Unmasking Wagner's Grail:
Homoeroticism, Androgyny, and Anxiety in *Parsifal*

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Music
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2014

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Dedication

To my grandfather

Charles Wesley Miles, Sr.

in memoriam

Acknowledgements

This project has benefited from the assistance of numerous colleagues and friends, for whom I am very grateful. I would like to especially thank my advisor, Dr. Rachel Golden, for her patience and ever-willing desire to encourage me as a scholar. I owe her a great deal in introducing me to the discipline of musicology and teaching me to value clarity in my writing. Along with Rachel, Drs. Leslie Gay and Jacqueline Avila have persistently challenged me to think critically about musico-cultural phenomena and for that I thank them. Without the support of my colleagues at the University of Tennessee, I would not have been able to complete this project. Ryan Taussig was especially helpful in allowing me to discuss ideas with him when I was confronted with problems along the way. Finally, I would like to thank my family – my mother, Pamela Mitchell, father, Jim Mitchell, and grandmother, Matilda Miles – for acting as my emotional buttress and giving their financial support. My sincere gratitude goes out to you all.

Abstract

Most readings of Wagner's final music drama *Parsifal* seek to illumine a clandestine presentation of Wagner's racist doctrine or make sense of a less-shrouded but still ambiguous panegyric to Christianity. However, little scholarly material addresses Wagner's provocative account of sensuality and homoeroticism in this *Bühnenweihfestspiel* [Stage Consecration Festival Play]. This thesis explores desire and homosexuality within the drama and considers how and why Wagner masks these themes through the opaque mythos of religion, race, and community. *Parsifal* was partly informed by Wagner's own complex neuroses: his sexual anxieties and scandals, amalgam of German philosophies, and confusion concerning Germanness. As filtered through his own belief system, Wagner's *Parsifal* ambivalently presents homoeroticism, wavering between an idealized pure love and a destructive, even unnatural, force of desire.

I was initially inspired by Laurence Dreyfus's work *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, which struck me as a fresh exegesis of Wagner's oeuvre, embracing the overt sexual nature of his dramatic text, music, and philosophical writings. Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices* and Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *Wagner Androgyne* provide methodologies for narration and androgyny from which I draw. Wagner demonstrates homoerotic sensibilities through both heroic and villainous characters, within an exotic medieval Spain (and a *Zauberschloß),* and through opposing sonic worlds of communal diatonicism and chromatic sensuality. Exploring this work from a perspective energized by recent musicological gender studies and musico-textual semiotics and relations, my reading of *Parsifal* is thus primarily corrective. Wagner's final music drama offers a manifestation of love and sensuality with all the contradictions and fears of Wagner's experiences and imagination.

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Chapter 1: A Gendered Approach to Wagner

"The phallus can play its role only when veiled."
-Jacques Lacan[1]

Parsifal (1882), Wagner's most explicitly Christian work, remains a highly contentious piece in the operatic repertoire and carries many cultural perplexities. Indeed, Michael Tanner has noted with irony, "*Parsifal*, Wagner's work of peace and conciliation, has been and remains the subject of even more bitter contention than any of his other works."[2] Similarly, John Deathridge has queried, "can *Parsifal* be interpreted as a Christian work at all, militant or otherwise? Or is it just a benign and rather feeble millenarian fantasy – a kind of Armageddon cocktail with large twists of Schopenhauer and Buddha?"[3] Religious elements and presentations of race in this piece have been explored and vociferously debated; however, surprisingly little attention has been given to aspects of gender in the work, despite a character list that includes an exclusive society of male knights that still procreate, a self-castrated sorcerer, and a solitary woman who variously embodies roles of temptress, Mary Magdalene, and eternal wanderer. Thus, while most readings of *Parsifal* seek to illumine clandestine presentations of Wagner's racist doctrine or make sense of an ambiguous panegyric to Christianity, little scholarly material addresses the provocative account of sensuality and homoeroticism in Wagner's *Bühnenweihfestspiel* [stage consecration festival play]. This thesis explores desire and homosexuality within the drama and considers how and why Wagner masks these themes through the opaque mythos of religion, race, and community. *Parsifal* was partly informed by Wagner's own complex neuroses: his uncertainty over his parentage, sexual anxieties and scandals, and trepidation over the future of the German nation. Wagner's *Parsifal* ambivalently presents homoeroticism, wavering between a pure and redeeming love and a destructive, even unnatural, force of desire.

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[1] Jacques Lacan, quoted in Joke Dame, "Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (New York: Routledge, 2006), 139.

[2] Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 184.

[3] John Deathridge, "Strange Love, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love *Parsifal*," in *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 159.

I was initially inspired by Laurence Dreyfus's work *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*,[4] which struck me as a fresh exegesis of Wagner's oeuvre, embracing the overtly sexual nature of his dramatic text, music, and philosophical writings. Concerning *Parsifal* specifically, the drama is composed of an amalgam of German philosophies, romantic ideals of metaphysical transcendence, medieval myths, and musical signifiers (e.g. chromatic content, instrumentation, etc.) that contribute to its esoteric complexity and multifarious layers. Wagner demonstrates homoerotic sensibilities through both heroic and villainous characters, within an exotic gothic Spain and *Zauberschloß* [magic castle], and through opposing sonic worlds of communal diatonicism and chromatic sensuality.

Exploring this work from a perspective energized by recent musicological gender studies and musico-textual semiotics, my reading of *Parsifal* is thus primarily corrective. Even so, any Wagner scholar must confront the racist doctrine promulgated from his essay "*Das Judenthum in der Musik*" [Jewry in Music] (1850, republished 1869)[5] and littered throughout his other writings and recorded conversations (e.g. letters and diaries). Thus while my interpretation of *Parsifal* redirects the focus toward sensuality as Wagner presents it in the work, I consider these features within a broader context: this includes Wagner's own alarming racial theories as well as the greater racial discourse in nineteenth-century Germany in an effort to reveal how these discriminatory and erroneous ideologies affected *Parsifal*'s creation and reception.

Coming at a time when the West seems to be embracing more than simply two expressions of gender, *Parsifal* presents figures exuding androgynous personae and who confound both nineteenth-century and contemporary gender boundaries. It does this while also presenting conflicting messages of compassion and exclusion related to discourse on race and nationalism. My study also resonates with several contemporary philosophers, among them Alain Badiou and Slovaj Žižek, who have complicated Wagner's relationship to Jewish culture and have re-positioned the

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[4] Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
[5] Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music (Das Judenthum in der Musik)*, trans. Edwin Evans (London: W. Reeves, 1910).

dramatist within left-wing politics.[6] Despite these new hermeneutical presentations, one cannot ignore the disturbing messages of hate Wagner lambasted on Jews; this hate exists alongside a powerfully positive representation of *Mitleid* (compassion) in *Parsifal*. Thus, I explore how both Wagner's paranoid hatred towards an Other and his desire for universal compassion construct multivalent meaning in *Parsifal*. Primarily, I view Wagner's final music drama not as a call for the eradication of non-Aryan races; rather, I argue it is a manifestation of love and sensuality complicated by all the contradictions and fears of Wagner's experiences and imagination.

"Who is the Grail?": Background on the Music Drama

Parsifal's genesis began nearly forty years before its completion in 1882, which means this material sat with Wagner longer than any other of his works. His original source material and fascination with grail lore was stimulated by his reading of Wolfram von Eschenbach's (1170-1220) epic poem *Parzival* in the 1840s. As William Kinderman relays, "The origins of *Parsifal* go back…notably to the summer of 1845, when, as Wagner relates in his autobiography, he studied Wolfram's *Parzival* while on vacation at the resort spa Marienbad in Bohemia."[7]

An artist seldom endorses a single composition as an aggregate of his or her entire *Weltanschauung* [world-outlook]. Nevertheless, scholars and performers tend to ascribe such significance to a composer or dramatist's final work in particular. In the case of Wagner, however, this teleological viewpoint is appropriate for *Parsifal*. Wagner consciously expressed this was to be his final music drama, describing it as his "last card."[8] In his recent monograph, Kinderman has

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[6]Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner,* trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010); Slavoj Žižek, "Afterward: Wagner, Anti-Semitism and 'German Ideology,'" in *Five Lessons on Wagner*, by Alain Badiou (New York: Verso, 2010), 161-225; Slavoj Žižek, "Forward: Why is Wagner Worth Saving?" in *In Search of Wagner* (New York: Verso, 2009), viii-xxvii.

[7] William Kinderman, "Introduction: The Challenge of Wagner's *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 3.

[8] Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work and His World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 233.

stated, "The music and drama of *Parsifal* display points [of comparison]… to most of Wagner's major works…In important ways, *Parsifal* is his culminating work."[9] *Parsifal*, then, particularly invites a consideration of Wagner's conclusions concerning love and desire and underscores ideologies and figures that influenced his worldview.

Wagner's disparate source material, on which he drew for the construction of *Parsifal*'s characters and plot, makes sense in light of nationalist tendencies in nineteenth-century Europe and Germany specifically. Three major medieval texts act as sources for the drama, which Wagner first encountered in 1845: Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (composed during the first quarter of the thirteenth century), Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* (written ca. 1135-1190), and the anonymously attributed *Peredur* (written ca. twelfth or thirteenth century).[10] While Eschenbach's text represents a hallmark of medieval German literature, the latter two sources were written in what became France. For a composer who frequently created dramas centered around Nordic tales, the seemingly lone German source text (Eschenbach), while a substantial and celebrated text itself, may strike the observer as relatively odd. However, contemporary scholarly discourse on nationalism, such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Anthony Smith's *Nationalism and Modernism*, helps clarify Wagner's actions and relate them to the various movements of German nationalism prevalent during the nineteenth century.[11] I find Smith's notion of "ethno-symbolism" especially helpful in that Wagner sought to link peoples that he saw as ethnically similar but who were separated by political or geographical boundaries.[12] In essence, the writers of *Perceval* and *Peredur* were located in a densely diverse region of Latin and Germanic cultures. As an intellectual cognizant of contemporary philological studies, Wagner would have sought to identify any linguistic phenomena that related to

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[9] William Kinderman, *Wagner's Parsifal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

[10] Mary A. Cicora, "Medievalism and Metaphysics: The Literary Background of *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 29-54.

[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006); Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[12] Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, 190-91.

Germanic languages and thus lay claim to the works' German heritage. Further, the Christian iconography of *Parsifal* serves as binding material among such disparate sources.

Another amalgamation of sorts, the ambiguous presentation of homoeroticism within *Parsifal* is due, in part, to Wagner's life-long development of a philosophy that addressed sensuality, spiritual love, and his personal struggles in relationships. Indeed, Wagner's artistic representation of sexuality is tinged with biographical elements: from his well-known muses, such as Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient and Mathilde Wesendonck, to Ludwig II. He even said of the Bavarian King, "through him I understand and am myself."[13] More explicit non-heteronormative relationships were also prominent in the composer's life around the time *Parsifal* was composed. When Wagner and his second wife Cosima discussed the relationship between the painter and set designer Paul von Joukowsky and a young Italian singer Pepino, Wagner explained "*Es ist etwas, wovon ich den Verstand dafür aber keinen Sinn habe"* [It is something for which I have an understanding but no inclination.].[14]

Inspired by his personal relationships, Wagner also worked out ideas for his dramas in his theoretical writings, which demonstrated his developing convictions about art, society, and the individual. Certainly, the concept of art as religion is an explicit theme in *Parsifal*, an idea promulgated from Wagner's 1880 essay "*Religion und Kunst*" [Religion and Art].[15] This essay calls the role of religion in society into question. Art, as Wagner would have it, must continue the religious ethos of transcendence and hope through the semiotic system already laid out in religious practice. This belief reveals the motivation behind the initially puzzling juxtaposition of sensuality and religious imagery found in *Parsifal*: by invoking religious and mythic tropes that were already established in Western society, Wagner sought to reveal a greater Truth. However, the composer

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[13] Wagner, quoted in Hans Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität: Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sexuellen Anomalien Seiner Gestalten* (Berlin: H. Barsdorf, 1903), 176.

[14] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 175.

[15] Richard Wagner, "Religion and Art," in vol. 6 of *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William A. Ellis (St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press Inc., 1972), 211-84.

remained ambiguous in the presentation of his ideas; keeping true to religious practices, his veiled message is made apparent only to the initiated.

While there is an explicit relationship between *Parsifal* and "*Religion und Kunst*," Wagner's earlier essays also inform his thinking. Jean-Jacques Nattiez explores Wagner's androgynous presentation of himself as both the male poet and "female" musician in his essays of the 1850s. While Nattiez primarily focuses on the *Ring,* Wagner continued to attempt a fusion between text and music, as well as man and woman, in his subsequent works. In *Parsifal* specifically his solution is complex and somewhat ambivalent. Wagner's own crossing of gender boundaries helps contextualize his characters who exhibit traits of gender-bending and emphasizes the androgynous possibilities of humanity, as portrayed by Parsifal and the Kundry of Act III. Equally illuminating, Nattiez also emphasizes "woman's double function as lover and mother" in Wagner's oeuvre, an erotic Oedipus element explored by Kundry in Act II of *Parsifal*.[16] Wagner left incomplete at his death a final section of "*Religion und Kunst*" that addressed women vis-à-vis their role as mother.[17] This theme is explored in the *Parsifal* too, as I explicate in my discussion of Kundry in chapter three. As the figure who requires redemption in the work, she provides a semiotic discourse on humanity's relationship to mothers, women, and strict gender dichotomies.

Since *Parsifal* is the culmination of Wagner's work, the Bayreuth theatre – in which the music drama was intended to be exclusively performed[18] – and the theatre's attending milieu of artists, dilettantes, and politicians are of significant interest. As *Parsifal* remains a work saturated in religion, Bayreuth lends a tangible ceremonial weight to the work. The locale continues to serve as a mecca for Wagner devotees who often must wait years to obtain tickets for their pilgrimage. The hall provides a special allure for those seeking a space designed specifically for Wagner's works by the

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[16] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 82.
[17] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 243.
[18] Kinderman, *Wagner's* Parsifal, 8.

dramatist himself.[19] The exclusivity of the event and its annual manifestation encourage the notion of a religious aura that surrounds the Bayreuth experience and the works themselves. Bayreuth and *Parsifal* are thus uniquely and enigmatically related, even influencing some of the homoerotic associations with the work, as will be explored in chapter two.[20]

Wagner's reticence to commit to a definite presentation of sexuality was part of a complex social anxiety increasingly aware of its fragmentation and irrationality. Carl Schorske explores this phenomenon in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna where collisions of older liberal rational values and the new fervent nationalism of conservatives violently clash in art and politics.[21] The conservative movement frequently cited Wagner and his ilk as a sonic embodiment of the new age. Also within *fin-de-siècle* culture Freudian psychoanalysis underscored irrational behavior and brought topics of disease and sexuality to the foreground of discussion. Sexual ambiguity and social tension in *Parsifal*, then, predicted on the stage matters that later appeared in social discourse in the years following the work.

Parsifal emphasizes disparate social orders as seen in the Grail community on the one hand and Klingsor's magic castle and garden on the other. Both realms, however, exhibit traits of political factions explored by Schorske.[22] The Grail knights perceive their society as decaying around them and seek to preserve ancient practices. Contrastingly, the pathological Klingsor has castrated himself and creates a world devoid of truth but reeling with irrational fantasy and unrequited desire. *Parsifal*, thus, demonstrates Wagner's perception of a surrounding social trend towards deconstruction of communal morals, a fascination with psychosis, and a splintered intelligentsia and political structure.

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[19] See for example Roger Allen, "*Die Weihe des Hauses* (The Consecration of the House): Houston Stewart Chamberlain and the Early Reception of *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 247-51.

[20] See also Oskar Panizza, "Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A Reflection," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no.2 (2006): 324-28.

[21] Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), especially 24-115.

[22] Ibid., 27-31.

***"Now let me lead you to the hallowed feast": A Synthesized Outline of* Parsifal**

For readers unfamiliar with the opera, I include here a summary of the plot, along with commentary on moments that relate directly to my argument. Although the opera unfolds via narrative techniques and manipulations of time that thwart a linear presentation of the material, I present the narrative in a straightforward manner. The drama's temporal confusion causes the audience to rely heavily on characters' narrations of past events in order to make sense of the larger story. Who the audience considers – or is supposed to consider – trustworthy feeds into the discussions of authoritative figures and sexuality addressed in chapters three and four.

Unlike most of Wagner's other music dramas, *Parsifal* is set in a region remote from Nordic lands. The action takes place in the fictitious mountain range of Monsalvat, a territory Wagner describes as "*Gegend im Charakter der nördlichen Gebirge des gotischen Spaniens*" [a region in the character of the northern mountains of gothic Spain].[23] The first and third acts are centered on the northern part of this mountain range, which contains a magical forest protected by an ascetic Christian community of Grail knights. This all-male community spans the gamut in reference to age, from young boys and squires to men with one foot in the grave. All the knights are charged with protecting the sanctity of the woods by guarding the animals, fellow knights of the brotherhood, and the Grail itself – the chalice that caught Christ's blood at the crucifixion. Additionally, the Grail – which remains hidden from sight and can only be unveiled by the Grail king – sends knights on specific quests through spiritual messages. Only when the Grail presents a knight with such a task is he permitted to leave the realm: failure to honor this code usually results in dire consequences for the knight.

Based on various legends, Wagner portrayed the Grail as the cup that caught Christ's blood at the crucifixion. The daily performance of the Eucharist in the realm uses this chalice in the

[23] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal,* ed. Felix Mottl (New York: C.F. Peters, 1986), 4. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

ceremony; this ritual allows the knights to live eternally while aging very slowly. Amfortas, the Grail king, presides over the service and, as the only person in the realm with this authority, uncovers the veiled Grail. Along with several other factors discussed in chapter four, this performative act links Amfortas and Christ in a very physical exchange, as Christ's blood flows through Amfortas' veins when he begins the ceremony. The elderly former Grail king Titurel, Amfortas' father, watches over the ceremony from a distance – his grave to be exact. Confined to his coffin, he has become too weak to perform the act himself, but he still draws on its power to remain alive.

The second act is set on the same mountain range as the Grail realm but much further south. Here the evil sorcerer Klingsor resides in his *Zauberschloß* [magic castle] surrounded by a beautiful flower garden. Klingsor once wished to be a part of the Grail community, but, unable to control his sexual urges, he castrated himself in order to remain pure. The act horrified Titurel (then the acting Grail king) and he banished Klingsor from the Grail realm. Once banished, Klingsor bent himself on exacting revenge on the knights of the Grail, committing himself to sorcery and the raising of his magic flowers. These flowers come to life as flower maidens and serve Klingsor by attempting to seduce any knight who enter his castle walls. Once mesmerized by the flower maidens' enchantments, Klingsor moves in and stabs any unsuspecting knight who happens to enter his garden with the spear that pierced Christ's side, which he wrested from Amfortas.

The necromancer employs one other woman aside from the maidens, a mysterious figure named Kundry. Having once laughed at Christ suffering on the cross, she has been cursed to live forever – perpetually reincarnated with different physical features. Klingsor, unaffected by women's seductive attempts, uses Kundry's curse to control her. While she may perform good deeds outside of his realm, she must obey him within his walls, and she attempts to seduce any knights who enter the garden. The only way for Kundry to break her curse rests on a man who would forego her seductions. Until that moment, Kundry wanders aimlessly from life to life. Periodically she helps the

Grail knights (who know nothing of her reincarnation), but she is always called back into Klingsor's service via her curse.

Before the opera begins, Amfortas has taken a band of knights and the holy spear to attack Klingsor's castle. Kundry seduces Amfortas, allowing Klingsor to take the spear and mortally wound Amfortas. Klingsor stabs the Grail king in the side, emulating Christ's wound incurred on the cross; Wagner moved the wound to this position away from the genitalia where his source texts had placed Amfortas' injury.[24] This event triggers Amfortas', and consequently the Grail community's, need for redemption and sets the scene for the opening of the opera. As Amfortas sings in the first act a prophecy told to him: "*durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor*" [the pure fool, enlightened through compassion]![25] This aphorism proves to be a unifying theme in the work both musically and textually, although its meaning remains ambiguous throughout the first act of the opera; later it becomes associated with Parsifal and redemption.

I now follow a walk-through of the opera through the eyes of the protagonist, Parsifal. At the time of the opera, the boyish Parsifal has been wondering on his own for a number of years. After observing a retinue of passing knights, the young boy decided to leave his single mother, Herzeleide, and venture out into the world. Thus far, he has been untouched by society, much like Siegfried from the *Ring,* and fulfilling the notion of purity proclaimed in the prophecy.

Parsifal makes his first appearance after the "*reine Tor*" prophecy is sung. Subsequently following four squires who sing the "*reine Tor*" motive, horns from the orchestra sound a starkly contrasting fanfare. Both of these themes become associated with the character Parsifal. The young boy has wandered into the Grail realm and has shot a swan, which – while no sin in his eyes – is an evil act in the Grail community, which honors all creatures. He is subsequently brought before

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[24] James M. McGlathery, "Erotic Love in Chrétien's *Perceval*, Wolfram's *Parzival*, and Wagner's *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 76.

[25] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, 49.

Gurnemanz – an older knight who acts as a fatherly figure to many of the squires within the realm. He delivers a series of inquiries to the oblivious Parsifal, including questions about his own identity. The young boy can answer none of Gurnemanz's questions. Despite everyone's astonishment at Parsifal's complete lack of self-knowledge, no one provides any solutions except for Kundry.

Prior to Parsifal's entrance, Kundry has made a dramatic appearance (discussed in detail in chapter three). Seeking to help the Grail knights but limited by her curse, Kundry brings balsam in an attempt to assuage Amfortas' suffering, for which she is partly responsible. As a result of her reincarnation, she goes unrecognized by the knights as the same woman who seduced Amfortas at Klingsor's castle. While Gurnemanz attempts to interrogate Parsifal, only the lone female appears aware of the boy's past; she reveals most of her knowledge, including his name, in the second act. Here, however, she does inform Parsifal of his mother's death, which took place after he left home. Shortly thereafter, Kundry "falls into violent trembling"[26] and succumbs to a sleep that she is powerless to resist.

As Amfortas returns from a healing bath, Gurnemanz leads Parsifal to the castle where the *Liebesmahl* [Eucharist, literally love-feast] is to be performed. Their journey is sonically portrayed by the astoundingly mesmerizing and lyrical *Verwandlungsmusik* [Transformation Music], which marks the spatial and temporal shift in the plot (this passage is further discussed in chapter two). Once at the castle, Parsifal observes Amfortas' excruciating pain of performing the Eucharist, a scene whose intricacies I will explicate in chapter four. Wagner evokes the father-son trope again (earlier fulfilled by Gurnemanz and the squires), this time through Amfortas' father Titurel. The former Grail king, literally from within his grave, orders Amfortas to perform his duty and uncover the Grail so that they may continue living. Once Amfortas finally uncovers the sacred chalice, a beam of light extends

[26] Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, 130.

down to the Grail (the *Lichtstrahl*). The act concludes with Gurnemanz angrily turning Parsifal away after the boy's uncomprehending response to the ceremony.

The prelude to the second act, beginning in a growling b minor, conjures the loveless world of Klingsor's *Zauberschloß*. When Klingsor summons Kundry by her eternal curse, she finds herself in a sonic world much more akin to her own. The aural realm of Klingsor's magic castle and garden constantly shifts harmonically and bubbles with sensuous chromaticism. Klingsor, importantly, contrasts with everything for which the Grail stands. Self-centered, callous, and insidiously motivated, the sorcerer presents all the nasty human traits that Wagner feared. As Gurnemanz reveals to the young squires, Klingsor also evokes nineteenth-century tropes of homosexuality, Jewishness, and disease by means of his self-castration.[27] The associations between Klingsor and negative stereotypes within Wagner's milieu receive a thorough discussion in chapter four.

The second act, which explicitly contrasts male and female, starkly separates it from the outer acts. In some ways, this act projects a disorientingly sexualized world. Indeed, when Parsifal enters the garden and is surrounded by Klingsor's flower maidens, he cannot gather his wits so intoxicated is he by their wondrous scent, evoked by the lilting gestures of the chorus. When Kundry makes her appearance, it is her voice that is first heard. Like many of Wagner's female characters, she reveals Parsifal's identity to himself as she is the first character to utter his name in the work. Even more, she reveals his identity as the "pure fool" by singing his name to a manipulation of the prophetic motive. Despite her continuous attempts, Parsifal foregoes her temptations, violently feeling Amfortas' suffering at the moment Kundry kisses him. Parsifal's first act of redemption, then, begins by refuting sexual liaisons with a woman; the fulfilment of this criterion releases Kundry from her curse The hermeneutics of this scene surrounding both Kundry and Parsifal are discussed in chapters three and four respectively. Once he refuses Kundry's

[27] See Sander L. Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity at the fin-de-siècle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

seductions, Parsifal, now knowing himself, recovers the spear from Klingsor, and the sorcerer's realm rapidly collapses as the music returns to the act's opening b minor.[28]

The final act begins with music that portrays Parsifal's torturous journey back to the Grail realm. After years of searching, the knight comes across the elderly Gurnemanz on Good Friday. Here, too, appears the now redeemed Kundry. After her initial moans, Kundry remains silent throughout the remainder of the opera. She is only given stage directions, such as her act of washing Parsifal's feet and tacit observance of the Eucharist. At the end of the opera, she sinks slowly to the ground, lifeless, in a puzzling transformation that I discuss further in chapter three. These three characters travel to the performance site of the Eucharist. The music here echoes the *Verwandlungsmusik* and subsequent male chorus of the first act. This time, however, the themes are presented in chromatic polyphony and overwhelming cacophony. In comparison with Act I, these musical choices in Act III suggest the decay of a society, touching on a *fin-de-siècle* anxiety. Once arriving, Parsifal observes Amfortas in greater pain than the last time he saw the Grail king. Amfortas has refused to perform the Grail ceremony resulting in his father's, Titurel, death. While the knights command Amfortas to uncover the Grail, he instead tears the dressings from his wound and lets his blood flow out. Parsifal, as the prophesied redeemer, ends Amfortas' suffering by stepping forward and touching his wound with the spear. After Parsifal releases Amfortas from his duty of uncovering the Grail, Parsifal takes his place as Grail king. The opera closes in the A-flat major that began the drama with the choir singing "*Erlösung dem Erlöser*" [Redemption to the Redeemer]![29]

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[28] For a discussion on the tonality and cyclical nature of the second act, see Warren Darcy, "'Die Zeit ist da': Rotational Form and Hexatonic Magic in Act 2, Scene 1 of *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 215-244.

[29] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act III, 584-86.

Scope & Methodology

The controversies surrounding eroticism and gender in Wagner's works are overshadowed in contemporary research by discussions of his polemical and disturbing racial theories. While his racism was undeniably an alarming facet of his personality – and arguably his music dramas – the erotic pulse present in his oeuvre deserves substantial attention. I want to encourage other perspectives of this complicated and powerful final opera that relate to Wagner's own message of sensuality within Western society. To this end, I examine *Parsifal* from its inception to its relevance in a contemporary context.

I look to scholarship that confronts Wagner's unsettling racial polemics alongside his dramatic and musical objectives and innovations. John Deathridge's monograph *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* provides an exemplary model for this type of study. His acknowledgment of Wagner's darker ideologies in addition to the positive aspects of the composer-dramatist's work yields greater insight into Wagner's influence on and relevance to subsequent generations, even today's.[30] Concerning *Parsifal* specifically, Deathridge does not ignore the racial and sexist elements contained within the drama. Instead, he uses them to inform his readings of Wagner's works and make sense of the dramatist's ambiguous intentions. I follow this approach as a model, making sure to consider how Wagner's racial polemics shaped ideas contained within *Parsifal*.

To further my argument, I employ some contemporary methodology concerning gender theory in musicology. Collected works such as *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* and *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* have informed my thinking in relation to homosexuality, music, and identity.[31] For instance, in his article "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet" Philip Brett examines the analogous relationship between musicality and homosexuality. He explains,

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[30] Deathridge, *Wagner*, 228-29.

[31] Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, ed. *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* (Urbana, Il: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood ed., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

"though it is not proscribed in the same way as homosexuality, music has often been considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioners."[32] Indeed, Wagner's music is often cited as being seductively corruptive. His moral integrity and persona are also frequently called into question (sometimes rightfully so). Hence, Adorno employs sexual imagery when describing Wagner: "The impotent petitioner becomes the tragic panegyrist."[33] Before Adorno, Nietzsche had suggested Wagner's sexual deviance more explicit, clouded by personal embitterment as I explore in the next chapter.[34]

Wagner's masculinity was questioned in light of the public scandal around his silk fetish and penchant for rose-scented perfumes.[35] The chaste Parsifal mimics this when he says to the flower maidens, "*Wie duftet ihr hold! Seid ihr denn Blumen*" [How sweet you smell! Are you flowers then]?[36] Certainly, none of these traits are inherent qualities of homosexuals. However, as Mitchell Morris notes, "The nineteenth-century stereotypes of homosexual character – the artsy, nervous, effeminate man, for instance – are familiar to everyone and, despite a quarter-century of vigorous disputation, still constitute a kind of folk knowledge about homosexuals."[37] It is not only a person's presentation of him or herself that is important to consider but also others' perception of him or her, whether this perception is justified or jaded and discriminatory.

The characters of *Parsifal* also exhibit elements of gender difference. Joke Dame explores the identity of the castrato and questions of gender in the voice. She suggests, "in most cases we do hear correctly whether a voice comes from a female or a male body…there are examples [however] that

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[32] Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (New York: Routledge, 2006) 11.

[33] Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingston (New York: Verso, 2009), 7.

[34] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 121-30.

[35] Ibid., 135-36.

[36] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act II, 314-15.

[37] Mitchell Morris, "Tristan's Wounds: On Homosexual Wagnerians at the *fin-de-siècle*," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, eds. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 274.

might give rise to doubts as to the 'genderedness' of the voice."[38] This ambiguity is illustrated in passages such as Kundry's androgynous low moans or hair-raising laughter. Even more, Klingsor himself is a castrato, albeit one that sings in a bass range. In order to understand his nebulous identity, the phallic symbolism of the spear, *Lichtstrahl* [light shaft], must be considered alongside notions of purity.

These three dramatic elements are relayed through the rhetorical device of narrative. As I mentioned in the outline of *Parsifal's* action, most of the work can be described as a scene of stasis. Narration, rather than explicit action, is paramount to understanding how Wagner conveys the dramas. Audiences frequently bemoan the extended narrated passages that often occur within Wagner's opera texts. *Parsifal* is no exception. In fact, this work contains extended monologues in every act, an excessive dramatic gesture even for Wagner. However rather than dismissing narration as a superfluous rhetorical device, one might consider to what purpose this method recurs so frequently in *Parsifal*. I look to Carolyn Abbate's work, specifically *Unsung Voices*, as a guide in this area.[39] Similarly to Nattiez, Abbate focuses primarily on Wagner's narrative technique in the *Ring*, citing Wotan's extensive monologue in Act II of *Die Walküre*, as well as Gutrune's aural hallucinations and Brünnhilde's Immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*. Her methods can be usefully applied to *Parsifal* as well.

Exploring the musical elements of oration, Abbate has observed a common oversight in operatic interpretation: "narrating is not itself seen as an act within an action."[40] Conversely, she posits that relaying a tale is not simply a recapitulation of events but an active interpretation of them. Her observations when applied to Wagner suggests the importance of retelling material already heard, thereby providing insight into that character's perception of his or her reality (or what he or

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[38] Joke Dame, "Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood (New York: Routledge, 2006), 140.

[39] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), see especially 156-205.

[40] Ibid., 62.

she wishes to present to the listener). In essence, a character may lie about the past or tell a perspective that remains true to him or her but not without heavy subjective filtering. To illustrate the point, Klingsor's pained explanation referring to his self-castration compared to Gurnemanz's earlier horrified account of the same event presents two differently motivated Klingsors. Drawing on examples such as these, I underscore the importance of narrative in *Parsifal* and how this rhetorical device conveys power in relationships.

For instrumental music, musical narration is somewhat more difficult to pinpoint. Abbate argues that instrumental gestures (e.g. an orchestral six-four cadence that precedes a soloist's cadenza) can signify and describe an event.[41] Again, this is not an objective voice but one that may have an agenda of its own. For Wagner, the structure of his instrumental music (including preludes to the acts of his music dramas) derived from the inner feeling of the work as a whole.[42] In his music dramas, orchestral preludes and interludes allowed Wagner expressive means without the human voice. For instance, the *Vorspiel* to the third act of *Parsifal* imparts the eponymous character's torturous return journey to the land of the Grail. Similar to the third act of *Tannhäuser*, the audience is unaware that the prelude is an aural representation of the voyage until the music returns to accompany Parsifal's narrative of his frustrated wanderings. This creates a powerful moment of reflection during which the audience may empathize with Parsifal.

Biographical and psychoanalytic influences provide the final means through which I view *Parsifal*. Alluding to the psychological aspect inherent in Wagner's works, Thomas Mann argues, "When Siegfried dreams under the linden tree and the mother-idea flows into the erotic; when Mime teaches his pupil the nature of fear, while the orchestra down below darkly and afar off introduces

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[41] Ibid., 41.

[42] Thomas S. Grey, "Wagner, the Overture, and the Aesthetics of Musical Form," *19th-Century Music* 12, no.1 (1988): 3-22.

the fire motif; all that is Freud, that is analysis, nothing else."[43] Indeed as I have already suggested, Kundry is partially constructed from Wagner's complex relation to various women in his life. In his biography on Wagner, Joachim Köhler provides a useful model for uncovering biographical elements in Wagner's life that manifest in his works, both dramatically and musically.[44] In essence, he employs a type of Freudian psychoanalysis, linking Wagner's childhood relationships to the characters that manifest in his music dramas. *Parsifal*, with its multivalent expressions of familial and sexual relationships, invites such psychoanalytic techniques that aid in the interpretation of the work.

Literature Review

Wagner scholarship is immense and contains notorious contradictions, even within the body of the composer's own writings. I will address the works that have been most influential to my thinking on *Parsifal* and Wagner. These writings include philosophy and critical writings contemporary to Wagner such as those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. These two philosophers, and to a lesser extent Hegel and Feuerbach, impacted Wagner ideologically, dramaturgically, and personally. More recent philosophical studies engage with the composer from a post-Marxist perspective including the writings of Adorno, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek. Recent exegeses on Wagner's life, *Parsifal*, and erotic themes – specifically work by Kinderman, Winterbourne, and Dreyfus – are especially helpfully sources from which I draw.

Schopenhauer's undeniable influence on Wagner's *Weltanschauung* has been well-explored by scholars such as Bryan Magee and Joachim Köhler.[45] The much discussed impact of Schopenhauer unequivocally shaped Wagner's telling of *Parsifal*. The ascetic lifestyle of the Grail Knights, Parsifal's

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[43] Thomas Mann, quoted in John Farrell, *Freud's Paranoid Quest: Psychoanalysis and Modern Suspicion* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 66.

[44] Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wagner: Last of the Titans*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[45] Ibid. and Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

renunciation of physical consummation with a woman, and the elements of Buddhism found in the opera all stem from Wagner's fascination with the writings of the philosopher. To briefly paraphrase the philosopher's magnum opus *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1844, second edition) [The World as Will and Representation],[46] Schopenhauer posits that our yearnings and willful desires remain unfulfilled throughout life, thus resulting in perpetual disappointment. We are set for failure, then, from the start if we yield to our desires. He suggests the way out of this cycle is to negate the Will (in essence, an omnipresent force that strives for life), foregoing all pleasure: in other words, an ascetic lifestyle leads one to transcendence. This means forsaking all romantic love, especially if physically consummated. Wagner did not, however, ascribe completely to the pessimistic asceticism of Schopenhauer as the next chapter demonstrates. Unlike Schopenhauer who was preoccupied with the cause of human suffering, Wagner focused his energies on discovering a way to transcend these difficulties through love.

Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) also shaped many concepts found in *Parsifal,* specifically in respect to Wagner's portrayal of woman and community. These two philosophers were common names in German artistic and intellectual discourse in the nineteenth century, and their work engaged with many political and ethical questions of that century. For Wagner, Hegel contributed to the composer's concept of the Absolute or Ideal, a goal to be reached.[47] Hegel extends this to a notion he labels the eternal feminine, which receives further discussion in chapter two. Feuerbach's influence on Wagner was more pragmatic and affected the dramatist's construction of a dichotomy between the modern and pre-modern. As the next chapter will demonstrate, *Parsifal* engages with this subject blatantly and brings notions of sexuality to the dichotomy.

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[46] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969).

[47] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth,* 83.

The relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner, two iconoclasts of sorts, is one of the most richly documented dialogues between a philosopher and artist. After their relationship had soured and Wagner's subsequent death, Nietzsche perpetually sought to overcome the Wagnerian influence in his writings. He frequently cites Wagner and his works as exerting superficial effects associated with disease and effeminacy, even as he remains fascinated with the composer: "But on whom would the effect be made? Upon something on which a noble artist ought never to deign to act, upon the mob, upon the immature! upon the blasés! upon the diseased! upon idiots! upon *Wagnerites*!..."[48] As explicated by Dreyfus, Nietzsche's negative reactions to the Christian elements in *Parsifal* include a gendered bent. Nietzsche derides the music drama as a form of "Christianity cleaned up for female Wagnerians."[49] The complexities of the Nietzsche-Wagner relationship are discussed fully in the next chapter, drawing especially from Dreyfus's and Magee's work.

Hans Fuchs' monograph from 1903 on Wagner and homosexuality reveals the heightened interest in "sexual abnormalities" at the turn of the twentieth century. Fuchs studies the relationship between Wagner and Ludwig II and has a chapter that focuses solely on *Parsifal*. In this section, Fuchs devotes considerable attention to Klingsor and Kundry. Describing Klingsor and focusing on his deviant sexuality, he writes, "*aber war [er] nicht rein, und darum fand der die Pfade nicht, die zum Gral führen: er hatte im Heidenland viel gesündigt*" [he was not pure and therefore did not find the path that led to the Grail: he had sinned much in the heathen land].[50]

Towards more contemporary scholarship, Adorno's polemical writings on Wagner raise musical issues that he describes with gendered language. In his study *In Search of Wagner*, Adorno lambasts Wagner's compositional technique for its qualities he perceives as feminine, alleged lack of harmonic complexity, faulty voice leading, and the melody's confinement to only the upper voice.

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[48] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche* contra *Wagner,* Vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche,* ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony Ludovici, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 63.

[49] Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 221.

[50] Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität*, 250.

He attacks Wagner devotees as well: "anticipating the universal practice of mass culture later on, the music is designed to be remembered, it is intended for the forgetful."[51] The more subtle moments of thematic metamorphosis are cast aside as theatrical trickery, the work of a superficial artist. Adorno does, however, praise Wagner in a backhanded way for his "intimate" orchestration.[52] However, timbre and color, as seen by Adorno, are the feminine qualities of composition; Wagner lacks the masculine stability of harmonic logic. Adorno goes further with the human metaphor of orchestration: "There is indeed something in the idea that Wagner's orchestration is inseparable from the idea of the human body: some of his theatrical figures seem to be instruments of the orchestra that have become flesh and blood."[53] Consequently, the androgynous component of *Parsifal* is present in the music as well as the text. Indeed, Adorno observes that, "the specific sound of each instrument is lost: they can no longer be separated out."[54]

Philosopher Alain Badiou provides a provocative counterargument to many of Adorno's refutations of Wagner, and he even suggests that the composer's work provides a solution to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. Instead of denigrating Wagner's innovations as fraudulent and flawed, Badiou offers that "Wagner created a new situation with respect to the relationship between philosophy and music."[55] Wagner, as Badiou argues, emphasizes the experience of suffering as an alternative to the static, nihilistic characterstics of modernity. In so doing, he challenges Adorno's assessment of the modern condition. To illustrate, Badiou cites the prolonged suffering found in the third act of *Tristan*. However, *Parsifal* engages with these themes throughout the entire opera.

Barry Millington's biography, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, and Barry Emslie's work on Wagner are interested in the manner that racial ideologies influenced Wagner's life and work. Emslie's study

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[51] Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (New York: Verso, 2009), 21.
[52] Ibid., 61.
[53] Ibid., 68.
[54] Ibid., 62.
[55] Ibid., 56.

Wagner and the Centrality of Love posits that a racial or idealistic Other can exist paradoxically beside love.[56] Millington, too, heavily emphasizes Wagner's disturbing racial polemics and their presumed manifestation in his work.[57] Related to this approach but arguing with a different agenda is another post-Marxist philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. Žižek suggests Wagner's relevance today in a post-modern, fragmented society especially because of his contradictory theories concerning race, gender, and the position of art.[58]

Studies specifically on *Parsifal* or that discuss the opera in-depth display the variety of approaches available in interpreting this densely rich piece. Anthony Winterbourne, in his work *A Pagan Spoiled*, notes that Wagner sought the "Kantian 'ideal' of religious truth [to be] manifested (or appropriated) in art."[59] His study also proves useful in demonstrating Wagner's relations and thoughts about women and how these affected *Parsifal*. Winterbourne relates Wagner to the cultural anxieties of his age through Wagner's fascination with psychological aspects of characters, which influenced artists such as Kafka and Berg.[60] As stated earlier, Kinderman's recent monograph on *Parsifal* approaches the opera from a variety of perspectives including its initial reception and associations and the musical genesis of the work itself. Similar to this multifarious approach is the collection of essays *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, edited by Kinderman and Katherine Syer. This book includes analyses of musical gestures, explores the religious nature of *Parsifal*, and compares the opera to von Eschenbach's original text. The list could continue, but I would also like to mention specifically Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's film *Parsifal* from 1982 and the recent book by Adrian Daub *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Artwork of Wagner*. Syberberg's film supports my argument for the importance of androgyny in his decision to make the character of Parsifal a boy

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[56] Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2010), 7.
[57] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*; for notions of race and *Parsifal* specifically, see 238-40.
[58] Slavoj Žižek, "Afterward: Wagner, Anti-Semitism and 'German Ideology,'" 161-225.
[59] Anthony Winterbourne, A *Pagan Spoiled* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 20.
[60] Winterbourne, *Pagan Spoiled*, 11; see also Kevin C. Karnes, *A Kingdom not of this World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

before Kundry's kiss who is then replaced by a girl actress following the event.[61] Daub's work draws on psychoanalysis and Wagner's concept of sexual difference – presented in *Parsifal*, among other works – and illustrates the effects of Wagner's erotic fascination in the work of subsequent composers such as Richard Strauss.[62]

Laurence Dreyfus brings much insight regarding eroticism, both in Wagner's personal life and his music dramas. Eroticism as a focal point allows for a flexible approach to *Parsifal* and Wagner's greater philosophical and biographical context. Dreyfus, however, devotes only a small portion of his chapter on homoeroticism to *Parsifal,* deciding to focus on characters primarily within *Tristan*.[63] His discussion is crafted within a section that explores Wagner's relationship to homosexuals such as Paul von Joukowsky and Ludwig II.[64] This and other passages reveal that Wagner enjoyed a level of intimate comfort with (and even empathy for) his homosexual friends. Dreyfus also illustrates the sometimes paternal, other times worshipful, nature of Wagner's relationship to men in his life. While offering several useful frameworks, Dreyfus's two and a half pages on *Parsifal* leave the reader desiring much more. He concludes that, "If there is an erotic problem with *Parsifal*, it is not that the opera is too homosexual…but that it isn't homosexual enough."[65] Alternatively, I provide an interpretation of this work that reveals its richly ambivalent treatment of same-sex love.

Mitchell Morris has explored relationships between Wagner and male homosexuality explicitly. Drawing from *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) [The Artwork of the Future], Morris elucidates Wagner's affirmation of *Männerliebe* [mutual male affection] found in ancient Spartan and Hellenic societies. He suggests, "Wagner's impassioned defense of physical intensity in male

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[61] *Parsifal*, directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (1982; Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1999), DVD.

[62] Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Artwork of Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[63] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 211-13.

[64] Ibid., 175.

[65] Ibid., 213.

romantic friendship offered an ideal defense of same-sex eroticism substantially different from defenses that sought to use medicine as an alibi. That is, same-sex erotics is justifiable because it serves higher moral and political goods."[66] What might these moral justifications be? Late nineteenth-century scholars perceived Wagner to posit that moral and political stability are brought about by a deeply affectionate, albeit platonic, male friendship. While allowing the possibility of physical engagement with men in Wagner's own life, Hans Fuchs' assessment of *Parsifal* focuses on the spiritual nature of male affinity rather than a consummated physical relationship, as observed by Morris. This conclusion is akin to Nietschze's indictment of Wagner's last work as a sterile, religious retreat. I provide an alternative perspective that argues Wagner still advocated physical, erotic relations, even if he appeared conflicted in his presentation.

As Carl Schorske has observed in his kaleidoscopic study of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, "rational man has had to give place to that richer but more dangerous and mercurial creature, psychological man. This new man is not merely a rational animal, but a creature of feeling and instinct."[67] Art reflected a desire to incorporate this instinct into humanity's understanding of itself. Wagner, certainly, was obsessed with the *innere Empfindung* (inner feeling) of a musical work.

Chapter Overview

Chapter two explores Wagner's milieu surrounding the creation of *Parsifal*. His psychological influences from childhood and his relationship to other males in his life are factored into the fabric of the opera's construction. The obsession with psychological pathologies that burgeoned in the scientific community during the late nineteenth century have striking correlations in the characters of *Parsifal*: the debilitating inner turmoil of Amfortas, his insufferable wound, the father Titurel that

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[66] Mitchell Morris, "Homosexuality and the Manly Absolute: Hans Fuchs on Richard Wagner," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no.2 (Spring 2006), 330.

[67] Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna,* 4.

commands from within the grave, and the self-castrated Klingsor illustrate a few such examples. *Parsifal*'s position with respect to the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and its decadent audience's demographics influenced early reception of the opera and amplified its mystique. Surrounding the work's creation, the cultural anxieties of German unification in 1871, the question of *Was ist Deutsch,* and liberal and conservative political movements in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna reveal the tumultuous environment in which Wagner found himself during his final years.

As suggested earlier, Wagner devoted his life to the perpetual search for a union of sensual and spiritual love. This lifelong quest is explored in his philosophical writings and manifested in his stage works, specifically through "*Religion und Kunst*" in the case of *Parsifal.* The religious ethos from which Wagner draws suggests the reason for the work's saturation with religious and mythic iconography. Finally, I address how Wagner's construction of a Jewish Other informed his representation of evil characters within *Parsifal.*

In chapter three I confront Wagner's treatment of women in *Parsifal.* Before exploring the wondrously enigmatic figure that is Kundry, I address the choral presentations of females in the drama. The sensuous entreaties from the flower maidens who are confined to the second act are analogous to siren episodes not only in *Tannhäuser* (1845) but to a greater operatic tradition of ostensibly dangerous female choruses. More curious is Wagner's employment of adult female singers to aurally and visually portray the various *Knappen, Jünglinge,* and *Knaben* [squires, youths, and boys] of the Grail realm. The reasoning that motivates this abstruse casting lies in the transfiguration of the only acknowledged female character in *Parsifal.* Kundry is the innovative character of Wagner's creative mind. While traces of her are found in his earlier works, there is no precedent for a female role that yearns for redemption from a male, specifically through renunciation of her solicitations. Even a staunch supporter of Wagner like Ludwig II was puzzled by the act of Kundry's kiss prompting Parsifal's compassionate awakening: "Why is our hero converted by Kundry's kiss? Why

does this make his divine mission clear to him?"[68] Kundry is positioned between the stereotypically negative flower maidens and Wagner's more idealized androgynous squires. She presents the audience with an ambiguous solution that negotiates the path from temptress to a figure of andryogny.

Chapter four is the complement of the preceding chapter in that it explores Wagner's treatment of men in the music drama and determines how communal and personal male-to-male relationships fit into his worldview. Wagner gives Gurnemanz a prominent place in the outer acts who acts as a quasi-fatherly figure to the orphaned Parsifal. Gurnemanz' amorous descriptions of Amfortas, "*in seiner Mannheit stolzer Blüte*" [in the proud blossoming of his manhood], and the music that portrays his visceral pain when describing Titurel's death suggest a love that stems from eros.[69] Along with examining his guilt over succumbing to desire, I explore the erotic nature of Amfortas' performance of the Eucharist, with Christ's blood flowing through him. In keeping true to his ambivalent nature, Wagner also presents homoerotic love in a dangerous, violent portrayal. Indeed, Klingsor, regarding Parsifal, triumphantly declares, "*zu jung und dumm fielst du in meine Gewalt: die Reinheit dir entrissen, bleibst mir du zugewiesen*" [too young and dense you fall into my forceful might: once purity is wrested from you, you will remain attached to me!]![70] Parsifal is analyzed in his relation to all of these characters as well as his position to his mother and Kundry. I also address the esoteric dénouement of "Erlösung dem Erlöser!" [Redemption to the Redeemer!].

The final chapter synthesizes these ideas into a new method for approaching Wagner's work. I illumine *Parsifal*'s message of compassion while problematizing the work's connection to racist dogma. Through Parsifal's homoerotic and androgynous tendencies, the hermeneutical flexibility of Kundry's death, and societal metaphors of redemption, I posit that Wagner attempted to make

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[68] King Ludwig II of Bavaria, quoted in Deathridge, "Strange Love," 162.
[69] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, 42.
[70] Ibid., Act II, 280.

audiences aware of the disparities between gender roles in nineteenth-century society. The blending of genders in the work incited anxiety in audiences and reflected contemporary discourse that sought to redefine expressions of gender. I carry this presentation into the twenty-first century and argue for what *Parsifal* might tell us about gender representation in our own society.

Chapter 2: Intentions and Influences

"Bayreuth couldn't kill Parsifal *for me, nor could the ghastly horde of homosexual Wagnerians spoil Wagner."*
- Alban Berg[71]

Wagner's internal motivations and the external milieu that surrounded *Parsifal*'s creation mutually influenced the thematic material of the opera. Indeed, the work engages directly with issues of community, ethnicity, and psychological and sexual disease – all concepts at the forefront of discussions among intellectuals, artists, and politicians in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Early and contemporary perceptions of *Parsifal*, many related to the work's initial exclusive performances at Bayreuth, further inform its cultural value and meaning. Concertgoers approached the work with a religious reverence, and many attendees spoke of the performance as if it were a holy event. While Wagnerites frequently exhibit such sacrosanct behavior and language, *Parsifal* particularly captivated audiences and writers with its religious iconography and mesmerizing sonic palette. Viewed from the external perspective of Wagner's milieu, reports on the opera's reception emphasize its social impact, whether in terms of the role of art vis-à-vis religion or a demonstration of multivalent expressions of love within Western society. Internally, *Parsifal*'s position within Wagner's own creative process and life helps makes sense of the drama's ambiguous elements of homoeroticism, redemption, and gender relations. As his final music drama, *Parsifal* stands as the final manifestation of Wagner's thoughts on philosophy and love, race and community; these are filtered through his own life experiences and surrounding discourses in politics and science.

The dyad between the internal – the personal and psychological – and the external – sociocultural and political – essentially informs my examination of how philosophy, sexual anxiety, and race influence the idea that constitutes *Parsifal*. I reveal the overlap between Wagner's personal experiences and artistic endeavors with social concerns in German-speaking lands. These mutual

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[71] Alban Berg, quoted in Mitchell Morris, "Tristan's Wounds: On Homosexual Wagnerians at the *fin-de-siècle*," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 271.

concerns include the numerous philosophical worldviews that heavily influenced German artists in the nineteenth century, sexual anxieties fueled by Freudian analyses, and emerging racial theories. Further complicating this interaction, Wagner wrote prolifically on many of these topics and sought to wed alleged philosophical truth to musical sound. The dramatist-composer, then, reveals his interaction with his society, and he attempts to answer questions of his contemporaneous culture through the music drama.

Broad cultural norms, however, were not the only influences on *Parsifal*. Certainly, personal tribulations and experiences found their way into Wagner's work as well. His own sexual anxieties shaped his perceptions of social deviance – both in personal interactions and more broad cultural exchanges – particularly in reference to contemporary questions of ethnicity, class, and love. His own anxieties reveal themselves through his ambiguous treatment of characters such as Kundry, Parsifal, and Klingsor. For instance, in the latter case are we supposed to empathize with the castrated sorcerer, or condemn him? At times, the music makes a straightforward answer difficult.

Finally, this chapter illumines how the multifarious contradictions inherent in Wagner's life and society act as a way of piecing together a work that is as polysemous as it is vague. I posit that an understanding of the work's surrounding environment, its creator's ambitions, and reception give a clearer glimpse into *Parsifal*'s meaning. As Badiou states, "In Wagner there is no single, unifying pole towards which the music is somehow oriented as such, but rather an exploration of diverse possibilities."[72] These possibilities do not have to remain exclusive; rather, they can exist simultaneously. Wagner's racial theories and commentary on gender coexist with his philosophical convictions and ideas about compassion: they converge in *Parsifal* to present a work of ambivalence.

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[72] Ibid., 99.

Philosophy in Sound

Wagner saw himself on equal intellectual footing with philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and deemed himself a significant contributor to surrounding philosophical discourse. For him, a defined philosophical outlook was paramount for the composition of a work. To be sure, many German artists of the nineteenth century immersed themselves in and engaged with philosophical debates of the time. Still, even in light of this tendency, Wagner exhibited a unique perspicacity for excising intellectual ideas from philosophical treatises and incorporating them into works of art.[73] The more obtuse moments and ideas in *Parsifal* stem from this desire to unite the philosophical and the artistic.

The subject matter about which Wagner wrote often took time to infuse with his philosophical convictions. His method, too, for creating a work that synthesized his ideas changed as he aged. For instance, Wagner's incorporation of Feuerbach's and later Schopenhauer's philosophies is well-documented, demonstrating the various ways in which he merged drama and a philosophical ethos.[74]

From his studies of Feuerbach in the 1840s, Wagner found a philosopher who wrote about concrete issues relating to the revolutionary events that surrounded the young composer in this decade. This writer's work captivated the young Wagner who passionately followed the attempted political movements for independence across German states, known as the *Vormärz*. Along with the subject-lord political feuds that were spreading across central Europe in the 1840s, another social dichotomy was drawn between the moderns, who favored the industrial revolution and free-market

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[73] A great amount of Wagnerian scholarship has been devoted to this phenomenon. See, for example, Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner,* trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010); and Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[74] See Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wagner: Last of the Titans*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Magee, *Tristan Chord*.

urban life, and the so-called pre-moderns, who sought to protect their traditional lifestyle and organization under guilds.[75]

Feuerbach's well-circulated work *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) influenced many thinkers of the *Vormärz* period in Germany, emphasizing the human construction of religion and encouraging other aspects of humanism.[76] Feuerbach's expressed an unequivocal distrust of (organized) religion and sharply distinguished between a revolutionary-conscious pre-modern and modern ethos. These philosophies left Wagner enthralled, which he expressed in conversation and in his work.[77] This situation where the modern and traditional collide occurs frequently in Wagner's operas and is often cited in studies of the *Ring*. Nattiez, in his exegesis on Wagner and androgyny in the *Ring* (the texts written between 1848 and 1852),[78] proposes that Wagner promulgated his philosophical ideas first in his writings, and then in the music and poetry of his music dramas.[79] In essence, Wagner rendered theoretical abstraction as tangible sound, through music, or declaimed text, or both. For *Parsifal*, the orchestral score makes the clash of the modern and the pre-modern tangible and distinct. The initial diatonicism of the prelude to the first act elicits the impression of the homogenous Grail community – itself a sort of pre-modern realm – while the prelude's ending, through its densely chromatic lines, also suggests the dark, fragmented decay of modernism that has begun to eat away at the knights' society.

The opera's overall structure reinforces Wagner's message that modernism brings about cultural decay. The two scenes of the Eucharist, found at the closing of the first and third acts, take place at the same location but many years apart. The music of the processional knights in the third act at first eerily echoes and then painfully distorts the music that accompanied the comparable

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[75] Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 208-21.

[76] Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work and His World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 96-97.

[77] Köhler, *Richard Wagner*, 260-63, 272-73.

[78] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 89.

[79] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-11.

scene of the first act. Using aural signifiers for modernism such as chromaticism and extremely loud and dissonant harmonies, Wagner conflates the musical elements that evoke modernism with the negative connotations of Feuerbach's social modernism. Discussed in greater detail in chapters three and four, this modern signifier informs Wagner's problematic associations of modernism with femininity, homoeroticism, and race within *Parsifal*.

The modern and pre-modern dichotomy contains a gendered element that Wagner also used as a signifier in his works. His *Ring* cycle displays, through linguistic means, a coded Feuerbachian element, which he links with gender. Wagner constructs the opening scene where the modern (characterized by consonant-intensive text) confronts the primeval (characterized by vowel-intensive text). The Rhinemaiden Woglinde opens the tetralogy with these words: "Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle, walle zur Wiege! wagala weia! wallala,weiala weia!" [Welter, you wave! Flow to the cradle!].[80] The repetitious initial consonant "W" and proceeding string of vowels used by Woglinde links the vowel with the feminine, even a primordial female. Importantly, she sings it to a memorable, pentatonic melody, with pentatonicism acting as a usual Western signifier for the pre-modern. This vowel-rich linguistic palette of the Rhinemaidens contrasts with the consonant-laden speech of the dwarf Alberich: "Mir zagt, zuckt und zehrt sich das Herz, lacht mir zierliches Lob." [My heart quakes and quivers, and burns with desire when such fulsome praise smiles upon me].[81] Not only do Alberich's words come across as more forceful and grounded than the Rhinemaidens; his song-speech is much more akin to declamation than to melodious and mellifluous song. He has no access to a tune. Here Wagner clearly demonstrates a linguistic dichotomy, assigning vowels to music, feeling, and the feminine while ascribing consonants to intellect, reason, and the masculine. As Nattiez explains, "the phenomenon described by Wagner is one familiar to linguists under the name *paronomasia*: the similarity between certain words and their neighboring sonorities helps to suggest

[80] Quoted in ibid., 57.
[81] Ibid., 62.

and even create semantic links."[82] Hence, Wagner discreetly contrasts the Rhinemaidens, with their long chains of melodic vowels, and the dwarf Alberich, whose words spring off from consonants.

Parsifal employs similar techniques to evoke gender dichotomies through text as well. Kundry provides an especially clear example through her broken (i.e. irrational) lines that she utters in both the first and third acts. Indeed, in the outer acts her moans and tersely constructed text contrast greatly with the lengthy male narratives. From Kundry's scenes in the outer acts, modernism appears linked with the feminine and Freudian psychoanalysis. Mary Ann Smart, for example, connects Kundry with a kind of Freudian hysteria: "she speaks little, often stammering, repeating words or breaking into senseless laughter; and, especially in the first act, she is in constant motion – quivering, trembling, throwing herself in a heap on the ground and then gradually raising herself up again."[83] The flower maidens of Act II exhibit the vowel-feminine trope that Wagner evoked with the Rheinmaidens. However, the flower maidens create sonorities of seduction through their mellifluous vocal lines in contrast to the more positive, pre-modern feminine figure he had constructed in the *Ring*. These issues are further discussed in chapter three.

Thirty years after the revolutions and his completion of the *Ring*, the tension between the modern and "natural" continued to occupy Wagner's thoughts – despite the common argument that Wagner had rid himself of all things Feuerbach by this time.[84] Another musical example from *Parsifal* demonstrates Wagner's continued interest in the idea of the modern and pre-modern. Regarding the *Verwandlungsmusik* [Transformation Music] from the first act, Ulrike Kienzle demonstrates a musical representation that juxtaposes these two concepts (See Figure 2.1): "As is articulated here, the *Heilandsklage* [Saviour's lament] harmonically resembles a piece of Baroque music with its sequences

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[82] Ibid., 38.

[83] Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 195.

[84] See for example Theodor Adorno, "On the Score of *Parsifal*," *Music and Letters* 76, no.3 (1995): 384-97; and Paul Schofield, *The Redeemer Reborn:* Parsifal *as the Fifth Opera of Wagner's* Ring (New York: Amadeus Press, 2007), especially 21-24.

of falling fifths. Yet because of its chromatic augmentation with secondary tones, it gains a specifically modern and alienated aural character. The result is a paradoxical combination of the archaic and the modern."[85] The *Helandsklage* to which Kienzle refers is the ornamental turn seen in the soprano voice on the last bar of the first system, starting on the B natural. The sequence of falling fifths, a Baroque gesture that could signify lament, begins in that same bar in the bass (the D to G). Here, both external philosophical notions about modernism and musical traditions that evoke the modern and archaic inform Wagner's artistic decisions and enrich his cultural engagement. As I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, Wagner also continued to develop sonic signifiers to represent gender that showed respective relationships to modernism. Unlike in the *Ring*, however, the dichotomy between the feminine and masculine and the modern and pre-modern frequently becomes blurred in *Parsifal*.

The young Wagner absorbed other philosophical writings in addition to those by Feuerbach that had consequences for his presentation of gender. Barry Emslie suggests that Wagner's concept of the *Ewig-Weibliche* (eternal-feminine) – a character trope extant in Wagner's entire oeuvre – derives from the Hegelian constructs of the Absolute.[86] This gender paradigm elevates the woman onto an absolute plane of perfection, while also removing her from reality. Many of Wagner's earlier characters – such as Senta (*Der fliegende Holländer*, 1843), Elizabeth (*Tannhäuser*, 1845), or Eva (*Lohengrin*, 1848) – fulfill this angelic, pure stereotype of women. Later female figures like Brünnhilde and Kundry, depart from this type, but still provide a means for the male character to achieve transcendence. While these later characters exhibit an authoritative – and at times, defiant – air, they

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[85] Ulrike Kienzle, "*Parsifal* and Religion: A Christian Music Drama?," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 119.

[86] Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2010), 46-47.

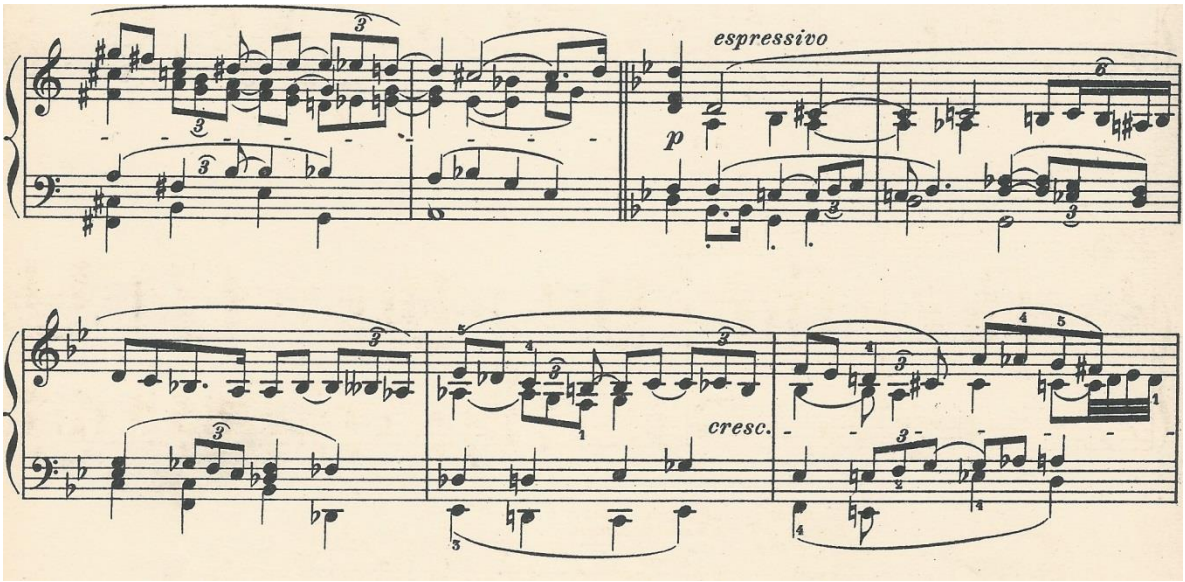

Figure 2.1: The Juxtaposition of the Baroque and Modern in the *Verwandlungsmusik*[87]

contain a facet of the *Ewig-Weibliche* by revealing to their respective male counterparts a truth about himself (fear and love for Siegfried; compassion for Parsifal). In an element of gender bending, Parsifal also represents a facet of the Absolute as he is frequently referenced as the *reine Tor* [pure fool]. This notion of purity relates to the *Ewig-Weibliche* and complicates Parsifal's position as a male character.

The dialectic of the Absolute informed musical thinking as well, hence the nineteenth-century labeling of "programmatic" and "absolute" music used by critics and musicians such as Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904). These two categories emerged as mutually exclusive and carried gendered implications. Ian Biddle has examined within Austro-German culture of the nineteenth century the intersections of music and gender, especially as influenced by philosophy and greater

[87] Source: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, Vocal Score, English text by Margareth Glynn, ed. Karl Klinworth (New York: G. Schirmer 1904), 66.

social discourse. Thus he writes, "German-language literary and philosophical accounts of music…dramatize men's intense identification with listening subjectivity and, conversely, the danger thereby entered into by those men who listen since, as we shall see, listening was also marked in these symbolic economies as 'feminizing.'"[88] As a result, programmatic music, with its evocative imagery and deference to emotional expression, was seen as more feminizing than the putatively more logical (and therefore masculine) absolute music. Dramatic works such as Wagner's were seen, consequently, as even more feminine. Nietzsche thus derided Wagner and his music, as Dreyfus reveals, "'Man is a coward' who too often succumbs to Wagnerian messages about a woman's love."[89]

Music, as opposed to more concrete arts, allowed for more flexibility concerning gender discourse; even more, it encouraged the blurring of strict gender delineations. Disturbingly to Nietzsche, Wagner communicates most powerfully through music. Not only does Wagner present a message of (feminine) love, he does so seductively through music. Nietzsche shared good company in the nineteenth century with his suspicion of music's sensuous powers. Biddle writes, "Listening…marks out an ambiguous space into which a number of dissident gender formations were able to rush. Indeed, listening, we might say, opens up queer space."[90]

As early as *Tristan* and certainly by the time of *Parsifal*, Wagner had reached a nuanced development of Schopenhauer's philosophy as well. This did not stem from a misreading of Schopenhauer's works as some have claimed. Rather, as Bryan Magee states, "We have it from Nietzsche that Wagner's grasp of Schopenhauer's philosophy was thorough and masterly."[91] As a man who was always restlessly thinking, Wagner concluded – at one time, at least – that

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[88] Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and the Claims of History: The Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 21.

[89] Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 123.

[90] Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and the Claims of History,* 21.

[91] Magee, *Tristan Chord*, 287.

Schopenhauer went too far in forsaking all love.[92] Magee illustrates how Wagner reinterpreted Schopenhauer's denial of the Will, where sensual love offers another type of self-annihilation. Citing a drafted letter that Wagner intended to send to Schopenhauer, Magee writes, "[Wagner] then went on to argue that sexual love is among the ways in which the Will can be led not only to self-awareness but to self-denial."[93] In a way, giving yourself to another person results in the annihilation of yourself: two become one, but the original two beings are lost. These were Wagner's thoughts around the time he composed *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859). *Parsifal,* however, provides a different means to self-annihilation, which involves dissolving oneself into community and the mutual-affection between males. An individual becomes an anonymous figure within the Grail community who yields to the greater needs of the society. Male-to-male relationships, while given some attention in Wagner's other works, receive explicit attention in *Parsifal* as a means to empathetic suffering.

The homoerotic and blending of gender in *Parsifal* satisfies sexual urges while keeping true to Schopenhauer's ideology. As I argue in chapter four, the characters of *Parsifal* present an open display of male-to-male affection, while being perceptibly wary of any female. This of course proves problematic in many ways, not least concerning Wagner's attitude toward women (which the next chapter will discuss). *Parsifal* indicates that Wagner considers the love between two males acceptable, even desirable, within Schopenhauer's paradigm.

Wagner's last essay "*Religion und Kunst*" (1880) sought to wed Schopenhauerian ideas with his own theories about the practical role that art fulfills in contemporary life. As stated earlier, Wagner's work process involved internalizing social issues, working them out in essays intended for publication, and finally attempting to create a musical-dramatic work that embodied a solution, of sorts, to larger social questions. "*Religion und Kunst*" was written, like other prose works by Wagner,

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[92] Ibid., 222.
[93] Ibid., 222.

preceding the art work for which it calls.[94] Scientific terminology regarding evolution and questions concerning Christian faith influenced the tone of his last completed essay. He writes, "The evidence of such a flight of the animal kingdom from the tropics to the rawest northern zones supplied by our geologists in the results of the excavations, such as skeletons of elephants in Siberia for instance, is now well-known."[95] What is a passage such as this doing in an essay devoted to a discussion on religion and art? Wagner is reaching back historically to bind the present to everything that has occurred in the past, a fact that he seeks to corroborate by evoking geologic evidence. The scientific authority with which Wagner writes arises out of his own need to engage with the social discourse around him. Within Germany at that time, culture, as well as humanity itself, was seen as progressing on a linear trajectory.[96] Wagner sought to create a myth for music that paralleled the scientific paradigm of human development and that could satisfy the pessimistic void posited by Schopenhauer. He argues that music, in its service to artistic fulfillment, provides spiritual renewal in modern times – a role previously designated only for religion. Thus, the religious iconography and mystique that constitute the text and music of *Parsifal* reflect Wagner's desired transition from the church as spiritually significant to the stage as a new place of worship. After all, how else might we described his name of *ein Bühnenweihfestspiel* ? Bayreuth becomes a new mecca for those seeking philosophical and spiritual enlightenment. Just as Schopenhauer heard music as the very voice of the Will, Wagner wanted art (specifically, his art) to be elevated and given a religious reverence, which would benefit humanity's development.

The religious and spiritual aura that surrounded *Parsifal* and that Wagner discussed in "*Religion und Kunst*" highlights a philosophical parting of ways that occurred between Nietzsche and

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[94] Magee, *The Tristan Chord*, 281.

[95] Richard Wagner, "*Religion und Kunst*," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, ed. and trans. by William Ashton Ellis (St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1972), 237.

[96] For more on this in relation to music, see Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and the Claims of History*; or Barbara Eichner *History in Mighty Sounds: Musical Constructions of German National Identity 1848-1914* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012).

Wagner. When the two met when Nietzsche was 24 years old (1868), he was elated to find someone with whom he could share his enthusiasm for Schopenhauer. He described Wagner as, "indeed, a fabulously lively and fiery man who speaks very rapidly, is very witty, and makes a very private party like this one an extremely gay affair."[97] Later, however, Nietzsche set himself against Wagner. He contrasts his own "master morality," which "transfigures it beautifies the world and makes it more rational," with the "Christian morality, associated with Wagner's decadence." Nietzsche described the latter thusly: "[it] impoverishes, pales and makes uglier the value of things, it *negates* the world."[98] Nietzsche underwent a painful journey from the philosopher who was obsessed with Wagner to the philosopher who vociferously and incessantly attempted to separate himself from the Wagner aesthetic. This attempt to divorce himself from Wagner consumed works such as *Götzen-Dämmerung* [*Twilight of the Idols*] (an allusion to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, written in 1888) and *Nietzsche* contra *Wagner* (published posthumously in 1895).

The animosity that Nietzsche expressed towards Wagner and his disciples represented more than simply intellectual differences: Nietzsche had been personally wounded by Wagner. The two were almost as father and son, a relationship familiar to Wagner, as will be seen shortly. Nietzsche's admittance into the family household around the production time for the first Bayreuth festival (1876) and his and Wagner's numerous previous discussions on music, philosophy, and Greek drama engendered a familial relationship between the two men. However, this did not grant Wagner the license to interfere with Nietzsche's personal (i.e. sexual) life.

As he did many times throughout his life, Wagner overstepped his bounds. His young philosopher friend claimed to leave Wahnfried (Wagner's residence in Bayreuth) for an illness characterized by "severe headaches, fainting spells, and nausea."[99] Nietzsche met a Swiss doctor, a

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[97] Nietzsche, quoted in Magee, *Tristan Chord*, 293.
[98] Nietzsche, quoted in Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 129.
[99] Ibid., 130.

Wagnerian himself – Otto Eiser, in 1877 for a "proper medical examination" and to investigate his worsening vision. After Dr. Eiser warned Wagner that Nietzsche might be going blind, Wagner informed the doctor of his nasty suspicion:

> In assessing Nietzsche's condition I have long been reminded of identical or very similar experiences with young men of great intellectual ability. Seeing them laid low by similar symptoms, I discovered all too certainly that these were the effects of masturbation. Ever since I observed Nietzsche closely, guided by such experiences, all his traits of temperament and characteristic habits have transformed my fear into a conviction.[100]

This letter, which Wagner showed to Nietzsche, brought to an end a relationship that had already soured.

Rumors of Nietzsche's sexual deviance circulated around Bayreuth as well, even including accusations of pederasty.[101] Nietzsche didn't hesitate to retaliate in his representation of Wagnerites, specifically those who attended Bayreuth. He writes, "as regards the true 'Maenads' who worship Wagner, we can without hesitation conclude hysteria and sickness: something is not right about their sexuality; or there is a lack of children or, in the most tolerable case, a lack of men."[102] His caustic, thinly-veiled indictments of attendees' sexuality sought to challenge the sanity and healthiness of Wagner enthusiasts. Furthering his rage, the bourgeois concertgoers who comprised the Bayreuth audience were not what Nietzsche had been promised; what he had thought would be "a theatre that would be truly subversive to the false values of existing society" became a den where "the whole riff-raff of Europe had been brought together, and any prince could go in and out of Wagner's house as if it were a sporting event."[103] The philosopher was disillusioned at the sight of bourgeois concertgoers, exercising social hegemony, being warmly welcomed to an alleged artistic and social

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[100] Wagner, quoted in Magee, *Tristan Chord*, 335.
[101] Ibid., 337.
[102] Wagner, quoted in Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 130.
[103] Nietzsche, quoted in Magee, *Tristan Chord*, 311.

revolution. Magee suggests Nietzsche's personal hurt caused by these events when he cites Nietzsche's refusal to return to Bayreuth for the premiere of *Parsifal* unless Wagner personally invited him.[104]

Both the gossipers of Bayreuth and Nietzsche's diatribes emphasize a perceived sexual deviance present at the festival. As the opening epigraph by Alban Berg demonstrates, *Parsifal* was heavily entrenched in this culture, one seen as sexually questionable and perhaps even morally corrupting. Where Berg thought the work existed in spite of its milieu, I consider why a collective people described as homosexuals would be associated with *Parsifal* in particular and not, say, *Tristan* or the *Ring*. The ascetic lifestyle, glorified in the work and represented in moments such as Parsifal's refutation of Kundry's kiss, left audiences, critics, and other artists confused; it seemed to clash with Wagner's earlier works where characters abandoned themselves to their emotions and desired fulfillment.

Instead of viewing this work as an about-face in Wagner's oeuvre, however, we can view it as an extension to types of love not usually featured in opera. *Parsifal*'s ultimate message of "knowledge through compassion" was compelling for those who identified with a sexuality that existed outside of the normative expression.

The Man in Pink

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, descriptors for non-normative sexual groups (such as homosexual men and women) arose with psychiatric and pseudo-scientific studies. Mitchell Morris mentions scholarly discourse, such as Richard von Krafft Ebing's *Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiete der Psychopathia Sexualis* [New Research in the Area of Sexual Psychopathy], as well as social groups, including the *Allgemeine Konferenz der Deutschen Sittlichkeitvereine* [General Conference of

[104] Ibid., 312.

German Moral Societies] and the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komittee* [Scientific-humanitarian Committee], that formed around the end of the nineteenth century and reflected social awareness and concerns over sexual identity, practice, and rights.[105] Moreover, these societies and scholarly studies were most prominent in Germany and Austria, setting a precedent for other Western countries' discourses on sexuality. In essence, what happened in Germany was promulgated throughout the rest of Western Europe. Interpretations of *Parsifal* circulated along with discussions on sexuality; hence, the two became inextricably linked.

Within German-speaking nations, tensions arose when discussing sexuality and its moral implications. Insecurities arose concerning familial stability and the moral integrity of homosexuals and their intentions, with calls to criminalize homosexual practices expressed by such groups as the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komittee*.[106] Even into the 1920s, sexologists like Dr. Albert Moll attempted to explain the character of homosexuals (or Uranists, as he called them) in a manner akin to biological research (i.e. employing pseudo-scientific methods). He writes, "Uranists often distinguish themselves by their passion for music and the other arts. Coffignon has already cited this love for music as one of the peculiarities of the Uranist character…They often possess a remarkable talent for acting…I believe that this talent must be attributed in large measure to the habit of lying which clings to the Uranist during his entire life."[107]

Wagner, identified by his desire-laden music dramas, frequently appeared in discussions of sex and mental instability. External factors like scientific theorizing and research surrounding sexuality affected audience members' perception of musical works like *Parsifal*. In fact, Krafft-Ebing shares a remark from one of his patients "who suffers from *konträre Sexualempfindungen* [contrary sexual feelings/urges]." His patient relays, "as little as I am interested in politics, so I passionately

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[105] Morris, *On Homosexual Wagnerians*, 271-272.
[106] Ibid., 272.
[107] Moll, quoted in ibid., 274.

love music, and am an enthusiastic devotee of Richard Wagner's, which partiality I have noticed most homosexuals have; I find that this music corresponds so precisely to our natures."[108] There are many questions that stem from this man's assessment of Wagner's music. I find the opening comparison in which Wagner's music is seen as removed from, even opposed to, politics especially fascinating.

From the creator's perspective, Wagner experienced several close male relationships, which arguably affected the presentation of male camaraderie and affection in *Parsifal*. As the aforementioned Nietzsche-Wagner relationship reflects, the composer shared enigmatic and, at times, strained bonds with other men. Of course, he had many curious episodes with female persons as well, but his experiences with males specifically inform the subject matter of *Parsifal*. As Dreyfus explains, "In Wagner's life…the steady succession of special younger male friends all play different variants of a similar role…and the biographical evidence shows with some consistency that Wagner encouraged, even groomed, each Romantic Friend to understand and fulfill his assigned role as the adoring, self-sacrificing younger lover."[109] Tenderly paternal while overbearing and demanding barely begins to describe the feelings Wagner engendered in his male friends.

To illustrate the dramatic nature Wagner's "Romantic Friendships" could take, I turn to the death of the tenor Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1836-1865), who sang the role of Tristan at the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865). Wagner made a statement about Schnorr von Carolsfeld's early death that performatively blends his life with his art. Not one to shirk from the fantastical, Wagner assumed blame for the 29 year-old's death: "My Tristan! My beloved! – I drove you to the abyss!"[110] Curiously enough, Schnorr on his deathbed denied that the strains of the role led him there. He declaims, "*Tristan* hasn't caused my death. I'm dying in the most unbroken strength succumbing to

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[108] Ibid., 271.
[109] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 214.
[110] Wagner, quoted in ibid., 31.

an ailment that can strike anyone…Oh! My Richard loved me! How contentedly I die: He loved me!"[111] Schnorr's concluding words emphasize the impact that Wagner had on his adoring devotees, including men, who had a yearning desire to be loved by him. The words uttered by Schnorr resonate with the rhetoric of Isolde's last lines in *Tristan*, blending life, art and gender. Additionally, Dreyfus makes a pragmatic connection with this scenario and the "depiction of love's torment" in *Parsifal*: three days after Schnorr's death Wagner drafted a new prose sketch for *Parsifal*. This event appeared to renew Wagner's interest in a work that celebrates male communion and a male character's empathy toward a man who is suffering.

The relationship between Ludwig II and Wagner is one of the more complex interactions in Wagner's life.[112] Wagner described the Bavarian king thusly:

> *Im Jahre der ersten Aufführung meines Tannhäuser (1845) gebar mir Bayerns Königen den Genius meines Lebens, der mich aus tiefster Not zum höchsten Glück bringen sollte; er ist mir vom Himmel gesendet: "Durch ihn bin ich und verstehe ich mich…"* [In the year of the first performance of my *Tannhäuser*, the Bavarian king, the genius of my life, was born, who would bring me out of deepest plight to the highest happiness; he is sent to me from heaven: "Through him, I am and I understand myself"].[113]

From his youth, Ludwig had been intensely captivated by the works of the composer, as stated by Hans Fuchs, "*Sein Gott im Reiche der Musik war Richard Wagner*" [His God in the realms of music was Richard Wagner].[114] The young noble's fascination with Wagner's dramas led him, upon his ascent to the throne in 1864, to invite the much talked about figure to Munich. Again Fuchs relays, "*Aber die erste grosse That seiner Regierung war die Berufung Richard Wagners nach München*" [But the first great deed

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[111] Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, quoted in Ibid., 31.

[112] Hans Fuchs devotes an entire chapter to this relationship in his exegesis on Wagner and homosexuality. See Hans Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität: Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sexuellen Anomalien seiner Gestalten*, (Berlin: H. Barsdorf, 1903), 176-242.

[113] Wagner, quoted in Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität*, 176.

[114] Ibid., 187.

of his reign was the call of Richard Wagner to Munich].[115] The beginning of Ludwig and Wagner's relationship held deep significance for both men, but for Wagner it also provided a means for him to return to his homeland, from which he had been banished since his involvement in the Dresden uprisings in 1849. Wagner's transformation from "deepest plight to highest happiness" harkened perhaps as much to Ludwig's geographical location as to Ludwig himself.

Certainly, King Ludwig brought Wagner out of financial ruin and exile. He also placed at Wagner's disposal the musicians and stage of the Munich Opera house, where *Tristan* (1865) and *Meistersinger* (1868) premiered. Ludwig must have indeed seemed like a savior to the destitute Wagner when his expensive and hedonistic tastes were satisfied by the king. Ludwig provided the financial security of a 4,000 gulden annual stipend, which Millington explains as "comparable to that of a ministerial councilor," in addition to a sum of 24,000 gulden that he received intermittently as gifts in 1864.[116]

In addition to this financial security, one cannot overemphasize the significance Wagner found in Ludwig's unwavering emotional support.[117] When Wagner first had contact with Ludwig, the composer's time of exile in Zürich had left him psychologically strained, compounded by his feelings of isolation and failed relationship with Mathilda Wesendonck. Ludwig offered Wagner what he felt he had always deserved, namely undivided devotion and affection.[118] The Bavarian king was nothing less than obsessed with Wagner's work and Wagner the man. After his first encounter with the king in 1864, Wagner writes, "He loves me with the intensity and fire of first love: he knows everything about me and all my work, and understands me like my own soul. He wants me to stay near him always, to work, to rest, to have my works performed."[119] The intense infatuation

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[115] Ibid., 187.
[116] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 162.
[117] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, especially 53-56.
[118] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 159-65.
[119] Wagner, cited in ibid., 161.

came at a price. Many Bavarians and residing artists were concerned about the king's already excessive habits. Again, we see the metaphor of disease, always a favorite when Nietzsche describes Wagner, invoked here by the painter Friedrich Pecht: "Wagner's influence on the young king was certainly not a good one, if only because it encouraged his tendency to cocoon himself in a world of dreams and fantasies. The composer himself was only too ready to believe that the world existed solely in order to listen to Wagner's music and to despise everything else."[120] So the "homosexual, eccentric" king, in the words of Pecht, concerned himself less with reality and allowed himself to be completely immersed in Wagner's mythic world; indeed, Pecht willingly blames Wagner for exacerbating the king's already questionable grasp of earthly matters.[121]

Such a strong relationship as Ludwig's certainly gave Wagner a new perspective from which to view male relationships in society. Wagner had already included instances of same-sex love in operas such as *Tristan* and *Siegfried*, commented on in chapter four. The difference with *Parsifal* rests in its presentation of same-sex affection, in addition to heterosexual relations, as a solution to worldly woes. Interestingly, *Parsifal* exists as the only poem (as Wagner called his libretti) that Wagner wrote after meeting Ludwig. Naturally, this was not the only factor in shaping the work's message; however, the connection deserves more attention alongside the frequent parallels cited between Schopenhauer and *Parsifal*.

Even apart from his relationship with Ludwig, Wagner's behavior blurred gender lines that had become clearly delineated in broader society. Moll's essentializing twentieth-century assessment that the homosexual's "exaggerated empathy cast its feminizing influence further, inducing…an intense love for clothes, jewelry, perfume, and so on" would have resonated among readers familiar with Wagner.[122] While not often discussed in the twenty-first century, the stuff of Wagner's

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[120] Ibid., 164.
[121] Ibid., 165.
[122] Morris, *On Homosexual Wagnerians,* 274.

undergarments was a topic of conversation and (gleeful) ridicule about which journalists wrote in the late nineteenth century. Much of this conversation stemmed from an 1877 publication in Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse* that contained a collection of letters that Wagner wrote to his Viennese milliner. These contained, as relayed by Dreyfus, "Wagner's lavish requirements (even sketched drawings) for a succession of pink satin dressing gowns with lengthy trains and flounces, along with voluminous orders for satin undergarments, silk slippers, pillows, quilts, curtains, upholstery, and other embroidered accessories too numerous to name."[123] Several sketches appeared in newspapers following the published letters. One entitled "Der 'Atlas' in der Musik" depicts Wagner in heels, pink and silk attire, and surrounded by roses (see Figure 2.2). The title, too, pokes fun at Wagner as a rising cultural icon: in contemporary German, *Atlas* referred not only to the Titan but also a "refined variety of silk."[124] Neither Wagner nor his family appeared uncomfortable with this public image – in fact, his second wife Cosima in 1881 mentioned, according to Dreyfus, "Wagner's silk obsession casually as a kind of in-joke among the family."[125] Nevertheless, it was in the public consciousness during the time of *Parsifal*'s premiere, and consequently these "feminine" tendencies publically attributed to the composer also were ascribed to his work.

Wagner himself appeared comfortable enough with his pink-satin affinities. He and his friend Paul von Joukowsky (whose male partner and he shared residence with the Wagners in Bayreuth) shared this fetish for soft material. Dreyfus reveals a pun that Wagner makes on the final chorus from Goethe's *Faust* while he speaks to Joukowsky. The original lines from Goethe's work read:

Das Unbeschreibliche	[The indescribable,
Hier ist es getan;	here it is done;

[123] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 135-36.
[124] Ibid., 137-38.
[125] Ibid., 141.

Figure 2.2: Der 'Atlas' in der Musik[126]

[126] Source: Lawrence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 138.

Das Ewig-Weibliche	the eternally feminine
Zieht uns hinan.	draws us upwards.][127]

Wagner's pun, developed over a couple of days, reveals that he gave this text more thought, especially in relation to his personal tastes and gendered self-presentation. His first poem went as such:

Das Unbegreifliche,	[The inconceivable,
Hier wird's getan,	here it is done;
Das angenehm weichliche,	the pleasant and soft things
Zieht man gern an.	one likes to put on.]

And the second manifestation:

Das sanft Bestreichliche	[We've taken a fancy
Hat uns getan,	to strokable silk,
Das angenehm weichliche,	the softish and comfortable
Zieht man gern an.	worn by our ilk.][128]

Wagner and Joukowsky's intimacy, shared between a heterosexual and homosexual man, demonstrates Wagner's comfort with his own sexuality. Through this expression, Wagner also suggests that aesthetic preferences may be shared between people of various sexualities and that these tendencies do not reveal pathologies or degenerate behavior. Rather, as Wagner demonstrates through the flower maidens of *Parsifal* or Venus in *Tannhäuser*, these *ros'gen Düften* [rose fragrances]

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[127] Ibid., 178.

[128] Ibid., 179. I use Dreyfus's translation for these two poems. He notes that *sanft Bestreichliche* does not refer to silk specifically, but to "the softly strokable." Also, he clarifies that *weichliche* bears an effeminate rather than feminine connotation.

and other reputedly feminine signifiers may actually appeal to men as well, regardless of sexual ascription.

During the time surrounding Wagner's last years and continuing into *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, sexuality was buzzing throughout scientific discourse, and not with the same ease with which Wagner embraced sexual difference. Biddle, for instance, suggests that, "the crisis of homo/hetero definition…is particularly evident in the psychoanalytic discourse on castration, first formulated by Freud in his '*Über infantile Sexualtheorien'* (1908) [On Child Sexual Theories].[129] Klingsor, then, becomes more than a figure who cannot control his sexual urges; he is perceived as a sexual deviant and even a conflicted homosexual. As Biddle further elucidates, the implications of castration went beyond just sexuality; it denoted race and gender connotations as well. He writes, "the discourse of castration, linked metonymically…to circumcision, is a heterosexual discourse in which the fear of the removal of part of or the entire penis is generated by, and fundamentally linked to, *femininity*."[130]

In addition to offering commentary on contemporary notions of male sexuality, Wagner frequently presented characters that exuded both stereotypical masculine and feminine qualities, creating androgynous figures. The female soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient (1804-1860), whom Wagner greatly admired and worked with in his young adulthood, influenced Wagner's portrayal of a sensuality that crossed gender boundaries. Dreyfus notes, "[the] sensuousness that Wagner ascribes to Schröder-Devrient embodied a decidedly masculine element."[131] Thus, sensuality for Wagner does not necessarily limit itself to standard operatic tropes of a temptress or hyper-sexual female.[132] Rather, informed by his personal desires and encounters with other individuals, sexual desire manifests in a variety of forms associated with both men and women.

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[129] Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History*, 162.
[130] Ibid., 163.
[131] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 56.
[132] See for example Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet:* Carmen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Susan McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), especially 258-74;

Decadence and the effeminate became especially associated with Bayreuth and the cultural reception of *Parsifal*, depicted by artists at the turn of the twentieth century and articulated as moral indignation by intellectuals such as Nietzsche. For example, the artist Aubrey Beardsley presented Wagnarian audiences as effeminate men and ostentatiously bourgeoisie women (see Figure 2.3).[133] There must have been a tangible difference or at least a constructed notion that audiences consisting of Wagnerites distinguished themselves perceptively from other concertgoers.

The perception of individuals that comprised the audience of Bayreuth during the *fin-de-siècle* era equally influenced interpretations of *Parsifal*. When Berg made his derisive comment to his wife regarding the attendees of the festival during his pilgrimage (cited in the epigraph to this chapter), he was not alone in observing that an unusual amount of non-heteronormative individuals attended the

Figure 2.3: Aubrey Beardsley's *The Wagnerites* (1894)[134]

Judith Ann Peraino, "Songs of the Sirens: Desire," in *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11-67.

[133] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 252.

[134] Source: Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, His Work and His World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 252.

festival. Mitchell Morris suggests that the disturbing reasons psychologists put Bayreuth attendees in their memoirs on sexuality stemmed from the festival's reputation for hosting sexual deviants.

Thus, social hype surrounding *Parsifal* and Bayreuth as well as rumors about Wagner's own sexual behavior greatly influenced the perception of the work. In a drama that putatively values chastity, those writers addressing the work or its attendees ironically seemed fascinated by sex. Not only were these writers focused on sex, they wanted to underscore culturally-perceived deviant forms of sexuality in the work. Wagner at times corroborates the probing and poorly-constructed scientific discourse of his day in his presentation of characters such as Kundry and Klingsor, figures who exhibit both non-normative sexual behaviors to Westerners and who play villainous roles within the opera. Informed by his own personal experiences, however, Wagner offered characters such as Parsifal who do not necessarily exhibit accepted traits of Western sexuality but who complicate contemporary sexual theories and philosophies. The final social constructs of race found in *Parsifal*, however, haunt the work's uplifting message.

Race, Others, and Germanness

While this thesis does not claim to exhaustively explore Wagner's racial ideologies, one cannot ignore ideas of race and Otherness when discussing the social milieu of *Parsifal*. Rather than treat Wagner's concept of race and sexuality as isolated constructs, I wish to underscore how sexuality and Otherness coincide in *Parsifal*. Dreyfus offers a comment directly relating to this topic: "it is all the more curious to discover how Wagner the deviant eroticist might – or might not – be related to Wagner the hater of Jews."[135] Wagner's notorious indictment of Jews and their social milieu stemmed from both personal grievances and the desire to imagine a distinctly "German" nation. For example, he seemed particularly paranoid and defensive against the Jewish French opera

[135] Ibid., 157.

composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864), whose wealth and influence Wagner particularly envied.[136] Many such personal and professional interactions and Wagner's own skewed interpretations of such relationships informed his racial ideologies. He explored these concepts in essays such as "*Das Judenthum in der Musik*" (1869) and "*Was ist Deutsch?*" (1878), both written at a time when the composer was working on *Parsifal*. While Wagner writes fluidly with disturbing racist descriptions of Jewish peoples, he appears uncertain how to describe his beloved Germans, whoever they might be. In essence, he finds it easier to describe Germans by what they are not, preferring to excoriate the Other and use it as a foil.

German citizens in the late nineteenth century, too, appeared uncertain concerning what comprised Germanness. Anti-Semitism within the heart of the Fatherland, suspicion towards the French to the West, and the suppression of Slavs in the East characterized some of the only uniform sentiments held by Germans.[137] The identity crises that befell the German diaspora of Europe seemed exacerbated by German unification in 1871 – a process forcefully encouraged by the Prussian prime minister Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898). After a decades-long movement to unify the "German people," citizens were confronted with what being German meant exactly.[138] Again, the construction and villainization of an Other provided a means to unity. In particular, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) cleaved the fractured German principalities, then held in a loose confederation, into a cohesive body. In the face of an enemy, Germans became united. As Barbara Eichner argues, "Bismarck…instrumentalised conflicts with neighbouring states to overcome the disparity of the German Confederation, rather than supporting unification from within."[139] While Eichner downplays Bismarck's peaceful political maneuverings, she correctly highlights his strategy of using the notion of a foreign struggle to unite the German people.

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[136] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 185-86.
[137] Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996), 39-40.
[138] Eichner, *History in Mighty Sounds*, 9-11.
[139] Ibid., 9.

Wagner's artistic works certainly contain direct elements of German nationalism. Holding a personal vendetta against the French since his career failures there in 1839-1842 and again during the *Tannhäuser* debacle in Paris in 1861, Wagner reveled in the international embarrassment of the French.[140] He even devoted time to drafting an operetta, entitled *Eine Kapitulation* [A Capitulation], satirizing the French surrender of Paris in 1871 to Prussian forces.[141] Again, evidence reveals how Wagner was mutually inspired by social events and personal convictions and experiences.

Nineteenth-century German society also linked Otherness to a perceived deviant sexuality, as demonstrated by the early twentieth-century doctor, Oskar Panizza, who relates homosexual abundance to foreign Others. He denigratingly argues, "and there is no doubt, finally, that members or half-breeds of older nations, including Semites, Latins and Orientals, form the bulk of those who make up this physical class [homosexuals], whereas Nordic nations, such as the inhabitants of England and Scandanavia, ought to show a smaller percentage."[142] He continues with his repulsive accusations that the "highest aspirations" and "philosophical treatment of humanitarian issues" found within *Parsifal* are all qualities indicative of the homosexual.[143] These seemingly positive descriptors ascribed to homosexuals reveal the ambivalence with which German society and the medical community viewed such individuals.

Parsifal offers a nuanced expression of Otherness and appears to correlate with German notions of identity, wherein deviant behavior (the Other) is clearly marked and condemned but the righteous path (Germanness) presents itself ambiguously. Further, femininity and the foreign are linked in *Parsifal*, demonstrated by both Kundry and the flower maidens. When Kundry makes her

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[140] Thomas S. Grey, "*Eine Kapitulation*: Aristophanic Operetta as Cultural Warfare in 1870," in *Richard Wagner and His World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 87-88. Intending to try his luck in Paris once again, Wagner added the ballet number required for opera in Paris to *Tannhäuser*. However, he set it as a Bacchanal and placed the dance at the beginning of the work (uncustomary for French grand opera). Consequently, the French aristocracy who attended the work caused enough noise in the audience to make the opera fail in the French capital.

[141] Ibid., 88.

[142] Oskar Panizza, "Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A Reflection," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no.2 (2006), 325.

[143] Ibid., 326.

dramatic entrance in Act I, Gurnemanz queries as to where she acquired a healing bout of balsam. She responds, "*Von weiterher als du denken kannst: Hilft der Balsam nicht, Arabia birgt dann nichts mehr zu seinem Heil*" [From further than you can fathom: the balsam won't help, Arabia contains then nothing more for his health (or salvation)].[144] Musically, a three-note ascending chromatic line in the bassoon (its reedy tone suggesting aural Otherness) accompanies Kundry's voice on the word *Arabia*. Interestingly, a three-note descending chromatic line – i.e. an inversion of the *Arabia* motive – denotes the seduction melody employed by both the flower maidens and Kundry. Wagner's xenophobic tendencies and his notions of sensuality become fused in these passages. A chromatic gesture can represent suffering, foreignness, or the seductive woman[145] – all situations of which Wagner seeks to warn his audience.

Wagner's anti-Semitism, however, is the source of his most notorious diatribes against Others.[146] While anti-Semitism manifested in frightening racial theories towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, Wagner's acerbic treatment of Jews in his writings and conversation were unusual for a musician of his time, shocking both Ludwig and Liszt.[147] As stated earlier, part of his hatred manifested from personal paranoia towards the successful Jewish Meyerbeer compared to his own failures in Paris. On the other hand, scientific discourse of the nineteenth century influenced Wagner's external social observations of difference between Jews and gentiles. A passage from *Judenthum* provides a disturbingly prejudiced linguistic account of Yiddish conversation as, "hearing that gurgling, yodeling, and babbling which throws both sense and mind into utter confusion and

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[144] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, ed. Felix Mottl (New York: C.F. Peters, 1986), 40-41.

[145] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86-90.

[146] See for example Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 183-86.

[147] For an account of Liszt's attempt to remove any racial connotations from *Lohengrin* and his and Wagner's subsequent correspondence, see Lawrence Kramer, "Contesting Wagner," in *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 42-74.

which no attempt at caricature can ever make more repulsively distorted."[148] Wagner's description reflects his own fears by offering a racist account.

Surrounding *Parsifal*, broader cultural uncertainties and prejudices – such as those illustrated above in Wagner societies – manifested in the initial reception of the work and have influenced later perceptions. Of particular significance are the original exclusive performance rights that Bayreuth held until January 1st, 1914.[149] This exclusivity resulted in an unusually powerful connection among the locale of performance, the audience, and the piece itself. Festival attendees and residents of Wahnfried coalesced with the concept of the opera itself. One of the more notorious residents of Bayreuth was the Wagner in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927). Having married Wagner's daughter Eva in 1908 (25 years after Richard's death), Chamberlain quickly settled into the Bayreuth circle and published several of his own histories with a racial bent.[150] A contradictory juxtaposition therefore exists in Bayreuth: how can the home of the racist and demagogue Chamberlain, and the former residence of the author of *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, also be a pilgrimage site replete with putative dilettantes, homosexuals, and other social deviants?

The Bayreuth theatre – in which the music drama was intended to be exclusively performed – and the surrounding milieu of artists, dilettantes, and politicians influenced notions about *Parsifal*. Bayreuth and *Parsifal* are uniquely and enigmatically related through a troubled history that spans the opera's initial sole right to performance in Bayreuth until 1914, the associations of Bayreuth with Hitler during the Third Reich,[151] to innovative stagings in contemporary productions that address Wagner's work vis-à-vis German history. As Kevin Karnes notes, "from the start, the vision that animated the Bayreuth project was radically exclusionary."[152] While the exclusiveness referred in part

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[148] Wagner quoted in Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 184.
[149] Kinderman, *Wagner's* Parsifal, 8.
[150] Ibid., 14-22.
[151] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 271-84.
[152] Kevin C. Karnes, *A Kingdom not of this World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 190.

to economic class, it also applied to various social strata. As Karnes relays, "once a magnet for musicians and intellectuals drawn from throughout the continent, including Mahler, Siegfried Lipiner, and the musicologist Guido Adler, the festival no longer welcomed Jewish visitors [from the late 1890s through WWII]."[153] The associations between Bayreuth and *Parsifal* and the opera's frequent references to blood and purity relate to a complex web of polemical figures in a manner that continues to make a positive interpretation of the work problematic.[154]

Within this disturbing realm of racial polemics, Wagner also presented a message of redemption laden with sexual implication in *Parsifal*. Social issues, discussed in philosophical and scientific circles contemporary to *Parsifal*, both influenced Wagner's construction of the work and informed the audience's perception of the opera. Dreyfus argues, "it was an act of artistic honesty to craft a work that gives shape to a dilemma embedded deeply in the composer's own experience."[155] Racial theories, sexual pathologies, and communal struggles all are hermeneutical possibilities in a piece so culturally embedded. Nevertheless, Wagner's presentation of love in *Parsifal* invites consideration, even while the influences of his racist exclusionary theories and erroneous scientific descriptions of sexual maladies remain potent.

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[153] Ibid., 191.
[154] Kinderman, *Parsifal*, 7.
[155] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 217.

Chapter 3: From Temptress to Penitent: On Redemption of the Feminine

"I don't like hysterical woman."
-Friedrich Nietzsche on Parsifal[156]

The only solo woman role in *Parsifal*, Kundry is an amalgam of various sources from Wagner's research and personal convictions concerning the *Ewig-weibliche* and women's role in redemption. Placing Kundry among other female characters in nineteenth-century opera presents difficulties, especially when considering the standard presentation of the nineteenth-century operatic *femme fatale*, à la *Carmen*, and her required demise, as researched by Susan McClary and Catherine Clément.[157] When Kundry expires at the end of the opera, it is not out of vindication for the male who was tempted; rather, it fulfills her desire to find peace. Wagner's harmonic language within the opera, which expresses both eroticism and spiritual tranquility distinctly, along with his later essays provide clues concerning his intended presentation of Kundry.[158] Drawing from these and Jean-Jacques Nattiez's presentation of androgyny in Wagner's *Ring,* I construct a new interpretation of Kundry. As Wagner's only woman who requires redemption, Kundry's death, via her transformation from a chromatic seductress to a silent woman, signifies a transformation from the cursed fate of the feminine to an androgynous figure that transcends nineteenth-century gender dichotomies.

Few operas of the Western nineteenth-century tradition choose to abruptly silence the lead woman role two-thirds through the performance. Never one to shy away from dramatic innovations, Wagner does just this with Kundry in *Parsifal*, and the notable absence of women on the stage makes Kundry's muteness of the third act all the more palpable. While much of this thesis explores Wagner's projection of homoerotic sensibilities and anxieties intended for his male viewers, this

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[156] Nietzsche quoted in Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth: Richard Wagner, his Work and his World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 240.

[157] See, for example, Catherine Clément, *Opera: Or the Undoing of Woman,* trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet*: Carmen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[158] On Wagner's musical semiotics and women, see for example Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women*, trans. Chris Walton (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2011), 8-19.

chapter explores what such representations might imply for women in society. Simultaneously, I illumine how Wagner's treatment of women in *Parsifal* reciprocates and informs male-to-male love as presented in the work.

Three roles act as separate embodiments of the feminine in *Parsifal*. The flower maidens of the second act support the typical negative trope of the dangerous female siren, seeking to lure the hero with gentle song, gestures, and even scents.[159] Second, the ambiguously gendered squires, pages, and young knights of the Grail community portray androgynous figures; while dressed and referred to as males, these roles are actually sung by female voices. Finally, Wagner merges the negative with the ideal (among a cornucopia of other Western female archetypes) into the figure that is Kundry; she is both the wild, sensuous temptress and the spiritual, pious servant. Additionally, her role reveals the path to transcendence from her initially irrational and mysterious visage, representing the feminine, to the penitent figure of silence, who exhibits fluid traits attributable to both men and women. The androgynous transformation of Kundry echoes an interpretation by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg in his 1982 film *Parsifal,* where the eponymous character undergoes a relatable conversion.[160]

Contingent Tropes: Prostitutes, Mothers, and Women of the Bible

In some ways, Wagner reinforced in his final music drama the stereotypes of the *femme-fatale* and general fear towards women as presented on nineteenth-century stages. Kundry's chromatic and acrobatic lines, for instance, convey a being of unnatural and magical powers. Indeed, two squires who are in her presence during the first act clearly indicate that Kundry is a marked Other of whom

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[159] See Susan McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 81.

[160] Notably different, however, Syberberg presents Parsifal – not Kundry – as a figure of androgyny, depicting him as a boy before his encounter with Kundry in the second act and as a girl afterward. See *Parsifal,* directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (1982; Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1999), DVD.

to be wary. The first squire fearfully observes, "*Doch haßt sie uns; – sieh nur, wie hämisch dort nach uns sie blickt*" [But she hates us; only look there at how sneeringly she gazes at us]! At which point the second squire surmises, "*Eine Heidin ist's, ein Zauberweib*" [A heathen is she, a sorceress].[161] Common nineteenth-century tropes of the feminine are evoked by the gentle coaxing of the flower maidens' melodic lines as well.[162] Their simultaneous presentation of sensual desire and danger reveals, as Gail Finney states, the "alluring and yet disturbing embodiments of the dangers of female sexual power."[163]

This perceived power of females over males was especially feared in the nineteenth century, although many scholars have argued for its presence throughout history.[164] Creating a historical liaison with Greek drama, Gail Finney writes "the lineage of the femme fatale may be traced back to Helen of Troy, whose beautiful face launched ten years of war destruction. In her wake have followed a procession of sirens and gorgeous witches."[165] As one intimately familiar with Greek drama, Wagner created female roles that, through siren imagery, alluded to a long Western tradition of ambiguous female presentation[166] and that were simultaneously consistent with contemporary ideology concerning the feminine.

Wagner's continued engagement with the philosophically constructed *Ewig-weibliche* manifests tortuously in the perpetually reincarnated Kundry. In her desire to escape her curses, he reinforces the notion of eternal longing that women were called upon to represent in drama. As Adrian Daub reveals, "[for Wagner] this kind of all-subtending infinitude was often associated with the erotic – Wagner writes of the 'infinitely feminine woman' [*unendlich weibliche Weib*], the infinity of 'passion,

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[161] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, 51.

[162] Judith Ann Peraino, "Queer Ears and Icons: Sign Systems," in *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 110-151.

[163] Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 51.

[164] See for instance Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and the Claims of History: the Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 150.

[165] Ibid., 51.

[166] Peraino, "Songs of the Sirens: Desire," in *Listening to the Sirens,* 13-19.

love and yearning in themselves.'"[167] Kundry's painful cries and provocative harmonies, sounding both modern and hauntingly archaic, reverberate desire throughout time.

In certain ways, Wagner reinforced the already starkly divided gender dichotomies of Wilhelmine Germany; however, despite the negative female tropes that Wagner employs in *Parsifal*, Anthony Winterbourne suggests that Wagner resolutely believed this traditional presentation of the female was a problem. Wagner knew, "[that] women are victims of power structures determined exclusively by men, and in particular of the entrenched system of property ownership upon which marriage…was founded."[168] Consequently, he sought to challenge the constructs of gender in which he lived. Kundry acts as Wagner's reply to nineteenth-century and earlier discourses on female gender. She initially displays negative feminine stereotypes while ultimately undergoing a transfiguration into Wagner's ideal androgynous figure. Thus, Kundry offers a path of hope in an otherwise immutable gender dichotomy.

In addition to his contemporary milieu and secular sources, Wagner drew equally from sacred paradigms of women as represented in the Bible and Christian and Buddhist traditions. The blatantly religious iconography of *Parsifal* invites the viewer to consider biblical constructions of the female. The figure of Eve demonstrates one of the more noticeable parallels between the women characters of *Parsifal* and a biblical icon. The scapegoat for humanity's downfall, Eve embodies male anxieties toward a knowledgeable, independent female. When Adam succumbs to her entreaties, the scriptures warn men that the woman is a powerful temptress who cannot be resisted. The Kundry of the first and second act and the flower maidens evoke this trope, which ascribes treacherous temptation to women. Both the flower maidens and Kundry, for example, have brought the righteous, chaste Amfortas to his downfall before the opera even begins.

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[167] Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art after Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 14.

[168] Anthony Winterbourne, *A Pagan Spoiled* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 19.

Kundry shares another connection to this Ur-woman of the Judeo-Christian tradition: she inherits the curse of women that began with Eve. Presented as reincarnation (itself a fusion of Buddhist and Christian ideology), Kundry demonstrates the fate borne by every woman, being condemned to a life of suffering from the start. Wagner invites us to compare Kundry to Eve herself as well. Just as Eve makes the choice to disobey God and eat of the forbidden fruit, so Kundry chose to look upon Christ and mock him: both women decided their initial fate and then condemned either those to follow, as in the case of Eve, or her own perpetual selves, as does Kundry.

The redeemed Kundry of the third act reflects a second female biblical archetype. In the gospel of Luke, we are given a glimpse of Mary Magdalene before she encountered Jesus: "Jesus traveled from one town and village to another. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom several demons had come out."[169] Mary Magdalene demonstrates a transformation from a diseased sinner to a pious disciple. In the third act of *Parsifal*, Wagner conflates the image of this woman of transformation with another Mary, the sister of Lazarus, when Kundry washes Parsifal's feet.[170] By suggesting imagery redolent of Mary Magdalene and other righteous biblical females, Wagner therefore invites the audience to consider other women who have transformed themselves from a life of sin to one of repentance.

The final female archetype, the motherly figure, on which Wagner draws also receives ambivalent treatment. Finney reveals, "while motherhood has been a major source of women's oppression…it has also been the one area of life in which women have typically exercised power, through their authority and control over another human being."[171] Wagner emphasizes the

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[169] Luke 8: 1-3, KJV.
[170] See John 11:2.
[171] Finney, *Women in Modern Drama*, 185.

importance of the mother figure in his final, uncompleted essay "*Über das Weibliche im Menschlichen*" [On the Feminine in Humanity]. He intended it to be a conclusion to his essay "*Religion und Kunst*" [Religion and Art], and thus the article bears significant relation to *Parsifal*.[172] In this fragment, Wagner expresses humanity's relationship to nature and its position above other animals. Where he expounds on desire, he claims, "Man's severance from the animal kingdom…might be said to have been completed by the conversion of his 'heat' into passionate affection for the individual."[173] He goes on, "in the woman alone, the mother, does that instinct seem to retain its sovereignty."[174] The kinship between mother and child produces an emotion that Wagner found primeval. Kundry evokes this instinctual motherly affection in an attempt to seduce Parsifal; by touching on what Wagner views as a primeval instinct, Kundry hopes to gain access to Parsifal's emotions.[175] Through his resistance of her efforts, Parsifal, in Wagner's eyes, transcends the immutable motherly call and frees Kundry (i.e. those humans bound by natural desires) from her curse.

Such moments raise questions about where spiritual and physical love meet. Brian Emslie argues that in all of Wagner's works, "he [struggles] at the challenge posed by the apparently incompatible spiritual and sensual categories throughout the entire stretch of his creative and intellectual life, attempting a range of far-reaching, fascinating and hypocritical reconciliations."[176] Winterbourne contrastingly suggests that Kundry provides a solution to this challenge and represents, "the moment when the secular and spiritual converge."[177] *Parsifal* supersedes Emslie's conclusion in that Parsifal renounces physical desire of women entirely and gives himself over to compassion for a male figure (Amfortas). While Winterbourne is correct, I go further in arguing

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[172] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 243.

[173] Richard Wagner, "The Human Womanly," in vol. 6 of *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William A. Ellis (St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press Inc., 1972), 336.

[174] Ibid., 336.

[175] Motherhood and sexuality in Wagner's works is not limited to *Parsifal*. See also, for example, the concluding scene in Act III of *Siegfried* between Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

[176] Brian Emslie, *Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Woodbridge, U.K.: The Boydell Press, 2010), 3.

[177] Winterbourne, *Pagan Spoiled*, 12.

Kundry represents not only the convergence of secular and spiritual love but also the female character freed from the burden of redeeming the male.

Flower Maidens

For the first time in *Parsifal*, the second act depicts visually a clear distinction between male and female, namely at the point where Parsifal enters the magic garden and the flower maidens confront him. Importantly, the audience knows the insidious intentions of the flower maidens (described by Gurnemanz in the first act) and sees their malicious aims aligned with a negative presentation of the female. Jay Geller explains that in the scientifically influenced discourse of the nineteenth century, gender, existing as a distinctly "masculine" male and "feminine" female dichotomy, appeared to be a non-negotiable issue due to the concrete empirical observation of sexual dimorphism. He reveals, "the body remained, inscribed with the natural markers of gender and sexuality, nation and race. Identity was read off these inextricably intertwined signs as these sciences provided a grammar of truth that treated that body, and the reproductive organs especially, as the language by which 'natural' difference was expressed."[178] The flower maidens identify Parsifal, the *Frevler* [evildoer], easily enough: "*Wer ist unser Feind? Da steht er! Seht ihn dort"* [Where is our foe? There he stands! See him there!]![179] In Klingsor's magic garden intended to sedate and confuse reality, gender dichotomies offer a palpable contrast of concrete sexual difference.

Before Klingsor's young beauties spot Parsifal, however, they demonstrate another female trope: the lamenting woman. Clément describes female choruses in Wagnerian opera thusly: "'Sorority' is not worth much: Fricka and Freia, the three Norns, the troop of Valkyries, all have one trait in common – complaint. They complain about one another, they moan incessantly, they are

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[178] Jay Geller, *On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumstances* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7.
[179] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act 2, 290-91.

always crying."[180] While Clément describes here groups of women in the *Ring*, her accusation remains appropriate for *Parsifal* as well, at least for the stereotypically feminine characters who are the flower maidens. The *Blumenmädchen* enter the stage mournfully searching for their fallen knights, whom Parsifal has vanquished. They cry out, "*Mein Geliebter verwundet? Wo find ich den meinen? Ich erwachte alleine! Wohin entflohn sie? Wo ist mein Geliebter"* [My beloved wounded? Where find I mine? I awoke alone! Where have they fled? Where is my beloved?]?[181] In accordance with representing woman as emotional and irrational, the female members of the chorus exchange their lines mellifluously with a continuous descending chromatic passage, creating a disorienting effect for the listener.

Most obviously, the maidens play the role of temptresses. In this instance, the flower maidens correlate most directly to Venusberg in *Tannhäuser*, the underground world of sensual pleasures.[182] The gentle lines with which the maidens attempt to coax Parsifal (see figure 3.1) enraptured Wagner himself. Curiously, he began the musical composition of *Parsifal* with this music. As Kinderman relays, "the first music written specifically for *Parsifal*, is for the chorus of Flowermaidens in act 2, who sing 'Komm! holder Knabe!' (Come! charming boy!) as they surround Parsifal and flirt with him."[183] Köhler, citing Egon Voss, claims this musical moment "is directly related to the Dresden Amen [signifying the Grail community] through its 'ascending second,' with the result that 'the worlds of the Grail and Klingsor…are musically very close, not to say identical."[184] The worlds of secular sinfulness and sacred piety are thus more closely related than what the text and action might reveal.

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[180] Clément, *Opera*, 161.
[181] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act 2, 287-88.
[182] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 233.
[183] William Kinderman, "The Genesis of the Music," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 146.
[184] Köhler, *Richard Wagner*, 614.

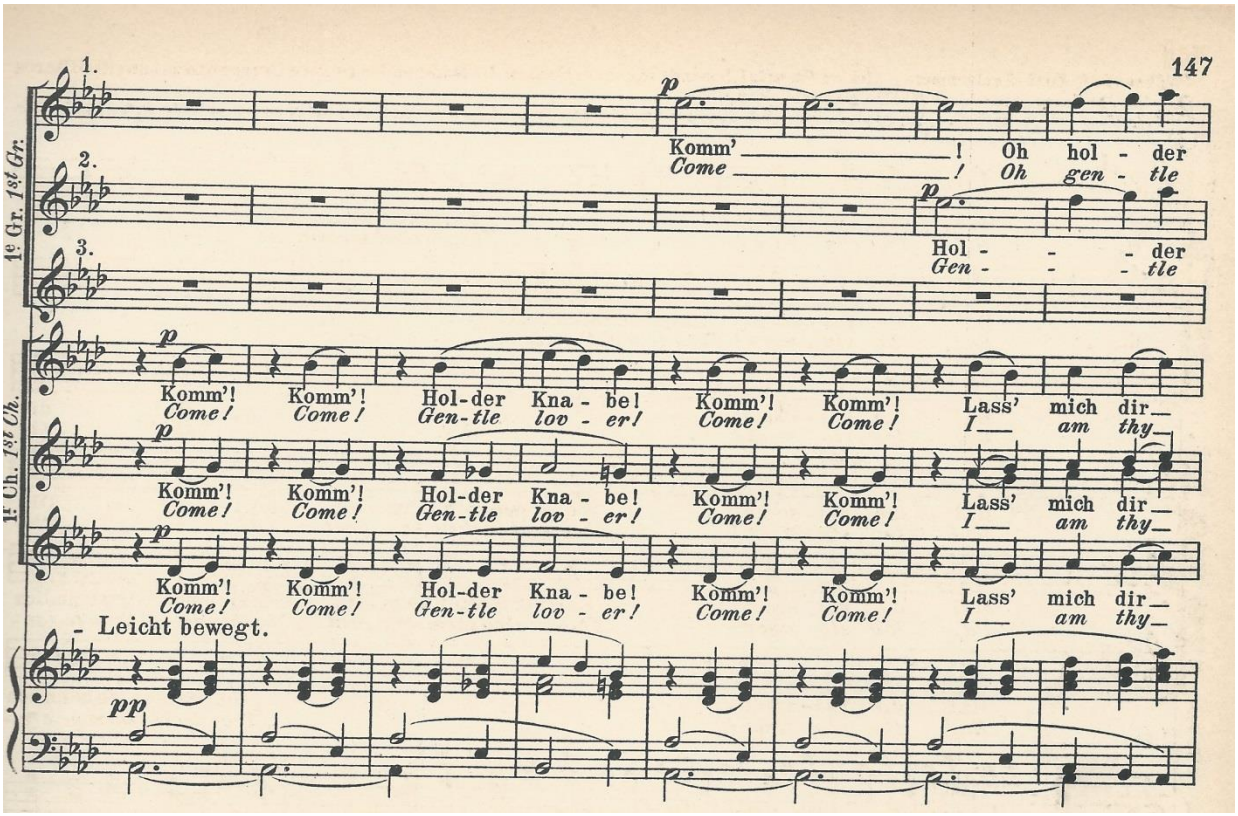

Figure 3.1 The Flower Maidens Seduce Parsifal[185]

This scene held special significance for Wagner as relayed by Cosima. Even when he was too ill to attend a full performance of *Parsifal*, the composer slipped into the hall to hear the flower maidens' passage, finding the gentle lines of the singing women soothing.[186] Millington offers another personal reason for Wagner's affinity for the flower maidens. Wagner, "it is alleged…was having an affair" with Carrie Pringle, a singer who played one of the Flower Maidens.[187] The two reasons – musical and sexual liaison – are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the two complement one another, as the opera itself demonstrates.

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[185] Source: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal* Act II, Vocal Score, English text by Margareth Glynn, ed. Karl Klinworth (New York: G. Schirmer, 1904), 147.

[186] Köhler, *Richard Wagner*, 615.

[187] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 243.

Unlike Wagner's own capitulation to the maidens' temptations, Parsifal refuses to give in to the women's seductions, culminating in an angry outburst. This renunciation left audiences puzzled and feeling anxious.[188] Nietzsche even caustically suggests *Parsifal* stands as a farce in Wagner's output: "That poor devil and nature boy Parsifal, whom he [Wagner] finally made into a Catholic by such captious means – what? was this Parsifal meant seriously? For one might be tempted to suppose the reverse, even to desire that the Wagnerian Parsifal was intended as a joke."[189] In Nietzsche's eyes, a man should naturally give in to a woman's temptations, otherwise he is incomprehensible or, worse, some type of social deviant (i.e. a homosexual). These implications will be further explored in the following chapter.

The flower maidens in the second act of *Parsifal* corroborate gender stereotypes found on nineteenth-century operatic stages. Specifically, they act as siren, who lure unsuspecting males to an inescapable doom. Curiously, in this work the females need only lure the male into a sense of enraptured acquiescence; a male, the sorcerer Klingsor, actually deals the lethal blow.

Grail Women

The squires of the Grail community offer Wagner's solution to the gender disparities he observed; essentially, he presents his own vision for women to circumvent male hegemony via an androgynous persona. Far removed from the malicious intentions of the flower maidens, these knights and squires of the Grail order – presented as men on stage but sung by females – share the desires of all living within the Grail community. Wagner presents the female voice in two manifestations. The squires are played by quasi-trouser roles where a female sings the role of a young male. The so-called youths, sung by female (alto) alongside male (tenor) voices that lack

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[188] Martin Geck, *Richard Wagner: A Life in Music*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 329; John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 162-63.

[189] Quoted in Suzanne R. Stewart, "The Theft of the Operatic Voice: Masochistic Seduction in Wagner's *Parsifal*," *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no.4 (1996): 599-600.

corporeality, are heard only as emanating from above the stage. The youths heard offstage further Wagner's manipulation of gender as the audience hears them as blending together.

The squires and youths of *Parsifal* offer complex figures that are an amalgam of the male and female, oftentimes resulting in disparate interpretations ranging from a pure, sexless being to a symbol of desire. Notably, *Parsifal* contains the only trouser-like roles in Wagner's dramatic output. In *Tannhäuser* for instance, Wagner employed boys to sing the actual roles of boys in the opera.[190] His reasons for using women to cast the Grail squires in *Parsifal*, therefore, must have been dramatically significant and not just pragmatically determined. Wagner uses the female voice of a squire to announce the entrance of Kundry, the only ostensibly female character in the first act. By this subtle device, Wagner links the feminine in the androgynous squire with the visible woman who appears shortly thereafter on the stage. The bond between these two characters – an androgynous Grail squire and Kundry – will be further elucidated below.

The youths of the Grail community exist only aurally, heard from above the stage. Clément attributes this to Wagner's masculine agenda: "*Parsifal* presents a compassionate masculine 'tune' among the 'tribe' of the knights: there again, in the sacred circle, there is no place for a feminine voice, except the voice that is heard falling from the dome, strictly invisible."[191] While Clément dismisses the other female characters visible on the stage, her reading of the relegation of female voices offstage is provocative. Although men sing alongside the women offstage, Wagner permits men to be seen onstage as well while not affording women this position. These disembodied voices sing two differing melodic passages. The first passage emits sounds within the modern chromatic world of the nineteenth century, and its polyphony evokes the torturous pains that constantly

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[190] Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*, Act III, vol. 3 in *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Werke,* ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1968).

[191] Catherine Clément, "Through Voices, History," in *Siren Songs*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.

entangle our suffering existence (see Figure 3.2).[192] The second time an overhead choir is heard they sing the primarily diatonic "*Reine Tor*" motive (see Figure 3.3).

These two examples suggest that the invisible voices represent fluid emotional states as opposed to exuding a fixed semantic meaning: one evokes pain and suffering, such as that endured by Christ and, by analogy, Amfortas. The second line, on the other hand, in pseudo-prophetic language heralds the coming of Parsifal. The musical setting, too, emphasizes the conveyance of these different emotions. The first passage's polyphonic texture and chromaticism evoke the

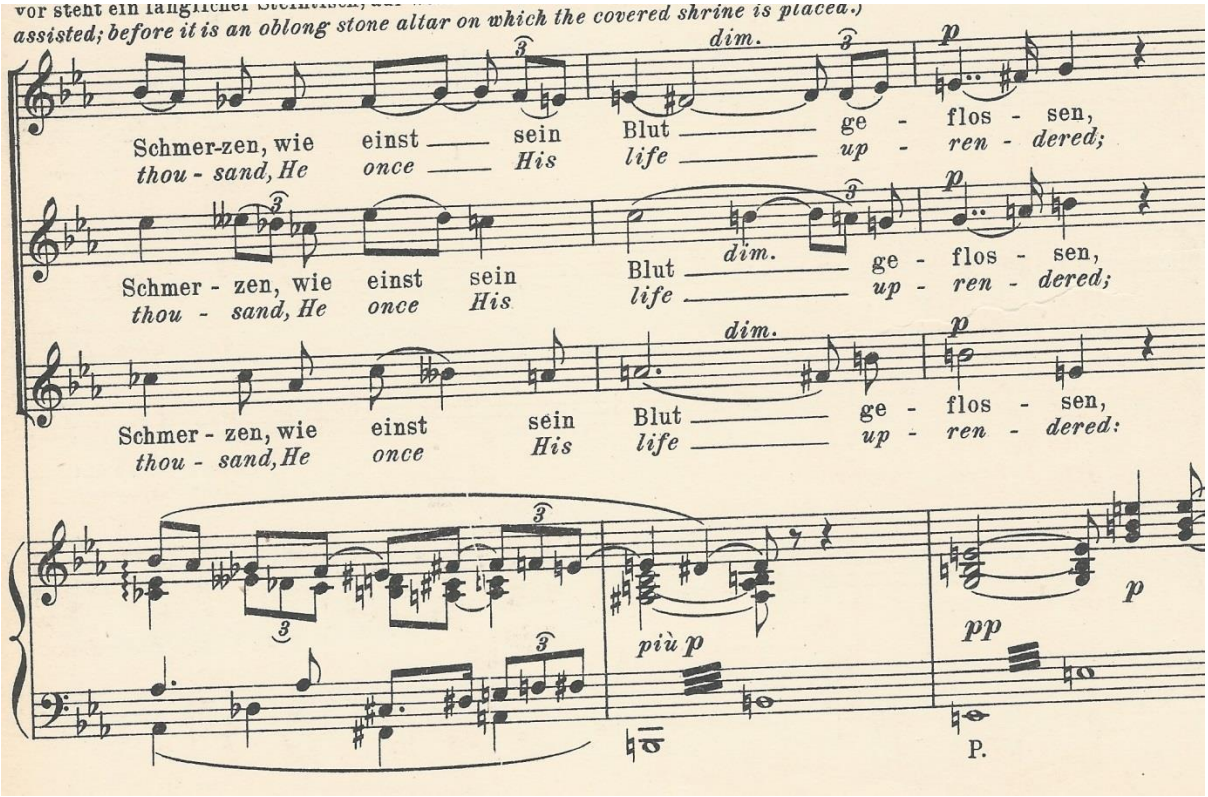

Figure 3.2 Voices of Invisible Youths Singing to Chromatic Polyphony[193]

[192] For a discussion of this passage, see Katherine R. Syer, "Unseen Voices: Wagner's Musical-Dramatic Shaping of the Grail Scene of Act I," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer, 177-214 (Rochester: Camden House, 2005).

[193] Source: Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, Vocal Score, 72.

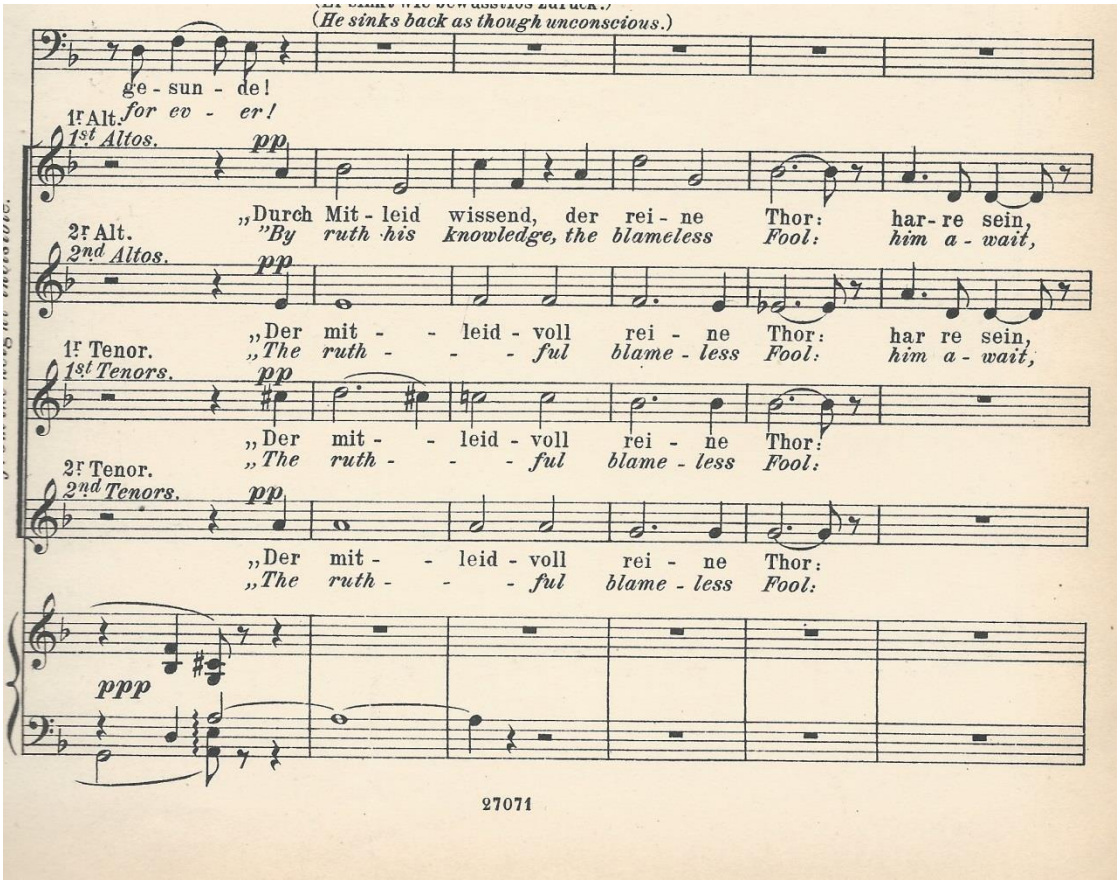

Figure 3.3 Voices of Invisible Youths Singing the "*Reine Tor*" Motive[194]

suffering felt by Amfortas. Conversely, the second passage emphasizes the notion of purity where the voices finish the phrase without orchestral accompaniment. Furthering the notion of androgyny, the timbre of the voices also flow over one another. Wagner sets both of these passages to alto and tenor voices only. In a choral setting, these inner voices are often difficult to single out and create a blending of timbre: aurally, males and females become indistinguishable. Katherine Syer suggests another reason for the placement of these singers out of the audience's eye. She argues, "at the same time, Wagner's use of invisible sources of sound is bound up with a sense that the meaning of the Grail extends beyond the phenomenal level, beyond the visible and immediate realm of

[194] Source: Ibid., 85.

experience."[195] The voices, then, remain unseen in order to emphasize their other-worldliness; these are the voices of those who have achieved a transcendent bliss where gendered differences cease to exist.

Kundry and the Path to Transcendence

If the disembodied voices represent Wagner's goal for transcending gender norms, Kundry demonstrates the path to that goal. She transitions from the babbling woman of the first act, to an omniscient voice in the second act, and finally to a silent role in the opera's conclusion. As already noted, she also employs differing voices, referencing biblical archetypes and iconic motherhood. Carolyn Abbate, in her exegesis of voice and narrative, suggests, "voice in music can…be understood…as the source of sonority, as a presence or resonating intelligence."[196] It is through her voice that Kundry expresses her various selves (and the voices of all women) and reveals the way to transcendence.

Wagner entangles Kundry's identity with ambivalent presentations of sexuality and guilt. As mentioned in chapter two, scholarly and social interest in sexuality and identity arose in the nineteenth century. Winterbourne illuminates, "the very idea of sexual identity began to assume an increasingly important role in how people thought of themselves."[197] The ambiguity and fear associated with gender were, as posited by Linda and Michael Hutcheon, "the consequences of this new psychobiological model [in which] sexual identity and desire became basic to how people thought of themselves as human."[198]

In the first act of *Parsifal*, Wagner marks Kundry as a distinct Other from the otherwise homogenous Grail community, both by her sexual difference and mysterious, foreign origins. She

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[195] Syer, "Unseen Voices," 177.
[196] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.
[197] Winterbourne, *Pagan Spoiled*, 21.
[198] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, quoted in Anthony Winterbourne, *A Pagan Spoiled,* 22.

makes her entrance into the all-male Grail land of the first act as a wild rider, feared and mocked by most of the Grail knights save the elder Gurnemanz. Linda and Michael Hutcheon emphasize Kundry's estrangement from the world of Grail knights: "a dangerous alien, she is called a heathen and a sorceress…wildly dressed, with black hair flowing in loose locks, and piercing black eyes, sometimes wild and blazing.[199] Her arrival music corroborates this alien character, sounded by a transparently orchestrated f diminished chord; this chord evokes the trepidation the knights feel towards this encounter with a woman. The musical passage concludes with Kundry's serpentine motive; the chromatic ambiguity of this theme contrasts starkly with the diatonic harmonies of the knights (see Figure 3.4). This theme often accompanies Amfortas as well, revealing the source of his pain and further blurring gender.

Mary Ann Smart conveys the connection between Kundry, sexuality, and a kind of Freudian hysteria in her opening scene: "she speaks little, often stammering, repeating words or breaking into

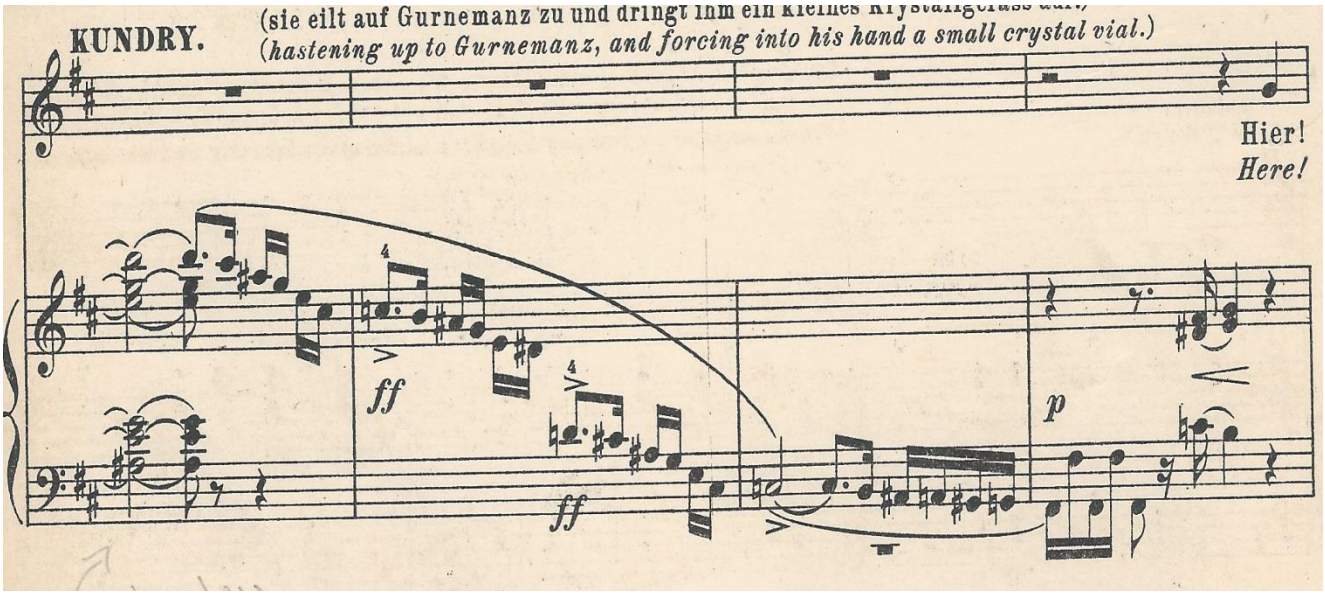

Figure 3.4 Kundry's Descending Motive[200]

[199] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "Syphilis, Sin and Social Order: Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no.3 (1995): 270.

[200] Source: Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, Vocal Score, 14.

senseless laughter; and, especially in the first act, she is in constant motion – quivering, trembling, throwing herself in a heap on the ground and then gradually raising herself up again."[201]
Her entrance, for example, consists of the broken lines, "*Hier! Nimm du! – Balsam…*" [Here, take this…balsam…].[202] Indeed, Kundry speaks only in this way throughout the entire first act: everything she utters is a painful fragment or short, mocking phrase. As with his depiction of the flower maidens, Wagner's presentation of Kundry relies here on the use of common female stereotypes.

In the second act, when Kundry is summoned by the sorcerer Klingsor through her eternal curse, she finds herself in a sonic world much more akin to her serpentine motive. Klingsor's sonic realm constantly shifts harmonically and bubbles with sensuous chromaticism. The variety of Kundry's reincarnated selves mirror the perpetual harmonic shifts heard in the music. Klingsor emphasizes Kundry's heterogeneous character when he addresses her by the variety of names she has possessed. He cries, "*Urteufelin! Höllenrose! Herodias warst du, und was noch? Gundryggia dort, Kundry hier!* [Primeval devil! Rose of Hell! Herodias were you, and what's more? Gundryggia there, Kundry here!]"[203]

Whether or not she physically embodied each person Klingsor names, Kundry has led multiple lives. In contradistinction to Christian and therefore Western doctrine, Wagner fuses Nordic and biblical characters with Buddhist elements of reincarnation. In fact, Kundry's origins began with a reincarnated figure from Wagner's unfinished Buddhist drama *Die Sieger* (1858).[204] In her final dramatic manifestation, Kundry is cursed to live perpetually and exist as multiple female beings. Only a man who renounces her temptations can free her.

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[201] Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 195.

[202] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, 40.

[203] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, 241.

[204] On Wagner's conflation of various medieval sources to create Kundry, see William Kinderman, *Wagner's* Parsifal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 63.

Continuing with the second act, Kundry exercises a greater range of expression through her vocality. By demonstrating her vocal prowess, Kundry's power to recall events from the distant past returns with clarity. Contrasting with the first act, Kundry's voice exhibits great strength in Klingsor's magic garden. When she makes her appearance, her voice is heard before she becomes visible. From her first line, "*Parsifal, weile!* [Parsifal, tarry!]" she exercises her authority in naming Parsifal, who has remained anonymous until this point in the opera. Not only does the text reveal her knowledge, she also calls to the hero employing a variation of the "*reine Tor*" melody: through music, she reveals an awareness of whom the prophecy speaks. With a similarly commanding presence, she dismisses the flower maidens and appropriates their melody as she initiates her seduction of the hero.

In her attempted seduction of Parsifal, Kundry offers another facet of womanhood through her presentation as a motherly figure. The music with which she seeks to seduce Parsifal in the second act is imitative of a lullaby in its gentle swaying motion, undulating harmony within a compound meter, and softly delivered text (See Figure 3.5). Explicitly, Kundry offers Parsifal ""*als Muttersegens letzten Gruß, der Liebe – ersten Kuß* [as the last regards of a Mother's blessing, the first kiss of love]"[205] In light of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale*, this motherly seduction resonates with Freudian significance, entrancing Parsifal with feelings of guilt regarding his own mother and her death as well as his curiosity about women. Significantly, this moment signifies the transition that will eventually free Kundry from her curse.

Wagner presents motherly affection as powerful, nearly irresistible. Even more interesting, he does not limit the power of the mother solely to female roles. Specifically looking for elements of gender bending and influences on *fin-de-siècle* culture, Adrian Daub has explored another Wagnerian opera where a character evokes motherly tropes in an attempt to seduce someone. In this case, the

[205] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, 364.

male dwarf Mime claims to be both the mother and father of the orphaned hero Siegfried. Daub illuminates Mime's motivation: "Mime's sole concern in laying claim to androgynous parenthood is to keep Siegfried from realizing that there is such a thing as love between mothers and fathers."[206] Thus, when the mother speaks in Wagner's world, the character must listen and choose whether or not to accede to the motherly character's wishes.

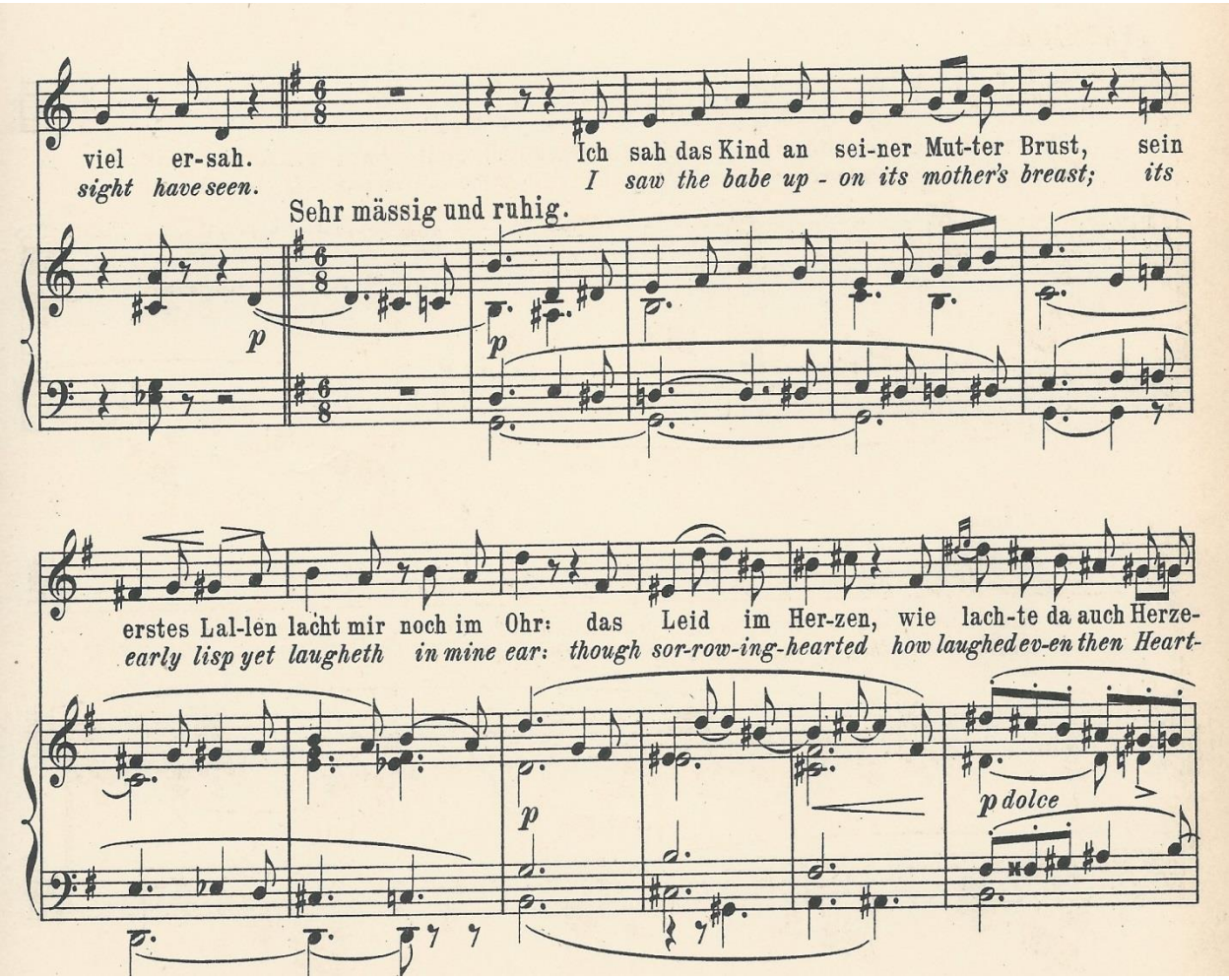

Figure 3.5 Kundry's Motherly Seduction[207]

[206] Daub, *Tristan's Shadow*, 34.
[207] Source: Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act II, Vocal Score, 175.

The final act presents Wagner's strangest role for any of his characters: Kundry is silent throughout the remainder of the opera. She is only given stage directions such as her act of washing Parsifal's feet and tacit observance of the Eucharist. Once Parsifal is crowned Grail king, she sinks slowly to the ground, lifeless.

The death of Kundry produces an enigma that is not easily riddled out. Does this end resign her to the fate of other *femme fatales*? Clément seems to think so when she states, "and when Parsifal has finally brought her to the long-awaited Redemption, Kundry collapses, dead, returning to the Nature that she was deprived of for her crime."[208] The use of "returning" implies that nature is birth *ex nihilo* followed by termination in death. However, Wagner discerningly gives us a character who is reincarnated and suffers *because* of nature, i.e. the Will and desire. Moreover, Kundry does not return to natural death, rather she is transfigured into a state of bliss.

As Winterbourne revealed earlier, Wagner consciously wrestled with the notion that women were trapped in a male-dominated society. This masculine control extended to the realm of language as well. In her study of *Parsifal* and the voice, Suzanne Stewart argues, "Opera, in its quest for the voice, expresses a certain truth: that humans suffer from the fact that they are always already inserted into the symbolic order of language and law and that they therefore gain pleasure in seeking to forget this necessary subjection to language."[209] Through her wailings and moans, Kundry seeks to express pain that is outside the typical patriarchal semantic meaning of language. Kundry's silence of the third act may actually be a conscious decision to not speak, a refusal to engage with the parameters set up by male discourse.

Thus one need not associate Kundry's silence with stupidity or the absence of self. Rather, Kundry projects a poised sense of stillness, one where she remains cognizant of her surroundings

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[208] Clément, *Opera*, 117.

[209] Suzanne Stewart, "The Theft of the Operatic Voice: Masochistic Seduction in Wagner's *Parsifal*," *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no.4 (1996): 604.

and exhibits emotive behavior. As Kramer argues, "Early in the third act, Kundry's voice famously deserts her. But it does so, perhaps…only to become the voice of the entire act. The figure on stage remains mute, but the whole span between the Good Friday music and the redemption of the Grail becomes, in effect, Kundry's song."[210] She is on a path to blissful unconsciousness, similar to Isolde's transfigured and other-worldly gaze at the end of *Tristan*. Thus Wagner provides a solution to eternal damnation through a system he had thought through for decades, which eventually was revealed through Kundry's journey from suffering to salvation.

[210] Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 225.

Chapter 4: Reine Männerliebe

"Künstler ist nur einer, der aus der Lösung ein Rätsel machen kann."
[The artist is the only one who can make a riddle out of a soloution.]
- Karl Kraus[211]

Much of Wagner's output features male redemption via a pure, sacrificing female, as is thoroughly explored in scholarly discourse.[212] The interpretation of *Parsifal,* however, appears less clear to scholars and audiences alike, which lacks such a male-female interaction. Wagner's final opus seems intent on removing the highly sensual representations of heterosexual love, in the words of Dreyfus, so "provoked by his erotics" in his earlier works.[213] The sequestering of females to the second act, for example, demonstrates this objective. In contrast to this dearth of female roles in *Parsifal*, Wagner fills the stage with an abundance of male bodies. The spear and *Lichtsrahl* [shaft of light] offer phallic symbols that complement these male figures. Even with the physical absence of the spear in the first act, the *Lichtstrahl*, which penetrates the Grail during the Eucharist, ensures that the audience perceives a phallic symbol of spiritual proportions. The excessive employment of male-oriented iconography, while perplexing to many viewers, highlights an underrepresented love theme. Through the multifarious and, at times, conflicting presentations of male-to-male relationships in *Parsifal*, Wagner depicts both communal and personal types of homoerotic love. In so doing, he emphasizes human interactions that were otherwise ignored or relegated to the periphery of late-nineteenth-century Western society while also reinforcing certain masculine social structures.

Parsifal communicates, with unusual acuteness, nineteenth-century Western culture's angst over male-to-male bonds and sexual liaisons. The music first creates and then exacerbates the

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[211] Quoted in Anthony Winterbourne, *A Pagan Spoiled: Sex and Character in Wagner's* Parsifal (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), unnumbered page.

[212] For a study of Wagner's relations to female persons in his life and characters in his works proper, see Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women*, trans. Chris Walton (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2011). See also Barry Emslie, *Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2010); Barry Emslie, "Women as Image and Narrative in Wagner's *Parsifal*: A Case Study," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, no.2 (1991): 109-24; and Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010).

[213] Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 117.

audience's sense of unease: the juxtaposition of hypnotic diatonicism (e.g. prevalent in the Grail community of the first act) with pain-stricken chromatic passages (e.g. Amfortas' scenes) keeps the listener disoriented. With the audience thus placed in a vulnerable position, Wagner seeks to relay his final and ambiguous message concerning matters of sexuality, relationships, and love.

While these topics still resonate strongly with us in the twenty-first century, nineteenth-century German society associated such subjects, which required an acknowledgement of physicality, with nervousness.[214] Further, Winterbourne posits the gendered source of anxiety found in the work: "*Parsifal* seems designed to invite us to worry…the form that this anxiety takes is in the blaming of the women involved."[215] While Winterbourne suggests that anxiety manifests in Wagner's treatment of women in the work, I expand on this supposition – drawing from male relationships in the drama – to include other nervousness concerning gender. It is not only the presentation of females in *Parsifal* that creates a sense of unease but also the ways in which inter-male relationships manifest in the opera. Wagner's ambivalent presentations of homoeroticism – demonstrated negatively by Klingsor and redemptively by Parsifal – offers his complicated model for transcendence and social peace.

Physicality, Sound, Flesh and Blood

Adding to the confusion that surrounds *Parsifal* and its intended message, no explicit physical contact between males occurs in the action of the drama; in fact, Kundry gives the only sexually charged caresses to a confused Parsifal in the second act. As a result, many scholars deny any notion of homoeroticism in *Parsifal* because of a lack of physicality.[216] Despite the lack of overt physical

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[214] Concerning social anxieties within nineteenth-century German culture specifically, see for example Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and the Claims of History: The Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010) and Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

[215] Winterbourne, *Pagan Spoiled*, 23.

[216] See for example, Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Holt Paperback, 2000), 268-70.

interaction however, the drama appears saturated with bodily exchanges. For instance, the performance of the Eucharist, the dramatic climax of the first and third acts, emphasizes the tactile nature of the Grail Knights' spiritual rituals. Amfortas feels "*des heiligsten Blutes Quell*" [the fount of divine blood] of Christ flowing through his body.[217] As will be seen, the notion of flesh and blood as taken from the Eucharist serves as a metaphor for physicality with various meanings throughout the opera. The spear and *Lichtstrahl* serve in this capacity as well to demonstrate physical action between bodies in the work.

In addition to the flesh and blood imagery of the text and music, another physical force exists in the sonic performance of the drama itself. While Wagner's aural effects are often referred to as exorbitant, scholars and audiences frequently ignore the physicality of performance and voice in hermeneutical discussions.[218] Importantly, sound acts as a mediator of physical sensations between the audience and performers. As Carolyn Abbate has noted in her study on voice and Wagnerian opera, "This sound [the female voice] is…unconquerable; it cannot be concealed by orchestras, by male singers, or – in the end – by murderous plots."[219] The audience, then, is brought into the action as each listener partakes in a physical response to the singer's voice or the orchestral sounds emanating from the pit. Bonnie Gordon, in her essay on singing courtesans, argues for the sexual nature of this contact: "carrying an ambivalent but almost magical power, the courtesan's singing voice moved from the mouth of the singer to penetrate the ears of the unwitting (but often willing) male victim."[220] She continues by explicating the inherent dangers of such tactile interactions: "accosting body and soul, sound could force submission to any number of threatening temptations,

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[217] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, ed. Felix Mottl (New York: C.F. Peters, 1986), 181.

[218] See for example Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 1952, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Reprint, New York: Verso, 2009).

[219] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), ix.

[220] Bonnie Gordon, "The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy," Chapter Nine in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182.

enticing a loss of control and reason that led to a wide variety of salacious activities."[221] What is true for the audience holds true for the figures of the drama as well: they too are penetrated aurally by the sound of other characters' voices.

Thus, the act of singing and listening involves an experience of both spiritual and physical proportions. Upon this consideration, sound simultaneously embodies the two loves – spiritual and sensual – that Wagner sought to unite through physical expression. Accordingly there appears a much greater amount of physical contact than is commonly acknowledged in the seemingly ascetic *Parsifal*, where much of this exchange takes on homoerotic dimensions.

Across Wagner's oeuvre, physical proximity to another body often generated a degree of nervousness for contemporaneous audiences.[222] Once the exchange of blood during the Eucharist commences in Act I, Amfortas experiences a feeling of insufficiency when united with Christ. Importantly, and unlike other characters of Wagner's, Amfortas experiences this anxiety in a same-sex encounter (i.e. Christ's blood during the Eucharist), which opens up a discursive space for male-to-male physical interaction replete with fears of deficiency and the mixing of bodily fluids.

Contrary to typical notions that *Parsifal* promulgates celibacy and an aversion to erotic contact, Amfortas has an explicit physical exchange with Christ. He undergoes a corporeal interaction of extreme inner intensity, as relayed by the graphic lines when he feels that "*des eig'nen sündigen Blutes Gewell' in wahnsinniger Flucht muß mir zurück dann fließen*" [the wave of my own sinful blood, in mad flight, must surge back into me].[223] The word *Flucht* implies that his blood is violently incompatible with that of Christ; it flees from his divine presence. A musical gesture adds a sexually provocative image to Amfortas' monologue already fixated on blood, wounds, and pain. Figure 4.1 shows a passage from Amfortas' lament that includes the ascending motive associated with the

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[221] Ibid., 182.
[222] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 37-39.
[223] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, 181-82.

spear. Here, the spear motive invokes the source of Amfortas suffering: physically he was stabbed by the weapon, causing fleshly pain, but he also became spiritually wounded by failing to keep his vow of chastity at the moment he lost the spear. The notion of penetration receives emphasis given that Amfortas and Kundry were in a sexual act when Klingsor pierced Amfortas' side. Consequently, the vocal line and the spear motive create a contrapuntal line that juxtaposes Christ's blood with penetration.

Community, -Schafts, and Fathers and Sons

Parsifal contains a complex variety of interactions between males that are both emotionally and physically intense. Oftentimes, relationships are in dialogue with greater social discourse and assist in perpetuating social values. To take a common example, the father-son bond presents in miniature the patriarchal system of the West: an older male figure passes responsibilities on to a younger man, who presumably will carry on the traditions of his elders. This interactions between Gurnemanz and Parsifal as well as Titurel and Amfortas echo this relationship.

As explored by Biddle and Eichner, such expectations may be enforced by subjecting the younger male to guilt; both the father figure and the larger community, which sees the father as an emblem of authority, apply pressure on the younger male.[224] While not necessarily directly physical, this inherited guilt has emotional repercussions that manifest as anxiety, depression, or even anger. Additionally, this exchange between generations can raise questions that surround sexuality, as explored by Freud in *fin-de-siècle* Viennese culture.[225] Through characters such as Gurnemanz and Titurel, Wagner demonstrates the benevolent and malicious psychological motivations found in

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[224] Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and Claims of History*; Barbara Eichner, *History in Mighty Sounds: Musical Constructions of German National Identity 1848-1914* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2012), especially 85-87 and 91-97.

[225] See Biddle, *Music, Masculinity, and Claims of History*; Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture*; and Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art After Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

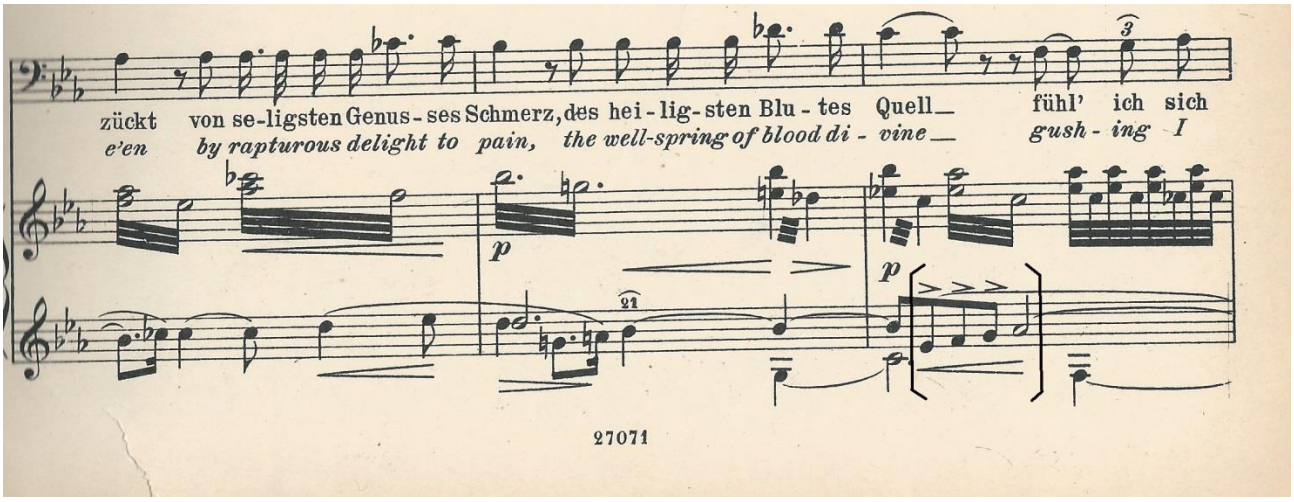

Figure 4.1 Amfortas' Lament and the Spear Motive[226]

The spear motive played by the English horn and oboe is shown here in the third bar of this piano reduction.

father-son relationships and fraternal communities and their perceptible impact on individuals and society.

Rituals reinforce a sense of community among individuals and often promote physical interaction. The Grail Knights, for instance, reiterate their unity by drinking the wine that is Christ's blood. Each member of the Grail community partakes of the same cup, placing his lips where his other brethren have received the drought. Noticeably, too, the act of communion excludes others by nature. Due to his outsider status, Parsifal does not participate in the ceremony of brotherhood. He may, however, gain admittance into the Grail community, which offers a hopeful message. The perpetual performance of the Eucharist allows for members to fluidly enter through redemption and leave upon death.

[226] Source: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, Vocal Score, English text by Margareth Glynn, ed. Karl Klinworth (New York: G. Schirmer, 1904), 82.

The representation of community on the stage also serves as a metaphor for social decay, as Carl Schorske demonstrates in his study of the interaction between politics and various artistic media in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.[227] Wagner invites this interpretation when the original music of the Grail knights in *Parsifal*, portrayed with an exuberant use of diatonicism and unison male singers in the first act, returns in the third act with deteriorating harmonies and a terrifying polyphonic chorus.[228] See figures 4.2 and 4.3 to compare the procession of the knights in the first and third acts respectively. In 4.2, diatonic accompaniment supports the male voices sounding in unison (the tenors actually sound an octave lower than written). Amfortas' retinue of all-male knights – unlike their counterpart choirs of squires and boys that contain androgynous figures – allows them to sing in unison, emphasizing their masculine timbre. Not even their male camaraderie, however, is a powerful enough bond to halt the destruction brought about by some individuals within the

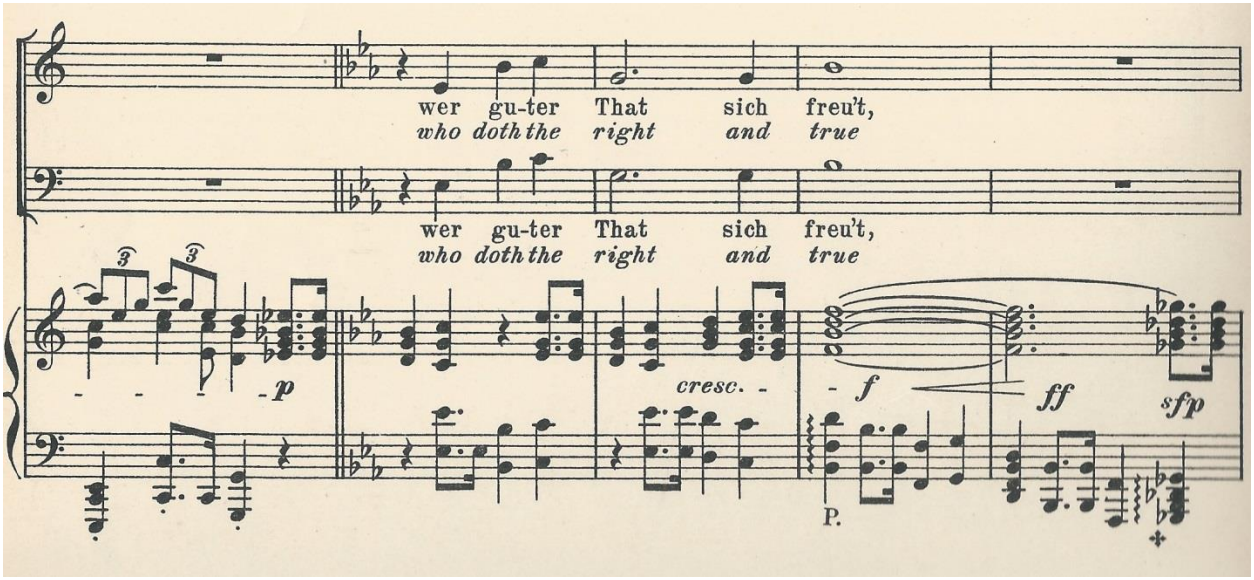

Figure 4.2 Grail Knights' Procession of the First Act[229]

[227] Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, 21-30.
[228] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, 156-162; Act III, 359.
[229] Source: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal,*Act I, Vocal Score, 70.

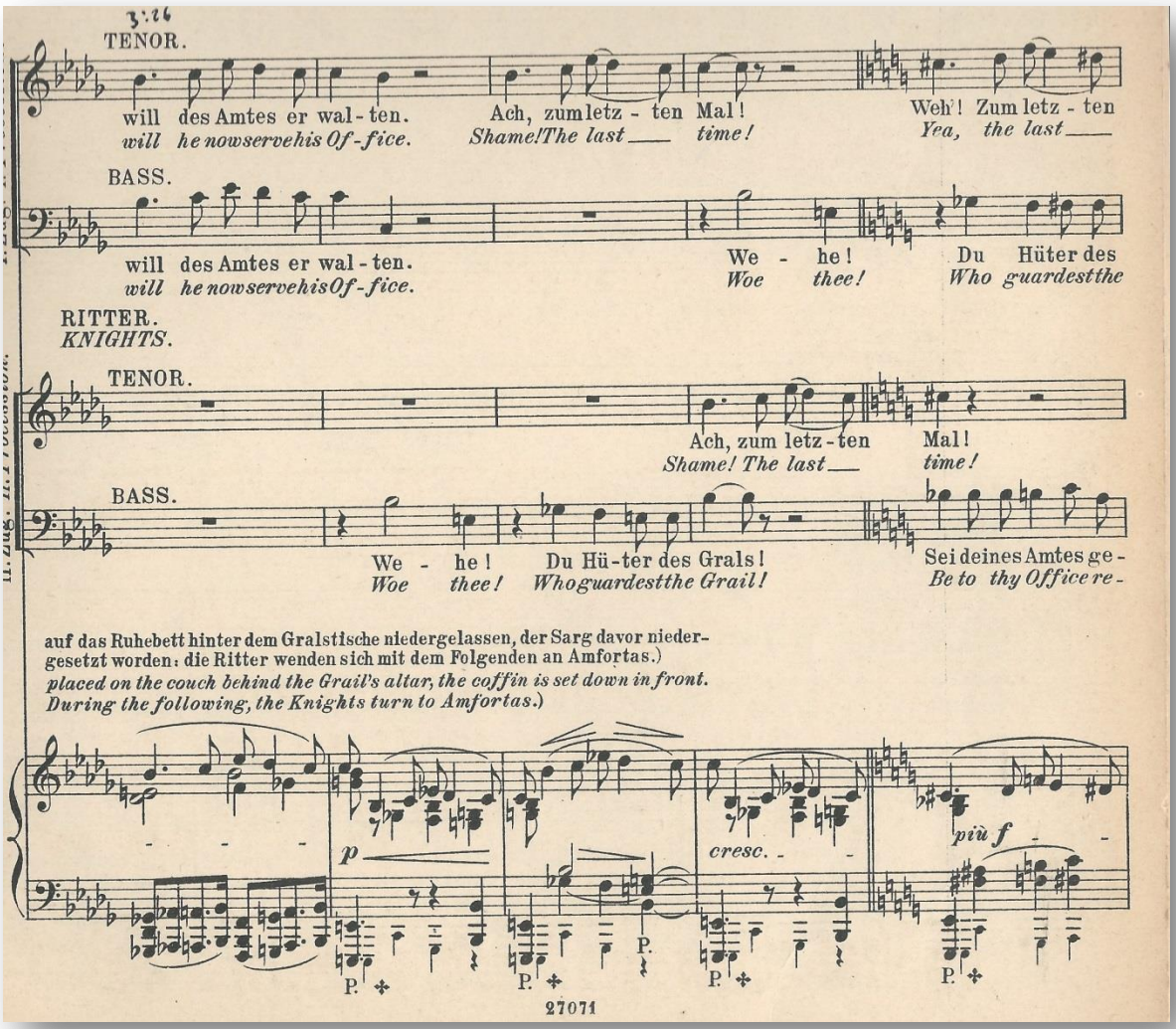

Figure 4.3. Grail Knights' Procession of the Third Act[230]

collective society. Klingsor and Amfortas' destructive effects on the Grail community manifests aurally in Act III, in the form of the dissonant, wandering harmonies and polyphonic texture of figure 4.3.

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[230] Source: Ibid., 359.

Through the interactions of the Grail knights, Wagner displays the responsibilities shared and expected within a male community and reveals the consequences should someone fall through on their commitment. For example, Titurel's death had directly resulted from his son Amfortas' neglect. Titurel had relied on the performance of the Eucharist, a foundational display of faith in the Grail community, for his survival, and once Amfortas refuses to carry out the act of uncovering the Grail his father dies (this implied action taking place between Acts II and III). Amfortas voices his ambivalent feelings, "*Der einzig ich sterben wollt', dir – gab ich den Tod*" [I, who alone longed for death, gave death to you]![231] His grief is doubled in that he is not only responsible for his father's death, but he must live on to suffer eternally. The notion of perpetual suffering, then, is shared across genders, both by Amfortas and Kundry. While Amfortas wavers indecisively and attempts to refuse the performance of the Eucharist, the brothers of his community emplore, "*Enthüllet den Gral! Walte des Amtes! Dich mahnet dein Vater: du mußt*" [Uncover the Grail! Preside over the service! Your father exhorts you: you must]![232] Amfortas' fellow Grail brothers pressure him to perform the office that his father had carried out. Even in death Titurel exercises influence through a shared memory in the community.

Titurel's influence even after death reflects the powerful effects of the father-son relationship. Many of Wagner's dramas explore the connection between children and their fathers, but in *Parsifal* we see the most direct interaction between father and son figures. Catherine Clément emphasizes the power evoked by the lower register of the male voice, citing Titurel and Gurnemanz as specific examples. She writes, "Moreover, all spiritual counselors, advisors, and representatives of churches or sects are basses: Titurel and Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*…"[233] Even before his death, the haunting dreams of parental expectations are made frighteningly physical in Titurel's exhortations to

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[231] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act III, 555.
[232] Ibid., Act III, 559-60.
[233] Catherine Clément, "Through Voices, History," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24.

Amfortas, which he makes from within the grave. In this scene from the first act, father and son exchange a dialogue where the former commands his son to perform a task against his will: "*Im Grabe leb' ich durch des Heilands Huld: Zu schwach doch bin ich, ihm zu dienen. Du büß' im Dienste deine Schuld! – Enthüllet den Gral"* [In the grave I live by the Savior's grace: but too weak am I to serve him. You may atone for your guilt through your service! Uncover the Grail]![234] Titurel, already exercising his authoritative position as father, seeks to further badger his son into performing the Eucharist by evoking the torturous spiritual guilt that Amfortas feels towards his heavenly father, Christ. Amfortas responds vehemently, "*Nein! Laßt ihn unenthüllt"* [No! Leave it uncovered]![235] But his act of resistance eventually gives way and the ceremony is performed. At this stage in the drama, the younger generation still executes paternal wishes.

Gurnemanz embodies the paternal role, perpetuating the patriarchal cycle, described by Biddle above. He steps in as father not only for Parsifal but at times for the greater Grail community as well. During the opening scene, he orders the young squires and knights to cease with their questions and attend to their tasks, with lines such as "*Sorgt für das Bad*" [Tend to the bath!]![236] Similarly, he rebukes the knights who deride Kundry, asking them rhetorically, "*Schuf sie euch Schaden je"* [Did she ever harm you?]?[237] Gurnemanz' respect for Kundry and indeed for all living things reflects his absorption and perpetuation of the Grail community's teaching. As an elder figure, he in turn attempts to pass on that knowledge to younger generations and scold them when they stray out of line. Gurnemanz contentedly serves the Grail Order and remains unquestioning in its service. Thus, Parsifal's complete ignorance and resulting disobedience baffles the older man, who claims the naïve boy's stupidity matches only Kundry's.[238] He also appears to perpetually rebuke the young

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[234] Ibid., Act I, 172-73.
[235] Ibid., Act I, 173.
[236] Ibid., Act I, 36.
[237] Ibid., Act I, 57.
[238] Ibid., Act I, 119-20.

fool: for killing a swan, attempting to strike Kundry, not understanding Amfortas' suffering. Finally at the end of the first act, he casts Parsifal, who he sees as a hopeless fool, out of the realm – not necessarily a kind paternal gesture, but one redolent of certain church fathers.[239] When Gurnemanz encounters Parsifal many years later in the third act, he quickly turns to lecturing this "stranger" on the niceties to be observed on Good Friday.[240] Once Parsifal presents the spear to Gurnemanz, however, the sight fills him with joy and he realizes that Parsifal has learned to empathize with the suffering of others. He anoints Parsifal's head with oil, marking him the new Grail king.

Gurnemanz expresses his strongest feelings of affection towards Amfortas. As Fuchs highlights, "*Des treuen Gurnemanz Gedanken drehen sich alle um seinen Herrn, den siechen König Amfortas, und seine Erlösung von seinem Leiden und seinen sehrenden Schmerzen*" [The faithful Gurnemanz's thoughts all revolve around his lord, the sick king Amfortas, and his [Amfortas'] redemption from his suffering and great pain].[241] In a sense, the older man obsesses over his lord, forging a particularly intimate male-to-male relationship. Moreover, Gurnemanz recounted to the young squires that "it was a terribly beautiful woman who had seduced Amfortas."[242] If the young knights heed Gurnemanz' other commands, they should also take care to avoid women – the alleged source of the king's suffering (the paradox is, as stated earlier, a man actually stabbed Amfortas). If men are to avoid the treacherous temptations of women, one wonders to where Amfortas' "*Mannheit stolzer Blüte*" [proud blooming manhood] should be directed, as Gurnemanz painfully laments its loss from the king's sickness.[243]

Both the representation of community and the father-son relationship in *Parsifal* reveal problems in the Western social structure, as evidenced by their impotence for providing a solution

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[239] Tanner, *Wagner*, 188.

[240] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act III, 466-68.

[241] Hans Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität: unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sexuellen Anomalien Seiner Gestalten*, 1903 (Reprint, Berlin: H. Barsdorf, 1943), 244.

[242] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 155.

[243] Wagner, *Parsifal* Act I, 42-43.

to the suffering Grail king. Despite their ineffectiveness, Wagner does not condemn them; he simply displays their weaknesses, particularly in their treatment of Kundry and Parsifal. In the text itself, these types of relationships go unquestioned, mirroring the thoughtless responses of characters such as Gurnemanz who respectfully continue the traditions of his community. The message to be gleaned from these figures harkens back to Feuerbachian tropes: blind ascription to religious dogma and societies leaves one in darkness. In fact, it creates the "*Noth*" [need] for a bringer of redemption.[244]

Negative Aspects of Male Love: Amfortas and Klingsor

If the father-son relationship expresses the affirmation of a powerful masculine leader, the figures of Klingsor and Amfortas further complicate the alleged rightness of this model. First, these two men are more concerned with their own internal motivations than their community's well-being. Indeed these characters prove blinded by their desires and, consequently, out of step with their society. Nevertheless, a notable difference between the two figures rests with their intentions. Amfortas' self-absorbed suffering unintentionally spreads to the rest of the Grail kingdom. Klingsor, on the other hand, seeks, with intended maliciousness, to destroy the Grail knights and acquire the Grail for himself.

Wagner's representation of Klingsor resembles the complex ambivalence associated with Kundry. Even his principal motive's tonality is difficult to determine. Whenever we hear Klingsor's music, we are left with a disorienting effect. The ambiguous tonality of his motive (see Figure 4.4) contrasts starkly with the more uniform diatonicism of the Grail community (cf. Figure 4.2). Diminished, minor, and major sonorities comprise this principal theme all within the space of two bars: we are unsure of his intentions as demonstrated by the opacity of his musical line; the three

[244] Millington, *Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, 97.

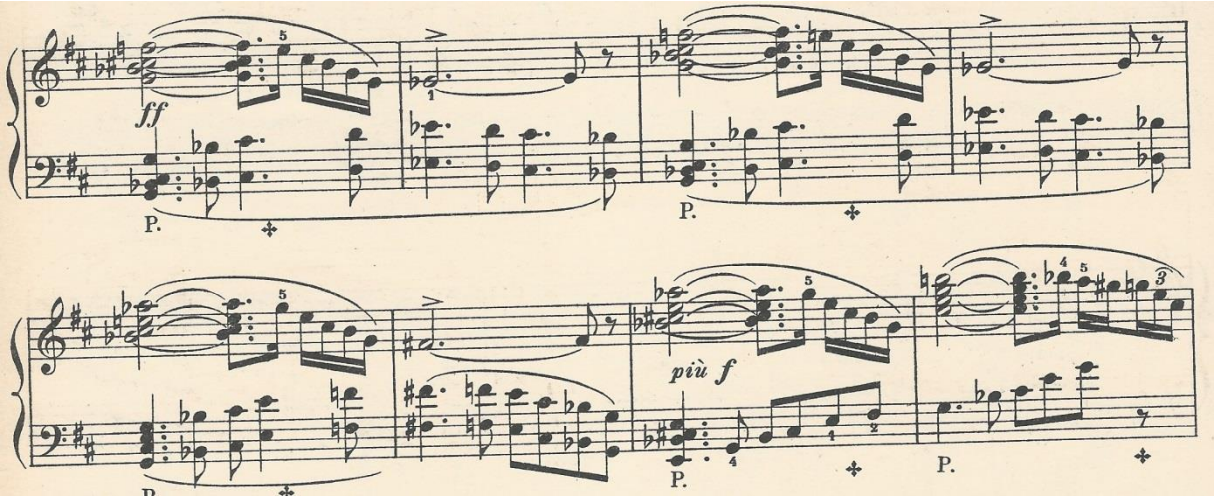

Figure 4.4 Klingsor's Motive[245]

sonorities here begin as a G diminished triad (bar 1 of the example, beats 1-3), moving to a G minor triad (again, bar 1 of the example, the second-half of the fourth beat), ascending to an E-flat major triad in first inversion (bar 2 of the example, beat 1), before sinking back to the instability of the diminished sonority. Despite the theme's ability to morph imperceptibly, the overall impression is that of a diminished triad, a sonority of great unsteadiness in Western music.

For his own part, Klingsor clearly suffers from instability: he physically mutilates himself in order to remove the possibility of carnal desires; he is bent on destroying the Grail Knights and any other males who might be tempted by his flower maidens; and he seeks to take the Grail, although we are uncertain of his intentions once he acquires it. Accordingly, Wagner's motivations for this character are multifarious, accentuating the notion of his ambiguity. Perhaps most clearly, Klingsor's nefarious acts encompass Wagner's own fears toward Klingsor, a male who does not require a

[245] Source: Wagner, *Parsifal* Act II, Vocal Score, 104.

woman's love.[246] Wagner had explored this concept earlier in the *Ring* with the dwarf Alberich, who renounces love in order to obtain the gold of the Rhinemaidens that he covets. Klingsor, however, relishes the fact that women hold no power over him, as he mockingly chides Kundry, "*Weil einzig an mir deine Macht…nichts vermag*" [Because solely with me does your power avail you nothing].[247]

Unlike Wagner's other male villains, Klingsor appears particularly drawn to phallic symbols. Parsifal certainly receives close inspection by him: "*Er ist schön der Knabe"* [He is handsome, this boy]![248] In the first two acts, Wagner associates Klingsor with the spear – the dominant phallic symbol of the opera. In the first act, we picture Klingsor wielding the weapon, as told by Gurnemanz' tale of Amfortas' demise: "*O wunden-wundervoller heiliger Speer! Ich sah dich schwingen von unheiligster Hand*" [Oh wondrous, wounding holy spear! I saw you wielded by an unholy hand!]![249] Every time the ascending spear motive sounds then, Klingsor and his deviant behavior accompany its semantic evocation. In the second act, the audience sees Klingsor wielding the spear, most dramatically when he maliciously thrusts it at Parsifal. The spear does not penetrate the hero, however, but remains suspended in the air. As Klingsor made the gesture, this spear's failure to hit its target reinforces the sorcerer's impotency.

Perpetually linked to the spear and cavalierly resisting temptations from women, Klingsor becomes a sexualized homoerotic symbol. Indeed, Klingsor's physical action associated with the penetrating object defies Panizza's claim for "spiritual" homesexuality, in essence homosexual relationships that do not consummate "carnal desires."[250] The necromancer receives pleasure by piercing other knights with his spear.

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[246] See especially Chapter One of Barry Emslie, *Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2010), 1-7.

[247] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, 253-54.

[248] Wagner, Parsifal, Act II, 264.

[249] Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, 70-71.

[250] Oskar Panizza, ""Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A Reflection," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no.2 (2006): 324-25.

Klingsor's music, with its nervous chromaticism, coupled with his insidious behavior provoked anxiety for both Wagner and his audience, an anxiety mirrored in notions of sexual pathologies and foreign peoples contemporaneous to *Parsifal*. While the audience may infer Klingsor's homoerotics, any direct mention of his own sexuality puts Klingsor at unease. As Fuchs reveals, "*das Wort 'keusch' hat einen ganzen Sturm von Empfindungen in ihm erweckt*…" [the word 'chaste' awakened in him a complete storm of emotions].[251] Lacking purity, Klingsor represents an array of perceived sexual deviants, including homosexuals. Further, Klingsor – as a mysterious sexual being – and the foreign Other converge, similar to notions of race and sexual deviance discussed in chapter two and the perceptions of Kundry explored in chapter three. Fuchs notes Gurnemanz' description of Klingsor's locale in "*die Wüste schuf er sich zum Wonnegarten, D'rinn wachsen teuflisch holde Frauen*" [In the wilderness created he (Klingsor) a Magic Garden, wherein he grew devilishly beautiful women].[252] Again, Wagner aligns the concept of female seduction, foreignness, and magic. Klingsor's self-castration, too, speaks to social anxieties of the time. Jay Geller, in his work on Freud and the Jewish body, explores the connotation of castration and Jewishness in the Western mind of the nineteenth century. He argues, "in sum, hatred of Jews arises as a reaction against 'the dreaded castration' evoked by 'its symbolic substitute,' circumcision."[253] Klingsor represents an amalgam of the fears held by Westerners in the nineteenth century: he evokes tropes of Jewishness, consummated homosexuality, self-mutilation, and disease. Moreover, he stays true to the Wagner archetypal villain; Klingsor's actions are entirely self-seeking and loveless.

Amfortas, conversely, reveals the alleged dangers of succumbing to a woman's temptations, ignoring duty for desire. In essence, he acts out the model already foretold by the siren trope discussed in chapter three. As Gurnemanz tells the young squires in act I, only "*ein furchtbar schönes*

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[251] Fuchs, *Richard Wagner*, 252.
[252] Ibid., 246.
[253] Jay Geller, *On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumstances* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 112

Weib" [a terribly beautiful woman] could have caused the Grail king's failure when confronting Klingsor.[254] Importantly, Amfortas represents an emasculated leader, incapable of overcoming a woman's seductions.

Because of his wound, Amfortas frequently draws attention to his body. Again, evidence refutes the notion that *Parsifal* lacks references to corporeality. Amfortas' laments frequently remind the audience of his unnatural wound, which engenders his eternal suffering. Linda and Michael Hutcheon elucidate the significance of Wagner moving the location of Amfortas' wound from his genital region to his side. They argue, "Wagner's transposition of the wound from the genital area to the chest [sic], while obviously offering a gain in Christian symbolism, also serves to distract attention: it displaces, but never totally obliterates, the sexual origins of the injury."[255] Wagner seeks to remove some of the overt sexualized guilt of Amfortas by altering the place of his wound from the epic poems told by Eschenbach and Chrétien. Despite this attempt, the origin of Amfortas' sin remains sexual. However, changing the location of Amfortas' wound arguably allowed Wagner to more clearly contrast Klingsor and the Grail king. While the sorcerer's wound is explicitly genital, Amfortas' wound is removed from sexual organs: further, it shares a spiritual allusion to Christ, making him a character with whom the audience will more likely empathize.

Furthering Amfortas' relationship to Christianity, the spear that wounded him is the same weapon that pierced Christ's side during his crucifixion. As Gurnemanz tells the young, querying squires of the first act, "*darein am Kreuz sein göttlich' Blut auch floß, dazu den Lanzenspeer, der dies vergoß*" [therein on the cross also flowed his divine blood, which that same spear shed].[256] As mentioned earlier, Amfortas and Christ also undergo an exchange of bodily fluids wherein Amfortas feels a

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[254] Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, 73.

[255] Linda and Michael Hutcheon, ""Syphillis, Sin and the Social Order: Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no.3 (1995): 262.

[256] Wagner, *Parsifal,* Act I, 81-82.

deficiency when united with the divine figure. The Grail king's physical suffering, which is comparable to Christ's, creates a sense of empathy, as Parsifal later does.

Unlike Klingsor, who represents incorrigible sexual deviance, Wagner wants us to identify with Amfortas' suffering. After all, the Grail king remains a redeemable figure. Both characters, however, perform personally motivated acts that result in their own destruction and incite pain in those around them. In order to correct the individual and greater social destruction wrought by these men, Wagner turns to another male character devoid of sexual experience and who finds the solution to love's quandaries through *Mitleid* [compassion].

Der Erlöser

Parsifal reconciles the personal and the social, the physical and the spiritual. In order to do so, he must experience the pain felt by others as the prophecy proclaims: "*durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor*." As Lawrence Kramer explicates, "Unlike the English pity, the word [*Mitleid*] connotes proximity, not distance; unlike the Latinate compassion, Mitleid says what it means with the particles of common speech. Its meaning is suffering with."[257] So, Parsifal must undergo a tortuous transformation from a pure, ignorant boy to a leader who identifies with, even shares, his subjects' sufferings.

Before Wagner reveals Parsifal's conversion, audiences familiar with Wagner's other works would know that the title character already experienced the father-son relationship described earlier. As the story of *Parsifal* germinated in his mind, Wagner included the medieval protagonist in the fabric of his other music dramas. Lohengrin, for instance, references Parzival (as Wagner then called

[257] Lawrence Kramer, "The Talking Wound and the Foolish Question: Symbolization in *Parsifal*," *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no.2 (2006): 208.

him) as his father. So the character Parsifal reflects a fatherly figure indirectly via Lohengrin's mentioning of him.[258]

Eternal wandering and waiting are common ontological states for Wagner's characters, who exist within a spectrum of suffering.[259] Again, before the full conception of *Parsifal*, Wagner thought of the character as a figure identified with sorrow. Addressing the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, Mary Cicora imparts Wagner's intention to include the figure of Parzival: "In his autobiography, he reports that in 1854 he had considered including Parsifal as a character in *Tristan und Isolde*, his idea being to have Parsifal enter in the third act and, while on his way to the Grail Temple seeking the Grail, encounter the wounded Tristan on his sickbed."[260] She explicates that there is a correlation or "'mythical' identification [between] Amfortas, the wounded and tormented Grail King, [and] the third-act Tristan."[261] Mutual male suffrage again seems centered around the character Parsifal. Parsifal's wandering, portrayed sonically in the prelude to the third act, bears a relation to several characters from Wagner's oeuvre including the Dutchman, Tannhäuser, and even Wotan as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*. Thus even before the opera begins, we know Parsifal shares a common element of suffering found in all of Wagner's works.

The boy of the first act in *Parsifal*, however, appears completely self-absorbed rather than empathetic. When Gurnemanz questions if Parsifal indeed killed the swan, the boy proudly answers, "*Gewiß! Im fluge treff' ich, was fliegt*" [Indeed! Whatever flies I can hit!]![262] This line does not indicate an empathetic individual. In fact, Parsifal shows a kind of callousness by killing an animal for pure enjoyment and ignoring the sacred environment of the Grail land. As mentioned earlier, Parsifal also betrays a lack of understanding when he witnesses the Eucharist, resulting in Gurnemanz casting

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[258] The character Parsifal is related to Lohengrin and other heroic characters in Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 131.

[259] Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010), 91.

[260] Mary A. Cicora, "Medievalism and Metaphysics: The Literary Background of *Parsifal*," in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 31.

[261] Ibid., 31.

[262] Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act I, 106.

him out. While Gurnemanz's actions do not engender a sense of empathy in Parsifal, the boy does achieve "knowing through compassion" via his own journey to Klingsor's magic garden.

Kundry's kiss in the garden, the trigger that awakens Parsifal's sense of suffering, seems the most problematic dramatic element for audiences to understand. Wagner attempts to convince the audience of this moment both through the text and music (see Figure 4.5). After his painful outburst, "Amfortas!" we hear the motive emblematic of Amfortas' suffering. Thus, Parsifal powerfully identifies with a man in the moment of an attempted sexual act with a woman. Nonetheless, scholars and audience are hesitant to describe Parsifal as blatantly homosexual. Dreyfus reveals one argument purported by Hans Fuchs: "After receiving a kiss that is so thoroughly erotic as was the kiss which brought Kundry's and Parsifal's lips together, a homosexual would have pushed the woman away from him in an upsurge of revulsion: in Parsifal this kiss doesn't cause revulsion but rather actual physical pain."[263] Fuchs' misunderstanding of homosexuals becomes more apparent in a note he adds to the noun "*Homosexueller*" [i.e. a homosexual] in his text. Referring to Parsifal, Fuchs claims, "*dass der homosexuelle König von Bayern diese Gestalt nicht verstehen konnte*" [that the homosexual king of Bavaria could not understand this character-type] because Parsifal is not a "pure" homosexual.[264] The scientific discourse at the turn of the twentieth century influences here Fuchs' interpretation of Parsifal. In essence, he seeks to categorize Parsifal as either homosexual or heterosexual, without allowing for fluidity in sexuality. To do so, however, erodes Wagner's deliberate construction of Parsifal as a figure of compassion, which includes love in all its manifestations regardless of his contradictions. Ultimately, Parsifal empathizes with everyone. Initially, however, a rejection of female sexual entreaties and a visceral connection with a male brings about Parsifal's transformation.

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[263] Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, 211.
[264] Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität*, 262 unnumbered note.

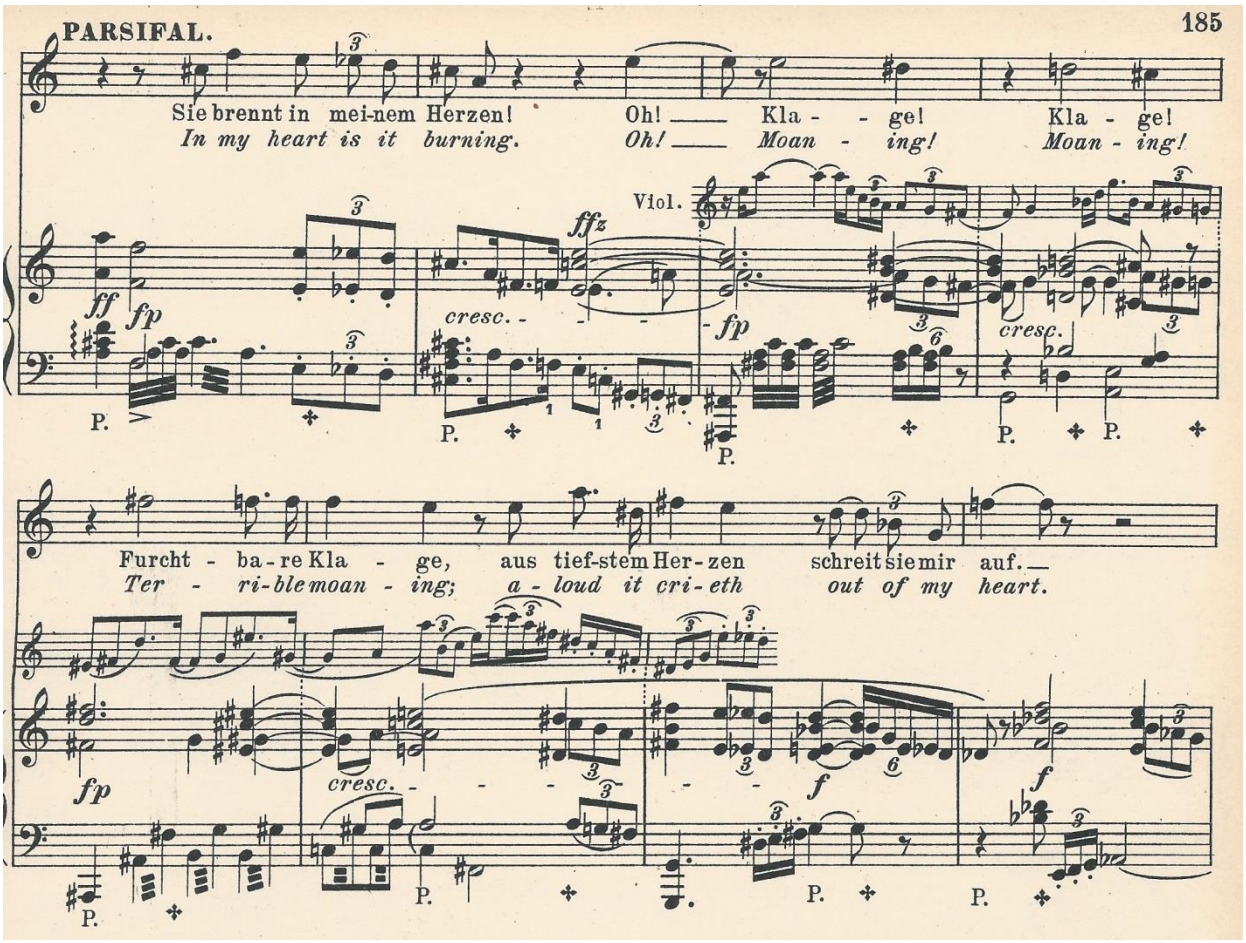

Figure 4.5 Parsifal and Amfortas' Motive of Suffering[265]

Amfortas' motive resides in the soprano voice of the piano line in the first bar.

Parsifal signifies Wagner's final conclusions regarding a path to redemption. Unlike his earlier operas where heterosexual love brings about bliss and self-annihilation, *Parsifal* rejects this model. Instead, the character Parsifal initially identifies with his mother's suffering caused by his callous departure from her. Wagner expands Parsifal's empathetic awakening to include not only

[265] Source: Wagner, *Parsifal,*Act II, Vocal Score, 185.

feelings between mother and child but also of love's agony. Specifically through Amfortas' suffering evoked by Kundry's kiss, Parsifal perceives the pain of eternal longing.

As Linda and Michael Hutcheon reveal, "At this moment he first identifies with Amfortas through the wound, but then corrects himself, saying the pain is not from the wound but from a fearful longing."[266] The way out of this "fearful" and eternal longing resides in compassion towards others. Through compassion and empathizing with others, Parsifal achieves the ability to control his sexual urges, demonstrated by his command of the spear. This does not suggest, however, that he foregoes all sexual liasons in a type of Schopenhaurian self-denial. The evidence of Lohengrin as Parsifal's son refutes this argument easily enough. Parsifal's healing of Amfortas by returning the spear suggests reconciliation with the phallic symbol: with compassionate intentions, mutual male love results in physical well-being, not disease.

Parsifal as Wagner's ultimate figure of redemption reconciles personal motivations with social interactions. The leader motivated by compassion receives personal fulfillment while simultaneously contributing to the betterment of society. The spiritual and sensual converge here as well, for the consummation of physical desire is considered in tandem with emotional fulfillment. In his final music drama, Wagner continued to present love as the solution to human suffering.

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[266] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon. "Syphillis, Sin and the Social Order: Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no.3 (1995): 265.

Chapter 5: Repositioning *Parsifal*

The idea that Parsifal *is not Wagner's best opera but rather the work of a worn-out old man has been around for a long time.* Parsifal *has been underestimated, greatly underestimated…"*
-Alain Badiou[267]

This thesis has provided a homoerotic reading of *Parsifal,* offering an alternative methodological approach to the more typical interpretations revolving around race, religion, and misogyny.[268] These traditional twentieth-century analyses of Wagner's works offer compelling arguments that should be acknowledged; however, a gendered reading further informs our contemporary perspective of the work. Indeed due to its opaque and esoteric nature, *Parsifal* allows for an array of hermeneutical possibilities that illumine much about the modern Western individual. Simon William demonstrates such flexibility inherent in the interpretation of *Parsifal:* "At one extreme, *Parsifal* has been declared a vindication of Christian faith, at the other it has been explored as an anti-Semitic diatribe with distinctly homoerotic overtones."[269] He continues with a suggestive line about Wagner's intentions, stating, "few stage-works so clearly demonstrate that the ultimate function of drama may be less the presentation of ideas than the generation of ideas within the audience."[270] In a sense, then, *Parsifal* means what we read into it and shifts as cultures value different elements within the work. Through the kaleidoscopic lens from which we can view *Parsifal*, Wagner's final work speaks to contemporary notions of gender, reality, and community that are bound to his notions of race and nationalist politics.

The emphasis on Wagner's innovative and provocative representations of sensuality, as argued by Dreyfus, has received more attention recently. Adrian Daub and Kevin Karnes, for example, have both written monographs exploring Wagner's effects on subsequent artists and

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[267] Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010), 136.

[268] See, for example, Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Reprint, New York: Verso, 2009); and Catherine Clément, *Opera: or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[269] Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 128.

[270] Ibid., 128.

intellectuals, specifically in regard to sexuality. These works seek to conflate Wagner's musical and dramatic abundance with his overall desire for social change. As Daub argues specifically, "What made Wagner unusual, however, was that he coupled these technical innovations with explicit speculation about the nature of sexuality."[271] In his study *Wagner's Melodies*, David Trippett also emphasizes the relation between Wagner's musical aesthetics and his desire to connect to the greater scientific and social discourse that surrounded him.[272]

One's own cultural norms and practices frame the interpretation of a work. As chapter two demonstrated, the cultural context of Germany in the late nineteenth century informed Wagner's creation of *Parsifal*. Indeed, Wagner used *Parsifal* as a platform for his own ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality. As I demonstrated, contemporary discourses on sexuality as well as philosophical treatises by Hegel, Feuerbach, and Schopenhauer influenced the trajectory of the work. Importantly too, these discussions were linked with racial theories as anti-semitic language took on terminology that resonated with descriptions of perceived sexual deviants. Essentially, this language placed a distance between what was thought to be German and what was a dangerous Other.

Chapter three further explored the concept of the Other by demonstrating the stereotypical presentations of the feminine in Western culture as expressed in *Parsifal*. The opera challenges these notions at times as well by offering androgynous characters and elements of gender bending. Kundry, too, defies operatic conventions in that she reaches a state of transcendence even while beginning the opera as a seductress. While sexist assumptions exist in the work, Wagner's drama does present more than just the typical Western binary of heterosexual man and woman. In this sense, *Parsifal* has particularly significance in Western twenty-first century culture, where expressions

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[271] Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art after Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5.

[272] David Trippett, *Wagner's Melodies: Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

of other genders have become more socially acceptable. The motherhood trope, too, invites reconsideration of the mother's role and influence in our society.

In a society that has been dominated by a patriarchal system, the father-son relationship so explicit in *Parsifal* resonates strongly with viewers. As chapter four demonstrated, this bond carriers many cultural expectations and often complicates matters for younger generations. Parsifal, as the triumphant leader who is not burdened by his father's demands, brings about a new order, suggesting that contemporary society break away from the past. The title character also reveals an important message about the strength of compassion. He reaches this path not through heterosexual or even sexual love but by allowing himself to empathize with a fellow male who is suffering. In a society that frequently obsesses over masculinity and that until recently reinforced homophobia, this message is particularly unique in allowing a male to come to greater human understanding by means of a male-to-male amorous bond. Also acknowledged in this chapter, however, were the negative presentations of homosexuality embodied in the figure Klingsor. The prejudices that ascribe sexual deviance to homosexuality still exist in contemporary Western society; thus, we can learn from the fears Wagner projects onto Klingsor and how we might avoid these same bigotries.

While acknowledging the original setting for *Parsifal*, I have also produced an interpretation that speaks to Western readers in the twenty-first century, who tend to accept manifestations of sexual identity outside a strict gender dichotomy. The androgynous presentations of the squires in the outer acts, for example, put *Parsifal* in dialogue with contemporary discourse surrounding sexuality and gender boundaries. Additionally, the display of homoerotics by the disparate characters of Klingsor and Parsifal reflects contemporary multivalent perceptions of homosexuals. These two characters in particular represent attitudes toward homosexuality that are problematic and accepting, respectively. By exploring the work from these perspectives I hope to encourage further studies that explore fluidity of gender and sexual anxieties in Wagner scholarship. I evoke Deathridge too in that

I seek, "[to present] a different and critical view of Richard Wagner based on new research and the conviction, which is not shared by everyone, that his works still have something to say to us."[273]

Recent philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek especially, have made attempts to reopen Wagnerian discourse to include his leftward political elements while also revealing the difficulty in interpreting his oeuvre.[274] Badiou even devotes an entire chapter of his *Five Lessons on Wagner* to *Parsifal,* acknowledging its hermeneutical difficulties while arguing for its covert but powerful contemporary social message of fragmented community and multiple presentations of sexuality. His discussion directly relates to my arguments in chapter two that reveal representations social decay and fragmentation. One of Badiou's central arguments for *Parsifal* posits that the work centers on indecisiveness and ambivalence.[275] In this light, he makes a compelling argument concerning Wagner's most densely constructed character: "Kundry can in this sense be regarded as the opera's heroine. Kundry is no doubt the one who knows that, in the end, it is impossible to decide [on a single identity]."[276] Offering Kundry as a symbol of fragmented modernity and fluid personalities speaks more directly to contemporary audiences than presenting her only as the hysterical female commonplace on the nineteenth-century stage. At the same time, her various personae reflect Wagner's engagement with contemporary uncertainties over gender and sexuality.

As stated at the beginning of this study, John Deathridge provides a tempered method of approaching Wagner, and *Parsifal* specifically. Commenting on the confusion that surrounds *Parsifal,* Deathridge states, "a less dramatic explanation is that he [Wagner] simply mistrusted interpretations that were too sharply defined."[277] He admits, however, that such conclusions are ultimately evasive: they attempt to thwart what might be uncomfortable in the work. Interestingly, *Parsifal* is an

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[273] John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), ix.

[274] See for example Badiou, *Five Lessons*; Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); and Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[275] Ibid., 157.

[276] Ibid., 157.

[277] Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil*, 160.

amalgam of moments of compassionate humanity and musical achievement juxtaposed with latent racial ideologies and overt misogynistic representations. Despite contradictory messages of acceptance and compassion in the opera, Deathridge does not dismiss the fact that disturbing ideas exist in *Parsifal*. Instead, he suggests, "On one level far from trivial for Wagner, however, its [*Parsifal*'s] final unity and intensity of utterance is a conciliatory resolution of often-misunderstood ideas about racial identity and decay that are equally unlikely to persuade us to stop worrying entirely."[278] Indeed, we should continue to worry as this provides the means for a path to further insight.

As this thesis reveals, I seek to contribute most significantly to a gendered approach to Wagner and his subsequent influences. During this time of flexibility concerning Western notions of gender, Wagner's works ask some of the very questions our contemporary society still ponders. While he might not offer specific or convincing answers to the questions raised, the inquiries themselves are uniquely and powerfully expressed. Moreover, *Mitleid*, which I view as fundamental to heterosexual and homosexual relations in *Parsifal,* conveys a compelling message for contemporary audiences. While Wagner may have ignored at times his own message of empathy and compassion, he created a work that attempts to construct a world grounded in these concepts.

Žižek raises a troubling predicament, which he posits in the form of a question: "Is our passionate attachment to Wagner to remain an obscene secret to be disavowed in public academic discourse?"[279] The music dramas of Wagner offer a richly dense corpus that contains keen insight into both the depths of human love and hatred. The contradictions among Wagner's writings, dramas, and personal life all reflect an innately human trait, that of inconsistency. Just as people change viewpoints and can present conflicting notions, so a work can emit manifold ideologies that, at times, seem to invalidate one another. Expressed via multiple artistic media, Wagner provides us

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[278] Ibid., 177.
[279] Žižek, "Afterword: Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and 'German Ideology,'" 162.

with an abundance of drama by which we may better understand ourselves. Through Wagner's texts and unusually semantic-specific music, we can examine the interplay of various human emotions and ideologies. *Parsifal*, perhaps more than any of his other works, presents the profuse manifestations of love and hate in anxiously close proximity.

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Vita

Tyler Mitchell is a graduate of the University of Tennessee, where he earned a Master of Music in Musicology, studying under Dr. Rachel Golden, and a minor concentration in linguistics. Prior to his studies in Tennessee, Tyler earned a Bachelor's of Music in Performance from Kennesaw State University, studying violin under Prof. Helen Kim and conducting under Dr. Michael Alexander. His research interests include topics in Western classical music – especially opera and instrumental music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, music and cultural relations in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and the Third Reich, presentation and issues of gender, nationalist theory, gesture and persona in conducting, and music and language. He has delivered papers at conferences in the United States and Canada, covering topics such as film mediation and conducting, gender issues in seventeenth-century opera, and Samuel Barber and issues of canonization. In the fall of 2014, Tyler is beginning the PhD program in Musicology at Stanford University, where he has received a five-year teaching assistantship and a graduate research fellowship.