–86.

[56] Graham Harvey, "Discworld and Otherworld: The Imaginative Use of Fantasy Literature among Pagans," in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, ed. Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 41 and 43.

[57] Strmiska, "Asatru," 149.

[58] Alastair Williams, "Technology of the Archaic: Wish Images and Phantasmagoria in Wagner," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 1 (1997), 73.

eral are used as representations of perennial wisdom that may be applied to issues of the present day.

This does not mean that all modern trends are easily synthesised with a pre-modern religion. A particular tension with regard to the staging of the *Ring* is that which exists between the modern Western tendency to represent the Norse gods in images, and the likelihood that traditional Germanic cultures eschewed this practice. The representation of the divine involves complex negotiations in almost all religious communities. The Heathen community is no exception, and has inherited debates over representation from the Norse traditions that inspired it. The Germanic tradition embraces both iconic and aniconic portrayals of the gods. Tacitus, in the Germania (ca. 98 CE), stated that there were no idols in the grove where the Nahanarvali worshipped the twin gods called the Alcis, and that the Germans did not represent the gods by moulding them "into any likeness of the human face."[59] Donald Ward has argued that these "gods" were aniconic pillars.[60] Yet, Scandinavian statues of the gods, including an ithyphallic Freyr and Thor with his hammer, are common.[61]

Contemporary Heathen commentators, well-versed in ancient and medieval sources of the religion, are aware that differences of opinion about such matters exist. Ragnar, an Australian Heathen, remarks that

> in the Northern Tradition there is not an emphasis on collecting images of the Gods, indeed the imagery is quite often far more abstract. So, pictures of mountain peaks, if they are in the right mood, can lead one to think of Tyr, but storms might lead one to think of Thorr and skulls or ravens can lead one to think of Odhinn. What you find is that Heathens will look for items or artifacts that represents the Gods particularly of those artifacts that have some origins in their tradition … these … are far more important than graphic representations of the Gods.[62]

[59] Tacitus, "Germania," in *On Britain and Germany*, ed. and trans. H. Mattingly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), 277.

[60] Donald Ward, *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 42–43.

[61] Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 6.

[62] Ragnar of Hearth Al-Þyðja of the Assembly of the Elder Troth (AET), Sydney, Australia, e-mail communication, March 13, 2007.

However, in another e-mail, Ragnar notes that a tattooist in the Northern Tradition, with whom he is acquainted, has produced remarkable images of the Heathen gods that are based on, or derivative of, the Hindu deities. The Heathen opposition to influences from other religions or ethnic groups is thoughtfully dismissed, as Ragnar argues that these images are "very good depictions" and are not "the cheesy 1970s style air-brushed macho fantasy images of the Gods that you see about." Rather, the images derive their power from the fact that "the Gods are depicted … so that the image contains all the correct symbology to spark mythic recollection."[63]

Some Heathen groups draw attention to the relevance of the textual sources of the *Ring* (for example, the Ásatrú Alliance website recommends the *Nibelungenlied* as "the heroic tale of Seigfreid [sic] of the Volsungs. This book was the basis for Wagner's Ring cycle which sparked the new awakening of our folk. Must reading").[64] The most detailed consideration of the *Ring* and its sources in a modern Heathen context is an essay by Michael Moynihan published in the traditionalist Heathen journal *Tyr*. Moynihan acknowledges that the Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied* is not an initiate of Óðinn like Sigurd, but merely a peerless warrior. However, he argues that Hagen's motives and actions mark him out as a significant "presence."

> When these are considered alongside the details of his attributes and physical appearance, a larger than life presence becomes evident: a presence no less than that of the Germanic high god Odin himself. This is not an entirely new revelation, as an investigation of … sources will turn up occasional inferences in this direction, although rarely does anyone make an overt connection.[65]

Moynihan further delineates the Odinic qualities of Hagen: he has vast knowledge, he controls the action of the story though his decisive interventions, he often intimates what fate has in store for his companions (and this foreknowledge frequently concerns death), the weapon with which he kills Siegfried is an Odinic spear, and he fights to the end despite his awareness

[63] Ragnar of Hearth Al-Þyðja of the Assembly of the Elder Troth (AET), Sydney, Australia, e-mail communication, March 15, 2007.

[64] Anon, "Book List," *Ásatrú Alliance: World Tree Publications*, http://asatru.org/wtree/BookllistCart.htm.

[65] Michael Moynihan, "Divine Traces in the Nibelungenlied, or Whose Heart Beats in Hagen's Chest?" *Tyr: Myth, Culture, Tradition* 1 (2002), 85.

of the destruction that concludes the epic. Moynihan concludes that "just as Odin must heroically fight to the death during the twilight of the gods—despite the fact that he is already aware what its catastrophic outcome will be—so too does Hagen wage his battle to the end, although he has long known that it will mean violent death for himself and his fellow men."[66]

Heathen leader Kveldulfr Gundarsson, who as Stephan Grundy has authored two best-selling novels retelling the *Nibelungenlied*, *Rhinegold* (1994) and *Attila's Treasure* (1996), has drawn attention to the multitudinous ways that the Norse myths survived the coming of Christianity to Iceland in 1000:

> the story of Sleeping Beauty, pricking her finger on a spindle to sleep for an hundred years and be awakened only by the destined hero who can force his way past an impassable barrier is told in the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, where the valkyrie Sigrdrífa (Wagner's Brünnhilde) is pricked with a sleep-thorn by Óðinn (Wotan) and must sleep until the hero Sigurðr (Siegfried) forces his way past … a ring of fire, to awaken her. It is no exaggeration to say that the native religion of Northern Europe is still a strong, if largely unseen, thread running through the culture of Northern Europe; and that the road to understanding opened by analysing our folktales in regards to what they show us of our lives and needs leads inevitably back to that native origin.[67]

This statement assigns a valuable role to all storytelling, from folk- and fairy-tales to fantasy novels and operatic libretti, that contain information about Northern tradition and may act as a stimulus for modern Western people to re-connect with the gods of the medieval Norse. If the *Nibelungenlied* can be read as authentically Heathen in this way, the *Ring* can, too; thus, Heathen and novelist Diana L. Paxson, despite being critical of Wagner's characterisation of the Norse goddesses, says that "in the *Ring* operas Richard Wagner succeeded in bringing to life the world of Germanic legend. His Wotan, especially, speaks (or rather, sings) with the voice of the god."[68]

Given that many Heathens agree that the Gods can be depicted and that the viewing of appropriate symbols may evoke experiences of the gods, inter-

[66] Moynihan, "Divine Traces," 99.

[67] Gundarsson, *Wotan: The Road to Valhalla*, n.d., http://www.scribd.com/doc/101384565/23272714-Kveldulf-Hagan-Gundarsson-Wotan-the-Road-to-Valhalla.

[68] Diana L. Paxson, "Beloved," *Hrafnar: Twenty Years of Re-Inventing Heathenry*, http://www.hrafnar.org/articles/dpaxson/asynjur/frigg/.

preting the *Ring* as a particular site of medievalist re-enchantment, in which the gods are made visible to modern audiences, is a logical move. This aspect of the *Ring* is most clearly apparent in realisations that emphasize the medieval and mythological elements. The best example is Otto Schenk's ultra-traditional production, which ran for twenty years at the Metropolitan Opera in New York to 2009, delighting audiences with its literal, medievalist vision of Wagner's epic. "When Wagner notes in his stage directions that the sky glimmers, then there is a glimmer across the Met's proscenium-arched sky. When he orders lightning, lightning is duly provided … with epic set changes to match the scale of the music, its romantic mountain and forest settings."[69] When Gundarsson's notion that narratives can serve as agents of conversion to Heathenry is connected to Ragnar's comments about the need for depictions of the gods to feature appropriate symbols, the Schenk *Ring* was, for Heathens, a legitimate and authentic depiction of the gods and the cosmic drama of the northern world.

A similarly mythically and atmospherically powerful staging was that of George Tsypin, whose *Ring* (with the Mariinsky Theatre, conducted by Valery Gergiev), was staged in Cardiff in December 2006. Wagner's desire that the *Ring* be conceptualised as a "preliminary evening and three days" and seen over four consecutive days, was here realized to great emotional intensity. Music critic Ed Vulliamy noted that "the leitmotifs work over four nights … when Siegfried returns through the fire a second time to betray Brünnhilde, the recapitulation of the theme from his first quest in pursuit of her is unbearably painful, coming just 24 hours after her glorious (and gloriously sung) awakening and their passionate love duet."[70] In addition to this musical intensity, the set—which Tsypin and Gergiev constructed with Ossetian mythology and motifs in mind—was dominated by four megaliths, and evoked the Neolithic Europe of Stonehenge and the origins of the Proto-Indo-European people in the Caucasus, facilitating an authentically mythic cycle. In an interview, Tsypin told Caroline Leech that, "I had this image of an amazing *Ring* which looks towards Asia, towards the Russian steppes. I had a sense of this ancient Russia—an almost archaic barbaric perception of that culture."[71] Tsypin's *Ring* did not look explicitly toward the North,

[69] Ed Pilkington, "The Met's Ring Cycle: Wagner As It's Meant To Be?" *The Guardian*, May 12, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/may/12/met-wagner-ring-cycle.

[70] Ed Vulliamy, "I dream of Brünnhilde … Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Opera cast a glorious four-night spell over Cardiff," *The Observer*, December 10, 2006, 13.

[71] Caroline Leech, "Interview with George Tsypin, *Ring* Cycle Designer," in *Ring Cycle:*

but to a related Indo-European tradition (like the tattooist discussed by Ragnar) and resulted in a thrillingly Pagan atmosphere, with a prehistoric set, and medievalism informing the costumes, weapons, and other elements of the staging. The Tsypin production itself embodied the principles of the Romantic rejection of modernity and evoked an ancient esoteric tradition in a pre-industrial landscape of epic proportions.

Finally, attendance at the *Ring* has often been highlighted as an example of spiritual tourism or secular pilgrimage, and recent scholarship has developed the notion that artworks, both exhibited in museums and galleries (building that are in certain ways reminiscent of temples and sacred spaces) and as performances, frequently take on a spiritual quality for modern secular individuals.[72] The 2004 *Ring* staged in Adelaide, by the State Opera of South Australia, with the Dutch bass-baritone John Bröcheler as Wotan and Australian soprano Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde, was the first *Ring* that the author attended. It featured a remarkable set by Michael Scott-Mitchell, which was distinguished by a combination of realistic effects (the ten-metre water-curtain simulating the Rhine that "circulate[d] 20,000 litres of water from below the stage to a tower above, where it [was] released onto an opaque plastic screen before being collected and recycled," and the circle of real flames surrounding Brünnhilde on the mountain) and abstract stylization (the gleaming white space-age costumes of the gods in the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*).[73] The ritual dimensions of attending Wagner operas have principally been explored in the context of travel to Bayreuth and attendance at the *Festspielhaus*, but like other recurring sites of attendance in secular modernity (the Olympics, the World Cup, and World Youth Day)[74] that have attracted scholarly attention, productions of the *Ring* the world over

Mariinsky Theatre/Cardiff Millennium Centre, ed. Caroline Leech (Cardiff, 2004), 46.

[72] See Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*, Continuum Advances in Religious Studies (London and New York: Continuum, 2011); Richard Shusterman, "Art and Religion," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 3 (2008): 1–18; Crispin Paine (ed.), *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000).

[73] Nance Haxton, "'Ring Cycle' Draws Wagner Enthusiasts to Adelaide," *Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC)*, http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2004/s1236235.htm.

[74] See Alex Norman and Carole M. Cusack, "The Religion in Olympic Tourism," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 10, no. 2 (2012): 124–36; Michael R. Real, "Super Bowl Football Versus World Cup Soccer: A Cultural-Structural Comparison," in *Media, Sports, and Society*, ed. Lawrence A. Wenner (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1989), 180–203; Alex Norman and Mark Johnson, "World Youth Day: The Creation of a Modern Pilgrimage Event for Evangelical Intent," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 371–85.

attract those who have a quasi-devotional attitude to Wagner's epic operatic work. Over nine years, attending Ring cycles in Australia, the United States, and Europe, the presence of Heathens was visible amongst the audience of regular operagoers. Their presence was signalled by the valknut and Thor's hammer pendants and tattoos that they sported, and the rather incongruous biker leathers that many wore, despite the formality of attire of most of the attendees, and the understated classiness of the event context.[75]

Conclusion

This article has argued that Wagner's *Ring* is a major site of medievalist aesthetics in the modern era, and that the mythic and archetypal significance that the cycle has acquired, along with the ritual dimensions of attending performances of the *Ring* worldwide, make it an important representation of the Norse gods and mythology for modern Heathens. The medieval sources for the *Ring* and Heathenry were examined, and the affinities between the *Ring* as a modern artwork from the nineteenth century which revived Norse mythology, and revived Heathenry as a modern religion with its roots in the nineteenth century, were explored. In assessing the reception of the *Ring* and its medieval sources by Heathens, the role of Romanticism is crucial. Wagner was a thoroughgoing Romantic. Ragnar noted that there was a range of Heathen responses to Wagner, and that negative assessments often claimed that "[the *Ring*] is too bound up with nineteenth-century Romanticism … [and is tainted by] Christianity, Humanism and Scientism."[76] In the same email he acknowledged the seriousness with which Ásatrú leaders like Paxson and Gundarsson take the *Ring*, and concludes that certain Heathens of all stripes (universalist, folkish, reconstructionst) find value in Wagner.

Kveldulfr Gundarsson is entirely positive in his assessment of the effectiveness of the *Ring* as a Pagan artwork. Speaking of the god Wotan he comments,

> but his career was not over when his worship ended. As soon as the expansions of the nineteenth century led nations to look

[75] Alan B. Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 5, no. 1 (1982): 30–37; Mary A. Stanfield and Robert E. Klein III, "Ritual, Ritualized Behavior, and Habit: Refinements and Extensions of the Consumption Ritual Construct," *Advances in Consumer Research* 17, no. 1 (1990): 31–38.

[76] Ragnar of Hearth Al-þyðja of the Assembly of the Elder Troth (AET), Sydney, Australia, e-mail communication, March 13, 2007.

> within themselves and seek to define their own cultures, their own strengths and characters, he appeared again: dominating the music of a turning century as he had once dominated the poems of the Vikings, firing the imagination in this new age as he had once fired that of the old—standing on the opera stage as the chief protagonist of Richard Wagner's *Ring* Cycle, the wise, furious, but ultimately doomed god, in which incarnation he is best known today.[77]

Thus it is concluded that although some Heathens reject the *Ring* outright as divergent from the medieval sources and tainted by nineteenth-century Romanticism, others accept it as a powerful representation of the deities and cosmology of the Norse Pagan religion. For those opera-goers who are not Heathen (the majority of the audience) the *Ring* is still important ritually, as it is almost the only site in the modern world where the gods of the Norse pantheon are portrayed with seriousness and passion, and where the power of Norse mythology can be appreciated both philosophically and aesthetically. As this article has demonstrated, both the *Ring* and modern Heathenry arise from Romantic, anti-Christian, modern, and secular stimuli. They reflect contradictory societal trends that Wagner and the modern Heathen community both endorsed and rejected; thus the *Ring* is modern, as is Heathenry, yet the *Ring* is medieval (in the sense of looking backward to an idealized past), as is Heathenry. The *Ring* is secular, whereas Heathenry is religious, but it is important to acknowledge that the rise of alternative religions and spiritualities in modernity is made possible only by the secular state and the retreat of Christianity as the normative religion of the West. While a study of Heathen receptions of the *Ring* illuminates divergent understandings, both Wagner's operatic text and the Heathen community can be viewed as perceiving medieval Norse mythology as a source of wisdom and enduringly relevant narrative.

Appendix

The plot of the *Ring* is as follows. In *Das Rheingold* ("The Rhine Gold"), Wotan has commissioned the giants Fasolt and Fafner to construct a palace, Valhalla, and offered them Freia, the goddess of love and custodian of the apples of youth, in payment. As he is bound by treaties, carved onto his spear

[77] Gundarsson, *Wotan*.

(which is made from a branch of the World Ash tree), Wotan and the fire god Loge descend to Nibelheim, a subterranean realm ruled by Alberich, the thief of the gold of the Rhinemaidens (three nymphs, the daughters of the river god). Alberich's brother Mime, a smith, forged two treasures from the gold, the Tarnhelm, which enables its wearer to take on any shape, and the Ring, possession of which makes the wearer ruler of the world. Wotan and Loge steal the treasure and offer it to the giants as payment. Fasolt (who loves Freia) demands that she must be entirely hidden by the gold, so Wotan has to add the Tarnhelm and the Ring to the pile. After the deal is struck Fafner kills Fasolt, the first manifestation of bad fortune associated with the Ring, and the gods ascend the rainbow bridge to their new dwelling. At the end of *Das Rheingold*, after Erda (the primordial earth goddess) has prophesied doom and the Rhinemaidens beg plaintively for the return of their treasure, "Wotan faces two terrible problems … How can he restore the gold to the Rhinemaidens without breaching his contract with Fafner? How can he prevent Alberich, Mime, or anyone else from taking possession of the Ring and thereby gaining its power?"[78]

Die Walküre ("The Valkyrie") opens with the incestuous love of the Wälsung twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, fathered by Wotan in his attempt to beget a hero free from the restraints of treaties, honour and responsibility, that he was unable to act against.[79] Wotan's wife Fricka, goddess of marriage and upholder of convention and morality, demands that Siegmund die in his combat with Sieglinde's husband Hunding. Wotan is torn, but counsels his favourite daughter Brünnhilde, a Valkyrie whose mother is Erda, to enact Fricka's will and uphold the sacred contract of marriage, where initially he had told her to ensure Siegfried's safety. Brünnhilde, convinced she knows what her father really wants and impressed by the love of Siegmund for Sieglinde, decides to defy Wotan and save the hero. However, Wotan appears on the battlefield and shatters Siegmund's sword.[80] Brünnhilde flees

[78] Peter M. Wolrich, "Wagner's *Ring* Interpreted in Light of Legal Principles," *Law and Literature* 14, no. 1 (2002), 37.

[79] Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner: His Life, Art and Thought* (London: Panther Books, 1983 [1979]), 197.

[80] Jesse L. Byock notes that the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* "refers to the progenitor of the race of heroes as Waels" and argues that Sigurd (the Scandinavian Siegfried) is associated with two historical figures, "Arminius, a leader in the first century A.D. of the Cherusci, a Germanic tribe … [and] the sixth-century Frankish King Sigibert. In both instances the connection is highly conjectural" (*The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1990], 22).

with Sieglinde who is pregnant, and the broken sword, to her eight warrior sisters for aid. They refuse for fear of Wotan, and Sieglinde escapes alone to the eastern forest where Fafner, transformed into a dragon, guards the Nibelung hoard. Wotan, suffering terribly from grief and loss, puts Brünnhilde to sleep on a remote rock, and summons Loge to raise a ring of fire to guard her. Her fate is to be awakened by a hero who braves the flames, and to then live as a mortal woman.[81]

Siegfried opens with the Nibelung Mime attempting to re-forge Siegmund's sword. Siegfried asks him about his mother, and Mime explains that she died in childbirth. Siegfried goes off into the forest, and Wotan (in the guise of the aged Wanderer) challenges Mime to a battle of wits, which Mime loses (as he failed to ask how to re-forge the sword). The Wanderer reveals that only one who knows no fear will be able to do this. Here Wagner closely follows the Eddic poem, *Vafþrúðnismál* ("Sayings of Vafþrúðnir"), in which Óðinn engages in a contest of wits with the giant Vafþrúðni. The questions are of a cosmological nature, and the giant's head is forfeit when he does not know "what Óðinn had whispered into Balder's ear before he went to the funeral pyre."[82] The Wanderer departs, Siegfried returns and reforges the sword Nothung. Mime then takes him into the forest to kill Fafner. Outside Fafner's lair the Wanderer meets Alberich and alerts him to Mime's intentions; they try to warn Fafner to no avail, and depart. Siegfried kills Fafner, and after tasting his blood understands the song of a wood-bird who sings that Mime intends to kill him. Siegfried kills Mime, and taking only the Tarnhelm and the Ring, pursues the wood-bird. Wotan summons Erda, who tells him that Brünnhilde possessed the wisdom he needs so desperately; he then encounters the fearless youth who shatters his spear. Siegfried finds Brünnhilde, experiences fear for the first time, and awakens her. They sing an ecstatic duet, "granted the fulfillment and consummation of their new love."[83]

Götterdämmerung ("Twilight of the Gods") begins with the Norns (Fates), the three daughters of Erda, weaving the rope of destiny and singing of Wotan's felling of the World Ash. When the rope breaks they descend into

[81] Thomas May, "The Ring of the Nibelung: A Look at Wagner's Masterpiece," *San Francisco Opera Magazine* 88, no. 4 (2011), 53.

[82] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1964), 10.

[83] James Conlon, "Wagner's Heroic Scherzo," *LA Opera Performances Magazine* (June 2010), 6.

the earth, to their mother. Upon the rock, Siegfried leaves Brünnhilde to perform heroic deeds. He gives her the Ring and she gives him her wisdom and her horse, Grane. At the hall of the Gibichungs on the Rhine, Gunther and his sister Gutrune are persuaded by their malevolent half-brother Hagen (the son of Alberich) to marry Brünnhilde and Siegfried respectively. When Siegfried arrives Gutrune serves him a drink that makes him forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with her. Meanwhile, Brünnhilde is visited by Waltraute who tells her of Wotan's passive desire for the passing of the reign of the gods. Brünnhilde, secure in Siegfried's love, declines to help her sister, who departs.[84] Using the Tarnhelm, Siegfried takes on Gunther's form and breaches the flames, seizing Brünnhilde and taking the Ring by force. She is appalled at this stranger, and upon arrival at the Gibichung hall denounces Siegfried as faithless. She and Gunther are married, as are Siegfried and Gutrune. Hagen and Gunther join in a conspiracy to kill Siegfried, and Brünnhilde reveals that his back is not protected by her spells. While out hunting, Siegfried meets the Rhinemaidens but refuses to give them the Ring, and then drinks a potion that restores his memory. Hagen spears him in the back, and he dies. At this point in the drama it becomes clear that Brünnhilde is the free agent that Wotan so desired, the hero he longed to beget, "who will act on an uncontaminated love both passionate and compassionate as he cannot."[85] She arranges Siegfried's funeral pyre, and after cursing the gods and promising the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, rides Grane into the fire to be united with Siegfried. The Rhinemaidens recover their treasure and Hagen drowns as Valhalla and the gods are engulfed in flames.[86]

[84] May, "The Ring of the Nibelung," 58.

[85] William E. McDonald, "What Does Wotan Know? Autobiography and Moral Vision in Wagner's *Ring*," *19th-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (1991), 47.

[86] Robert Bailey, "The Structure of the Ring and Its Evolution," *19th-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (July 1977): 48–61.