

Sophocles and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

During the early nineteenth century there was an explosion of interest in the Greek classics throughout the German states. The composer Richard Wagner was caught up in this from a very early age. As a child Wagner's imagination was fired by accounts of the Greek War of Independence, and he began studying the classics when he was nine years old. Wagner did not master Greek but his interest in the classics did not wane (Schadewaldt 1972, Lloyd-Jones 1976, Drews 1980, Roller 1992, Foster 2010). His private library in 1849 included Aeschylus, Sophocles, Homer, and other authors in German translation (Westernhagen, 1986).

The importance of the classics, and above all Greek tragedy, to Wagner are clear in the theoretical works he began writing in 1849. In *Art and Revolution* Wagner saw all European art as ultimately derived from that of Greece, and declared that Greek tragedy was "the highest conceivable form of art." In the same period as Wagner was writing these essays he also wrote the initial draft of his masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. And while the primary source of the *Ring* was Norse mythology, it has long been noted that Greek drama also had a substantial impact on how Wagner reworked his sources. The most important classical influence appears to have been Aeschylus, and numerous instances have been noted throughout the *Ring* of close similarities or parallels to his dramas (Ewans 1982, Lee 2003).

However, the influence of Sophocles, and in particular his Theban plays, has received considerably less attention. This neglect is in spite of Wagner's own analysis of the plays and his statement in *Opera and Drama* that they are "an image of the whole of human history, from the beginnings of society to the necessary downfall of the state," which is similar Wagner's description of the *Ring*. This paper will elucidate this relationship by looking at several aspects of the *Ring* which appear to have been influenced by elements of Sophocles, while keeping in

mind the contemporary 19th century interpretations of Sophocles of which Wagner was aware. Besides the universal nature of the dramas, the paper will examine the relationship between Wotan, the ruler of the gods and the main figure of the *Ring*, and the rulers in the Theban plays, Oedipus and Creon. Wotan, although drawn on Norse mythology, is very much a tragic hero, driven to self-destruction by the decisions he makes. Second, there is the figure of Antigone, who is analogous to Brünnhilde the daughter of Wotan. Both are portrayed at times as extensions of their fathers (Antigone in the *Oedipus Coloneus*, Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*) but both also help, in Wagner's view, bring about the destruction of the traditional state. This paper will make clear the importance of Sophocles to understanding these characters and Wagner's larger purposes in the context of the mid-nineteenth century.

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