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*Malicious Dwarfs, Fair Nymphs, Heroic Gods
Application and Transformation of Germanic Mythology
in Richard Wagner's libretto «The Rhinegold»*

Abstract

According to Joachim Heinzle, the *Nibelungensage* represents the «most German among all German issues». The following essay seeks to analyze in how far the German composer Richard Wagner resorts either to a more traditional or to a more innovative representation of the Germanic influences in his libretto *The Rhinegold*, which is the opening part of his operatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. Moving from an epistemological basis, the libretto will be examined with a special focus on how Wagner applies and transforms Germanic mythology in terms of the characters and of deictic references.

Even more than 150 years after Richard Wagner had finished the textual basis of his operatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelungen* in 1853, the complex history of his masterpiece and its reception is far from being concluded. It has, however, revealed a tendency of change from the fascination with Wagner's highly disputed and ahistorical reception as a “German nationalist” during the first half of the 20th century to the concern with the process of writing and composing. In this context, the issue of the sources that inspired Wagner has become increasingly important, which is encouraged by numerous notes that Wagner left while writing his libretti. Dieter Bremer lays emphasis on the following note which dates back to 1851: «Meine Studien trugen mich so durch die Dichtungen des Mittelalters hindurch bis auf den Grund des alten urdeutschen Mythos; ein Gewand nach dem anderen, das ihm die spätere Dichtung entstellend umgeworfen hatte, vermochte ich von ihm abzulösen»¹.

¹ D. Bremer, «Vom Mythos zum Musikdrama. Wagner, Nietzsche und die griechische Tragödie», in *Wege des Mythos in die Moderne. Richard Wagner Der Ring des Nibelungen*, ed. D. Borchmeyer (München, 1987), 41-63, here: 43. Transl.: «Research took me back through

This quotation provokes different questions. Since there has been a growing interest in Nordic and Germanic mythology from the beginning of the 19th century onwards², priority will have to be laid on *which* myth Wagner tried to unveil. Why is it that he referred to it as a *German* and, more precisely, *thoroughly* (“urdeutsch”) German myth? Which result does the discovery of the original German myth have? My suggestion starts with the term Wagner purposefully uses. The first question is therefore: what is a “myth”?

According to Hans Blumenberg’s famous definition, mythology focuses on «Geschichten von hochgradiger Beständigkeit ihres narrativen Kerns und ebenso ausgeprägter marginaler Variationsfähigkeit»³. Blumenberg continues to explain: «Diese beiden Eigenschaften machen Mythen traditionsgängig: ihre Beständigkeit ergibt den Reiz, sie auch in bildnerischer oder ritueller Darstellung wiederzuerkennen, ihre Veränderbarkeit den Reiz der Erprobung neuer und eigener Mittel der Darbietung»⁴.

Richard Wagner’s operatic tetralogy, which was written and composed

Medieval prose until reaching the basis of the old thoroughly German myth. I managed to unveil it slice by slice after it had been distorted by misleading interpretations» (transl. M.B.).

² Cf. W. Frühwald, «Wandlungen eines Nationalmythos. Der Weg der Nibelungen ins 19. Jahrhundert», in *Wege des Mythos in die Moderne. Richard Wagner Der Ring des Nibelungen*, ed. D. Borchmeyer (München, 1987), 17-40; J. Heinzle, «Einleitung: Der deutscheste aller deutschen Stoffe», in *Die Nibelungen. Ein deutscher Wahn, ein deutscher Alptraum*, eds. J. Heinzle, A. Waldschmidt (Frankfurt a.M., 2001), 7-41; L. Petzold, *Einführung in die Sagenforschung* (Konstanz, 2002), 64; R. Safranski, *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affaire* (München, 2005), 258-260.

³ H. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt a.M., 2006), 40. Transl.: «[...] stories with a high stability of their narrative core and a distinct variety at their narrative margins» (transl. M.B.).

⁴ Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 40. Transl.: «These two features make myths become a part of any tradition: stability results in the challenge to recognize them in graphical and ritual representations, whereas variety calls for the trial of new and proper ways of interpretation» (transl. M.B.). Other interesting approaches to the definition of “myth” and “mythology” can be found consulting the following publications: Christoph Jamme lays emphasis on the aspect of orality, referring to a myth as a «mündlicher Kommentar einer Kunsthandlung». Cf. C. Jamme, *Gott hat ein Gewand. Grenzen und Perspektiven philosophischer Mythos-Theorien der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M., 1999), 21; J. Assmann; A. Assmann, «Mythos», in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, eds. H. Cancik et al., Vol. 4. (Stuttgart, 1998), 179-200; R. A. Segal, *Mythos. Eine kleine Einführung* (Stuttgart, 2007). The volume edited by Barner, Detken and Wesche contains a survey of theoretical approaches dealing with mythology. W. Barner, A. Detken, J. Wesche eds., *Texte zur modernen Mythentheorie* (Stuttgart, 2007) 8-23.

between 1848 and 1874, can be understood as an example of the interrelation of “stability” and “variety” with a regard to different mythological topics. The libretti and the inherent overlap of numerous elements of different mythological sources have kept scholars busy with the research on Wagner’s relationship to mythology since the late Nineteenth century. It may be considered a surprise that the first part of the sequence, *The Rhinegold*, written in 1853, has been widely neglected by scholars so far, referring to the libretto merely as a “prelude” to introduce the main plot in *Valkyrie*, *Siegfried* and *Twilight of the Gods*. This tendency misjudges, however, the multitude of mythologems which are already referred to in the first part of Wagner’s tetralogy. With a regard to the whole operatic circle, *The Rhinegold* starts to expound the problems of the central conflict which will determine the following parts. Consequently, Wagner’s approach to mythology deserves to be examined more precisely.

At the beginning, it seems, however, appropriate to summarize the constellation of problems in *The Rheingold* briefly. It is the story of how Alberich, the dwarf, steals the Rhinegold, a legendary treasure, from the Rhine Maidens. He has himself forge a magical ring which shall enable him to rule the world. Still, it does not get that far, since the god Wotan obtains the whole treasure by fraud. Wotan needs the Rhinegold to ransom his sister-in-law Freija from the giants Fafnir and Fasolt. Freija had been offered to the giants in a contract which made them build the castle Walhall by order of Wotan. However, once Wotan has managed to get in the possession of the magical ring, he wants to keep it for himself. The giants discover the betrayal, claiming both the Rhinegold and the ring. Wotan does not give in until the goddess Erda succeeds convincing him with a warning prophecy. The libretto ends when the gods approach Walhall together, whereas the Rhinegold and the ring fall upon the giant Fafnir, who murders his brother Fasolt avariciously to possess the ring. This is as far as Wagner’s libretto is concerned.

The question that remains is: In how far does Wagner use mythology and how does he manage to recombine its various influences in his libretto? Therefore, the interest aims at the different sources which, besides being documented by the composer in his private quotes, have become a stimulating object of research on Wagner. In this context, the mythological sources of *The Rhinegold* appear to be as heterogeneous as the history of their reception. Three main directions can be distinguished: impacts of Greek, Nordic or Icelandic and Germanic mythology and heroic epics. In the following, the main concern shall be on the elements of Germanic and Nordic mythology. As Volker Mertens suggests, Wagner managed to «cre-

ate a new myth of the world and of humanity, giving old names to the newly created myth»⁵. In addition to the Germanic heroic epics around 1200 i.e. the *Nibelungenlied*, Wagner resorted especially to the legends of the *Snorra-Edda* respectively the *Völsunga-Saga* and the *Thidreks-Saga*. Although the latter ones were put down literally even after the *Nibelungenlied*, there can be no doubt that they are based upon considerably older sources which can partly be traced back to the 9th century.

The quotation mentioned above in which Wagner comments to try to «reach the basis of the old thoroughly German myth» suggests that he conceives of the Nordic legends as the basis of his original Germanic myth. From Wagner's point of view, "unveiling" is intended to recombine it with different influences of Germanic heroic epics. Wagner had the relevant translations of the *Nibelungenlied* and the Nordic epics by Simrock and Hagen-Breslau at hand when he started to write the libretto *The Rhinegold*. The same holds for the influential publications *German mythology* and *German heroic epics* by Jacob Grimm. The notable innovative potential of Wagner's libretto reveals itself with respect to the multitude of different sources and the target of recombining them on a new mythological level. Therefore, it poses a new challenge for the analysis of the recombined mythologems.

In this context, it may be of particular interest to discover in which elements of the text Wagner resorted to Germanic mythology. The libretto suggests a triadic constellation to respond to this question: local deictic elements (I) such as the Rhine and the castle of the gods, Walhall, can be distinguished from personal or figural elements (II) such as gods and demigods, giants, dwarfs and nymphs and central symbols (III) as for instance the Rhinegold, the ring, Freija's golden apples and Alberich's cloak of invisibility. This trichotomy, however, serves the needs of a scheme. On the level of the libretto, single elements of all three sectors interact with each other. The Rhine is intended to be the depository of the Rhinegold, connecting it causally with the ring which is forged out of it. The Rhine is furthermore the living space of the Rhine Maidens, the guardians of the treasure, and it sets the local background for Alberich's attempts to seduce the nymphs which lead towards the theft of the hoard. Bearing in mind that this exposition of the plot is connected to the situation of the gods in the second scene of the libretto, the efficient causality of *The Rhinegold* becomes evident: single elements of Germanic and Nordic

⁵ V. Mertens, «Richard Wagner und das Mittelalter», in *Richard-Wagner-Handbuch*, eds. U. Müller, P. Wapnewski, (Stuttgart, 1986) 40.

mythology cling one to another as the text proceeds. The result can be described as a dramatic arc of tension, forming – to put it graphically – a *ring* and making it impossible to differentiate between the original and the final state of the plot.

Is Alberich's theft really the cause *leading to* or is it already a fact *resulting from* the crisis of the almighty gods, represented by Wotan? A question which broaches another issue: which are the indications for a development of the single mythologems taken from the different sources? To answer this question, two lines of the plot have to be distinguished. The first one refers to the theft of the Rhinegold by Alberich, the second one is brought up by Wotan's claim for the castle Walhall. Both plots share a basic structure: one character tries to gain and to maintain power using dishonest means: theft and violence in the case of Alberich and betrayal and deceit in the case of Wotan. The two plots are therefore linked on the level of the protagonists' goals, the methods chosen to reach them and the emotions upon which the goals are based.

Both Wotan and Alberich are terrified to lose their power, which makes them try even harder and more drastically to ensure their dominance⁶. To put it differently: the fear of losing power turns out to be equal to the desire to gain it. This fear becomes a constitutive element of *The Rhinegold*. In fear of losing his power, Wotan has himself erect Walhall, the anxiety for Freija makes him steal the hoard and the ring from Alberich. Feared to give away his newly gained power, he refrains from handing it over to the giants, which leads to Erda's prophecy foreshadowing the end of the gods to cause additional fear that finally makes him change his opinion again. Wotan and Alberich represent two central characters in whom the creative combination of different mythologems can be illustrated. This holds especially true for the interrelation of Nordic and Germanic elements. Wagner's (Western) Germanic "Wotan" can be traced back to the (Central) Germanic "Wodan", who in himself shows several characteristic features of his Nordic pendant "Odin", a central character of the *Snorra-Edda*. This conclusion is not exclusively limited to physical characteristics (as, for example, the fact that Wotan – just like Odin – had to sacrifice one of his eyes to obtain more wisdom). It also includes some epithets of the characters. The derivation of the name "Wotan" from the adjective "wôdaz" ("furious") and the respective verb "wôdjan" ("to

⁶ Cf. T. Koebner, «Minne Macht. Zu Richard Wagners Bühnenwerk Der Ring des Nibelungen», in *Die Nibelungen. Ein deutscher Wahn, ein deutscher Alptraum*, eds. J. Heinzle, A. Waldschmidt, (Frankfurt a.M., 2001), 309-332.

rage”) points to the original classification as a god of the storm and of the death, which was foremost typical of the Central Germanic tribes. It establishes a link to Odin’s hall of the slain, Walhall, in the Nordic tradition, laying emphasis on Odin’s ambivalence in the legends of the Nordic epics, which draws a picture of the character just as ambivalent between perfidiousness, intransparency and bravery as holds true for Wagner’s Wotan.

It gets more complex as it comes to the mythological roots of Alberich. The name originates from the Germanic heroic epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, although its concept refers to decisively earlier traditions. As Wolfgang Golther explains, the *Snorra-Edda* distinguishes between elves of light and those of darkness.⁷ Alberich, whose name means “king of the elves”, belongs to the latter group, and, more precisely, to the dwarfs. He appears in the early Nordic legends conveyed by Snorri Sturloson with different names. Facts which stand as a stable landmark are his physical characteristics: he is said to be munchkin, bulky, deformed and gnome-like. Two other Nordic legends, the *Regins mól* and the *Skaldskapar mól*, refer to the dwarf Andwari who accumulates hoards of gold, gaining his magical forces from a mysterious ring. When the ring is stolen from him, Andwari puts a lethal jinx on everyone wearing the ring. Even the *Thidreks-Saga*, which is attributed to the Norwegian court of Bergen, tells a story about a dwarf named Alfrik, who is said to be a gifted farrier and who steals a treasure. Wagner therefore combines single elements taken from different mythological sources, places and epochs. This strategy is not limited to Wotan and Alberich. In Wotan’s advisor, Loge, Wagner combines single traits of the dubious god “Loki” and the giant of fire “Logi”. The interpretation of the first one is according to Golther based on central Germanic, pagan sources, which represent “Loki” as the «spoiler of the world»⁸, whereas “Logi”, the giant of fire, is especially associated with the *Snorra-Edda*⁹. In the case of Erda, Wagner uses an overlap of Anglo-Saxon and Germanic sources. Her significance lies in the warning prophecy in which she urges Wotan to refrain from his eagerness for power and the ring.

Since the main focus has been repeatedly laid on “power” and “leadership”, it seems necessary to put these two concepts into the context of the libretto. On the level of the plot, both terms are mirrored by two symbols:

⁷ W. Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie* (Wiesbaden, 2004) 165.

⁸ Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, 488-491; cf. P. Wapnewski, *Der Ring des Nibelungen. Richard Wagners Weltendrama* (München, Zürich, 2008) 78.

⁹ Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, 238-244.

the ring and the Rhinegold on one side and the castle of the gods, Walhall, on the other. While the latter is intended to assure the power of the gods, the ring offers the opportunity to gain world supremacy. According to Volker Mertens, it becomes therefore a «universal symbol of domination»¹⁰:

Abgesehen davon, daß die Kunstform der Oper nichts anderes bedeutet als die Emanzipation des Denkvorganges aus den Fesseln rationaler Logik und empirischer Wahrscheinlichkeit [...] wird man gut tun, den Ring nicht durchgehend als gefügiges Zauberinstrument zu verstehen, sondern weitgehend als Symbol. Eines für Herrschaftsanspruch und Herrschaftsmöglichkeit.¹¹

The interrelation between gain and assurance of power is foremost reflected by the local deictic structure of the text. Let us look at the topological position of Walhall. Not only is it isolated due to its position «on the top of a rocky mountain»¹², but also because of a series of means to protect it from possible attacks. Consequently, it offers a secure place to retreat for the gods, while it simultaneously serves as a symbol of Wotan's power. Walhall is described more precisely in the *Grímmesmól*, as Golther summarizes:

Dorthin wählt der Gott [Odin, M.B.] täglich sich die Helden, welche den Waffentod erlitten. [...] Westlich am Eingangstor hängt ein Wolf, darüber schwebt ein Adler. Fünfhundertvierzig Türen hat Walhall, aus jeder mögen zugleich achthundert Streiter hervorgehen. Beleuchtet wird die Halle am Abend durch den Glanz der Schwerter.¹³

The binary function to demonstrate and to protect the power of the gods is thus documented in the Nordic sources. Walhall's topological po-

¹⁰ Mertens, *Richard Wagner und das Mittelalter*, (note 5) 37.

¹¹ Wapnewski, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 91. Transl.: «Apart from the fact that opera as a form of arts aims at the emancipation of ratio from the restrictions of rational logic and empirical probability, one better refrains from interpreting the ring as a mere ornamental magical instrument. On the contrary, it is rather to be understood as a symbol of the request and the opportunity to rule» (transl. M.B.).

¹² R. Wagner, *Das Rheingold* (Stuttgart, 2004) 25.

¹³ Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, 381. Transl.: «It is the place in which the god [Odin, M.B.] summons those who were slain on the battlefield every day. [...] The western side of the entrance gate is watched over by a wolf. An eagle floats over it. Walhall has 540 doors, out of which may step 800 warriors at a time. The hall is illuminated by the glance of the swords in the evening» (transl. M.B.).

sition has been referred to the castle of the gods, Asgard, by Tetzner¹⁴. In the *Snorra-Edda*, Asgard is said to be the «centre of the world», whose summit protrudes out of the clouds into eternal clarity. Wagner's deictic counterpoint is the «ground of the Rhine», where Alberich becomes aware of the hoard out of which he has himself forge the second symbol of power, the ring. One of the libretto's particularities results from the fact that the hall of the slain and the ring are closely linked with each other. Only for the sake of Walhall, Wotan closes the contract with the giants, and to get rid of his duties, he takes possession of the hoard and of the ring. Once again, going back to the mythological sources, they appear to be quite heterogeneous: the *Snorra-Edda* lays emphasis on the construction of Walhall after the former castle of the gods had been destroyed in a war. The source furthermore quotes several elements of the contract Wagner alludes to in *The Rhinegold*: Freija as a reward for the giants and Loki as an advisor of the gods. On the contrary to Wagner, the *Snorra-Edda* has the conflict solved by Thor: he slaughters the giants with his hammer.

But what about the ring? Consulting the *Regins mól*, it is not yet the source of world supremacy, instead, it is associated with extraordinary wealth. The *Skirnirepic* tells a legend about a magical ring which multiplies possession and wealth. The ring is called "Draupnir"¹⁵. The *Snorra-Edda* provides us with the name "Andwanaut"¹⁶. Wagner uses these sources to make the symbol of wealth become a symbol of power. One of the central aspects of the ring is to reveal the characters' susceptibility to the temptation of power and dominance. Thus, it represents decisive deficiencies of the characters. None of them can be held as an example of perfection: almost all of them submit to the ring's fascination¹⁷. The Rhine Maidens enjoy teasing and mocking Alberich. Moral issues apart, they forget about their original task, which is to watch over the hoard. In Alberich's case, the ring brings forth the destructive potential of the character, which makes Loge comment: «Hohen Mut / verleihst deine Macht: / grimmig groß / wuchs dir die Kraft»¹⁸. In my translation in the footnote I left one expression in German, as I need to go back to a former diachronic variety of my language to explain it: Middle High German, in

¹⁴ R. Tetzner, *Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen* (Stuttgart, 2000) 512.

¹⁵ cf. Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, 379.

¹⁶ cf. Wapnewski, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 46.

¹⁷ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 62. Cf. Tetzner, *Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen* 542, who lays emphasis on the fallibility of the gods in Germanic mythology.

¹⁸ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 62. Transl.: «Your power grants you "Hohen Mut": Ghastly great has grown your strength» (transl. M.B.).

which the term “*hoher muot*” is to be understood as “sense of delight”. Not only does the ring give power to its bearer, but it also influences his consciousness. The state of bliss in which Alberich imagines himself makes him respond as follows. His goal is to gain himself not less than «*die ganze Welt*». Alberich still has other, more precise goals: « *euch Göttliche fang' ich mir alle*» desiring to force him their women for his «*Lust*»¹⁹.

Even Wotan cannot renounce the fascination of the ring as soon as he is in possession of it. He says: «*Nun halt' ich, was mich erhebt, / der Mächtigen mächtigsten Herrn!*»²⁰. The effect of the precious treasure is shown most drastically by the giants, with Fafnir murdering his brother Fasolt. It would, however, be wrong to conclude that the ring was to be held responsible for the behaviour of its bearers. Wagner's libretto is far too subtle to be reduced to any monocausal explanation which sees the ring as the source of evil making the world go to pieces. More specifically, the constellation of problems does not quite begin in consequence of the power of the ring, but *because* the world has *already* lost its balance. Wotan had calculated not to fulfil his obligations even when he signed the contract with the giants, as he admits to his wife Fricka. The betrayal had been planned carefully, and Wotan is definitely at fault. This constellation has serious consequences. The construction of Walhall is based upon a breach of promise and deceit. As I tried to show, Wagner keeps the tradition of Wotan's ambivalence in the Nordic epics and in Nordic mythology. Wotan's arguments strike the reader as almost machiavellistic: from his point of view, the intention to win himself the world justifies the means. His wife Fricka cannot completely agree with him. Not completely, since her motives are rather egoistic than moral. First, she considers Walhall a «*herrliche Wohnung, / wonniger Hausrat*»²¹ by means of which she hopes to make Wotan cling to her more strongly. She is concerned with her husband's fidelity.

On the other hand, her concerns are with her sister Freija. Once again, Wotan proves to be the coldly calculating politician: knowing well that his wife would never have accepted a contract with her sister being the set as the price, he insisted on treating with the giants on his own, only in the

¹⁹ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 63-64. Transl.: «the whole world», «capturing the Gods with his golden wrist» and forcing him their women for his «indecent appetite». (transl. M.B.).

²⁰ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 76. Transl.: «Now I hold what makes me the most powerful master amongst those who have power!» (transl. M.B.).

²¹ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 28. Transl.: [a] «magnificent place to live in, a beautiful home» (transl. M.B.).

presence of Loge. What does this decision tell us about the relationship between Wotan and Fricka? The answer is simple: they mistrust each other deeply, with Wotan being the morally ambivalent character that we already know. Even the fact that he tries to shift the responsibility to his advisor Loge may not gloss over that. Wotan's greed for power is too strong, it reveals itself when Loge tells him about the Rhinegold for the first time. Wotan's reaction is obvious: «Den Ring muß ich haben!»²² – which however suggests other means than those set up by Loge. Wotan rejects Loge's advice to hand the hoard over to the Rhine Maidens. Neither will he see his error, nor does he even have the slightest glimpse that his behaviour might contradict his original task, which is to guarantee the world's balance. In his Wotan, Wagner reveals a perverseness of this central issue: instead of balancing the sources of power, which he could easily have done by depositing the treasure on the ground of the Rhine again, he rather does the contrary. He saddles himself with guilt, which, as we all know, has severe consequences for the fate of his descendant, a certain fair-haired boy named Siegfried.

The ring is therefore only the catalyst of the characters' greed for power. It only quarries the elements which have already been designed in the conception of the characters. This holds true for Wotan, Alberich and the giants. Golther focuses on a characteristic feature of the giants in which he sees the «Ungeheure und Ungestüme, Finstre und Feindselige in der Natur»²³. Their goal is the overthrow of the constellation of powers which they hope to achieve via the destruction of the old world order. This motive has been repeatedly quoted since the *Snorra-Edda*, and the same holds for Wagner's libretto²⁴. Both Fafnir and Fasolt share the core desire for power, and they do have another characteristic feature in common: the disposition to violence which distinguishes them from Wotan, making them comparable to Alberich. Once again, the ring serves as a catalyst (decisively *not* as the cause) of the destructive potential which peeks at the moment in which Fafnir murders his brother.

A particular sequence of the libretto that represents the dependence among the gods is introduced by the kidnapping of Freija which the gods see with consternation. However, they fail to react as the text tells us via

²² Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 44. Transl.: «The ring must be mine!» (transl. M.B.).

²³ Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*, 203. Transl.: [the] «personification of rough, untamed elemental forces such as monstrosity, furiousness, darkness and hostility in nature» (transl. M.B.).

²⁴ Cf. Tetzner, *Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen*, 538-539.

Loge, who remains surprised. At the same time, the stage directions describe the gods as «zunchmend bleich und älter aussehend»²⁵. This is due to the attribution of fertility to Freija, whose task is to guarantee eternal youth and freshness to the gods as long as they continue to taste Freija's apples every day. In this context, the focus shall be laid on two aspects. First, Wagner made a notable choice when he decided to use the name Freija, which is documented in Norwegian and Icelandic sources, in favour of the Germanic equivalent Frijja. The second aspect deals with the mythological sources upon which the apples are based. The apples themselves have already become a myth in the libretto, as Fafnir reveals when he negotiates with Wotan. Apart from the implicit erotic connotations, the representation of fertility via two golden apples which have to be cultivated by a young woman to invite others to taste them, the mythologem is in some ways informative: it explains the conditions on which the gods' existence and their capacity to act are based. Freija's golden apples, an elixir of youth, obviously refer to the apples of the Hesperides in Greek mythology²⁶. However, Wagner's inspiration is not limited to Greek mythology: the Icelandic sources provided him with a similar mythologem. The goddess Idun, whose name means "juvenescence" and "regeneration". The scalds represent her – just like Freija – as the bearer of the apples from which the gods obtain youth. The fact that Freija's task is essential for the gods is explained by Loge, which makes the deal Wotan signs with the giants appear even more drastically. To set Freija as reward for the construction of Walhall endangers the survival of the gods. Wotan's plans are on the verge to cause collateral damage to his fellows. The fall of the gods becomes a topos frequently quoted in the libretto. It is inherent to Loge's final comment as well as to the jinx Alberich puts on the ring and moreover to Erda's prophecy. Hence, Wagner creates the transition to the second part of his operatic tetralogy: *Valkyrie*. Yet, this is supposed to be a different topic.

Wagner's libretto *The Rhinegold* can be understood as a synthesis of different mythological influences. In this context, special focus was laid on the Germanic and Icelandic sources. Wagner's work is, however, far from being reduced to a mere quotation of the single mythologems. Instead, his ultimate goal is a new combination by which he seeks to give his text an ambivalent structure whose heterogeneity in mythology is transferred to

²⁵ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 48. Transl.: «increasingly pale and elderly looking» (transl. M.B.).

²⁶ Cf. Wapnewski, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 75.

its characters who disprove any monocausal interpretation. *The Rhinegold*, in which Wagner tried to «reach the basis of the old thoroughly German myth», forms the platform of his whole operatic epic, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. As Heiner Müller summarizes, it is therefore inexorably linked to the «most German among all German issues»²⁷.

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²⁷ Heiner Müller in an interview with Urs Jenny and Helmut Karasek. Cf. *Der Spiegel* 19/1983, p. 205.