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The University of Sydney

Board of Studies in Music

***PARSIFAL* AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

A STUDY OF THE RECEPTION OF *PARSIFAL* AS A HOMOEROTIC TEXT

A thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with a largely forgotten body of criticism and commentary surrounding Richard Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*. In particular, criticism and commentary that focuses on what were believed to be, at the very least, inappropriate character types in the work, and, at the very worst, dangerous social messages implicit in the opera. Above all, these are messages that are concerned with issues of gender and sexuality—homosexuality in particular. This body of critical commentary (insofar as it can be called a single "body") was predominant at the turn-of-the-century and is largely, but not exclusively, confined to the writings of the English critic John F. Runciman, the American critic James Huneker and, to a lesser extent, fellow American William J. Henderson.¹ All three critics were esteemed music journalists and their critiques and essays on *Parsifal* were published in major newspapers and music journals in Great Britain and the United States and, for the most part, were reprinted in hard cover publications. As well as surveying the *Parsifal* literature by this trio of journalists, consideration will be given to related criticism by slightly earlier commentators, notably Friedrich Nietzsche, who was an outspoken critic of what he believed was a consummately degenerate work. Nietzsche's anti-*Parsifal* vituperation

¹ John F. Runciman (1866-1916), was music critic at the London *Saturday Review* from 1894 until his death. He was renowned for his outspoken criticism of composers and performers not to his liking, criticism which, on occasion, provoked litigation. In addition to two Wagner monographs (1908 and 1913), he wrote biographical studies on Haydn and Purcell. James Gibbons Huneker (1857-1921), was a well-known music critic, essayist, and novelist. Although his journalism was primarily for New York-based newspapers (including the *Sun* and the *Times*), he also acted as correspondent for journals in London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. His best known music publication nowadays is *Chopin: The Man and His Music*, published in 1900 and later translated into German. His novel, *Painted Veils*, is discussed in a recent study by David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). William J. Henderson (1855-1937), a Princeton graduate, was music critic at the New York *Times* and, later, the New York *Sun*. In addition to his work as a music journalist, he taught at the New York College of Music and the Institute of Musical Art, New

proved to be the catalyst for the hostile position taken against the opera by at least one of the three critics mentioned above. This study will demonstrate that reception of *Parsifal* at the *fin de siècle* illustrates the extent to which an operatic work was expected to fulfil certain responsibilities, that it was required to uphold and reinforce a given set of values. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century outrage against *Parsifal* stemmed not only from the fact that it was believed to ignore this unwritten (but evidently mandatory) requirement, but also that the opera had the potential to undermine accepted codes of decency; that *Parsifal* was, in fact, a threat to the common good. It comes as no surprise to find that concern for the opera's unorthodox treatment of such things as the portrayal of masculinity and sexual mores occurred at a time of profound gender insecurity and homosexual panic. It also occurred at a time when, for the first time, the work received extensive performances as a staged opera outside Bayreuth.

Unique copyright arrangements granted the *Festspielhaus* sole performing rights to *Parsifal*, a monopoly that it enjoyed until American opera houses, which were not bound by the agreement, began staging the work (in highly controversial circumstances) from 1903 onwards. Thus, it was in the early years of the century that *Parsifal* (which received its premiere in 1882) became known to a much wider public and, given the controversy surrounding the performances, generated a tremendous amount of publicity and interest. But the controversy was not confined to legal and copyright issues nor to questions of blasphemy and sacrilege. What is generally not

York. His published works include books on music appreciation, general histories of music, a Wagner monograph, and several guides to vocal production. He also wrote light opera libretti.

remarked upon is that Wagner's *Bühnenweihfestspiel* generated strong opposition in some quarters for its apparent endorsement of "contrary ways of life."

In order to account for the perception that *Parsifal* was a "homosexual" opera, this investigation will survey the important place of the work in "decadent" art and literature of the late nineteenth century and will also trace concerns regarding Wagner's sexuality that were raised by some key figures in turn-of-the-century medical studies on homosexuality. Finally, this thesis will argue that these "problematic" aspects of the opera clouded its critical evaluation well beyond the period under discussion. It will attempt to account for the hitherto unexplained fact that *Parsifal* was forbidden from performance in Nazi Germany, and will contend that, in the late twentieth century, issues of sexuality and gender in *Parsifal* are by no means resolved, that, even in these apparently sexually enlightened times, sex and gender issues in *Parsifal* remain precarious to say the least.

The position taken by commentators Runciman and Huneker is basically this: *Parsifal* is an unacceptable opera ("evil" and "dangerous," in fact) on the grounds that it presents the spectator and listener with a scenario that appears to promote homosexuality and an assortment of characters who can only be described as sexually and socially abnormal. (Homosexuality is not referred to by name—which is not surprising given that the word itself was not in general use at the time—but it is made clear by implication.)² They first expressed this view around the turn-of-the-century and neither critic retracted from this position in later commentary on the work (in fact,

² David M. Halperin explains that that word "homosexuality" (which first appeared in English in 1892) was slow to gain widespread use, in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), chapter one.

as I shall later demonstrate, Runciman's denunciations became even more outspoken in the fifteen years or so after his initial outburst). The fact that criticism of this kind did not go unnoticed at the time is made clear by a reference in 1906 to the observation that "recently *Parsifal* has been made the butt of the brilliant essayist and conversationalist," with the suggestion that both Wagner *and* Tchaikovsky were considered by some to be "arch-destroyers of the human soul."³ The Wagner bibliography in a history of music from the same year actually directs readers to the writings of both Huneker and Henderson should they wish to learn more of the "disparaging criticism" against *Parsifal*.⁴ Prominent English Wagnerian Ernest Newman made specific reference to the work of both Runciman and Huneker in his 1914 study of Wagner, *Wagner as Man and Artist*, when he accused them of being principal agitators in the "pleasant little game of *Parsifal*-baiting."⁵ It is also criticism of this kind that Lawrence Gilman appears to allude to in his 1937 monograph, *Wagner's Operas*:

It is astonishing, when one stops to think of it, that *Parsifal* should have survived into the third decade of the twentieth century. What extremity of contempt and abuse has not been poured upon it! Between those who disapprove of *Parsifal* because, as they have thought and said, it makes capital of sacred things, and those who object to it because it deals with sacred things at all, Wagner's much-enduring *Bühnenweihfestspiel* has been sadly buffeted. As if this were not enough, the work has had to endure attacks from other quarters. There have been defenders of the hearth and home who, with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause, have discovered a taint of "immorality" in *Parsifal*...⁶

Like Runciman and Huneker, neither Newman nor Gilman makes specific reference to "homosexuality" in their discussion of accusations of "immorality" against *Parsifal* but they are able to make their point clear by using standard euphemistic language.

³ Edward Algernon Baughan, "Poisonous Appreciations," in *Music and Musicians* (London: John Lane, 1906), 118.

⁴ Edward Dickinson, *The Growth and Development of Music* (London: William Reeves, 1906), 329.

⁵ Ernest Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist*, rev. ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 318.

⁶ Lawrence Gilman, *Wagner's Operas* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 220.

(Newman, somewhat quaintly, makes use of terms such as “moral nastiness” and “race suicide.”)⁷

What is astonishing is that in more recent (and presumably liberated) times, when one would expect a reader to be accustomed to references to homosexuality, discussion of turn-of-the-century *Parsifal* criticism that condemned the opera on the basis of sex and gender issues is either ignored, referred to fleetingly and in rather cavalier terms, or tucked away in an obscure footnote annotation. This is an aspect of *Parsifal* reception history that has never been addressed in any detail. My opening reference to a “largely forgotten” body of *Parsifal* criticism might perhaps be more accurately described as a wilfully unacknowledged body of work. Joseph Horowitz’s recent study *Wagner Nights*, a supposedly comprehensive history of the performance, interpretation, and reception of Wagner’s operas in America during “the gilded age” (the prosperous decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) makes no mention at all of Huneker’s and Henderson’s *Parsifal* criticism despite continued references to these critics and an entire chapter devoted to the highly publicised New York performances of *Parsifal* in 1903-4.⁸ It seems astounding that one could present an account of the reception of the opera in its first ever season outside Bayreuth and not mention (or at least imply) that two of the most respected critics in New York were deeply troubled by the apparently unmasculine and sexually problematic qualities of the protagonist. But Horowitz’s omission is not an isolated case. An article in *Nineteenth Century Music* by Burton W. Peretti, “Democratic Leitmotifs in the American Reception of Wagner,” draws attention to the fact that Huneker disliked *Parsifal*, quotes from his

⁷ Ibid., 318 and 320.

⁸ Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

scathing attack on the opera, but never once mentions that homosexuality was a central issue in Huneker's diatribe. Peretti *does* point out, however, that "after 1905 Americans rapidly ceased to adhere to Wagnerian rhetoric,"⁹ but does not suggest that this is precisely the time at which homosexual readings of the opera gained ground, as indicated above. Charles Osborne's *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner* includes an extensive quotation from one of Runciman's attacks on *Parsifal* but fails to indicate exactly what it was that Runciman found so abhorrent. Osborne merely describes it as "perhaps the oddest" view to appear in print.¹⁰ It might perhaps be odd but it was neither without precedent nor was it an isolated viewpoint. We find an almost identical situation in *The Wagner Companion*, by Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson. A lengthy quote from one of Runciman's monographs is cited as an example of the "strange prejudices" that have long existed against the work but no attempt is made to shed some light on the very precise reason why Runciman held this prejudicial view.¹¹ In Anne Dzamba Sessa's *Richard Wagner and the English*, Raymond Furness's *Wagner and Literature*, and David C. Large's chapter, "Wagner's Bayreuth Disciples," in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, references to late nineteenth and early twentieth century homosexual readings of the opera are relegated to the comparative obscurity of discussion in content footnotes.¹² None of these writers acknowledge that there is an entire body of criticism from the period that discusses the opera in these terms.

⁹ Burton W. Peretti, "Democratic Leitmotifs in the American Reception of Wagner," *Nineteenth Century Music* 13 (Summer 1989): 37.

¹⁰ Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner* (London: O'Mara, 1990), 283.

¹¹ Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Wagner Companion* (London: Allen, 1977), 201. Another oblique reference to Runciman's *Parsifal* criticism is found in William Blissett, "Ernest Newman and English Wagnerism," *Music and Letters* 40 (October 1959): 317-8.

¹² Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979), 170-1; Raymond Furness, *Wagner and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 134; David C. Large, "Wagner's Bayreuth Disciples," in

Lucy Beckett's monograph, *Parsifal*, includes a chapter on reactions to and critical assessments of the opera, but makes a point of ignoring all of the turn-of-the-century criticism with which I am concerned. She points out that, "there has until recently been very little English writing on *Parsifal* that could properly be described as critical."¹³ This may indeed be true, but this is not to say that earlier criticism is therefore of negligible importance (which she seems to imply) for, as I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, homosexual readings of the opera, which first appeared in the mid-1890s, permeated the reception history of the opera for some time to come.

Wagnerism and European Culture and Politics, ed. David C. Large and William Weber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 312, n. 20.

¹³ Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner: "Parsifal"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 120.

CHAPTER II

OPERA AS SOCIAL DOCUMENT

Music does not exist in a vacuum. It is written by composers who work within social structures—of power, authority, and convention—and, whether we are aware of it or not, is performed, listened to, written about, analysed, and understood within (or, possibly, in spite of) these same structures. Although its agendas are sometimes obscured by seemingly absurd or trivial surface layers of meaning (far-fetched plots, unlikely coincidences), opera probably illustrates the social and political potency of music more clearly than other musical form in that it has a story to tell, characters to tell it, a time and place in which to tell it, a message to convey, and a moral to be learnt. Jeremy Tambling argues that “it is time to take opera out of the isolation in which it often exists when discussed—isolation from the rest of culture, from politics, from society—and see it as one ‘discourse’ among many, inflected by culture and ideology, and inflecting those in its turn.”¹ Opera, like any other work for the theatre, has the power to move and manipulate its audience to a very significant degree. Processes of audience manipulation in a symphonic or chamber work, on the other hand, while certainly possible, are more difficult to achieve given the absence of a libretto.

The political function and significance of opera has long been recognised, indeed it as old as the art form itself. Lully’s operas, like other forms of entertainment at the French court, were works in which the glories of France and of the ruling monarch (Louis XIV) were never far from the surface. Conversely, we need look no further than Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* and, more particularly, Verdi’s early nationalist operas in order to understand that opera had the potential to be used as a tool for political subversion, a fact recognised with alarm by censors at the time. In *Fidelio*, a

¹ Jeremy Tambling, *Opera and the Culture of Fascism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 8.

political opera if ever there was one, there are, in fact, no hidden messages that need to be decoded and unravelled; what you see (and hear) is what you get—a hymn to political freedom and to the values of universal brotherhood.

What is more difficult to gauge is the extent to which opera for much of its history was able to quietly, subtly, but very effectively reinforce social values that were so all-pervasive that there may not have been awareness on the part of the audience that a conditioning process was in fact going on. A number of musicologists and scholars in fields such as philosophy, history, and cultural studies have, in recent years, focused upon questions regarding the role played by opera (and music in general) in reflecting, reinforcing, and possibly shaping social discourses. Catherine Clément and Susan McClary, for example, have argued that opera unquestionably has had a part to play in perpetuating the socially constructed image of the weak, dependent, disempowered, and vulnerable woman.² McClary has also looked beyond the operatic repertory and argued that music of all kinds—vocal and instrumental, popular and classical—is bound up with larger social issues involving sex, gender, and politics. Music “does not just passively reflect society,” she writes, “it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organisation (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated.”³ Recent writings on such things as opera and imperialism and opera and fascism have further deepened our understanding of cultural and political discourses in music and the burgeoning area of “gay musicology” has begun to look at composers and works and the representation of same sex desire.⁴

² Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing. (London: Virago, 1989); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 8.

⁴ On opera and imperialism see Nicholas Routley, “Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* as a Manifesto of British Imperialism,” in *Aflame with Music: 100 years of Music at the University of Melbourne*, ed. Brenton Broadstock et al. (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1996): 31–41; on opera and fascism see Tambling, *Opera and the Culture of Fascism*; on gay readings in music see *Queering the Pitch*, eds. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Wagner's music has long been scrutinised and discussed in terms of its wider social implications, most notably in its apparent political and racial agendas. As early as 1898, George Bernard Shaw offered in *The Perfect Wagnerite* an analysis of the *Ring* that presented a case for a socialist reading of the tetralogy.⁵ Theodor Adorno's *In Search of Wagner* (which was written in the late 1930s but not published until the early 1950s), presents a critique of Wagner's works from a Marxist perspective with an eye to their function and place in the ideology of fascist Germany.⁶ A number of more recent studies have taken up aspects of Adorno's critique—notably his assertion that Wagner's operas present us with thinly disguised and highly unsympathetic portrayals of Jewish-type characters—and examined them more closely through detailed consideration of music and text. Scholars indebted to Adorno, figures such as Robert Gutman, Hartmut Zelinsky, Paul Lawrence Rose, Marc A. Weiner, and Barry Millington, have all offered cogent interpretations of Wagner's operas based on the belief that they contain encoded anti-Semitic messages.⁷ The point made by commentators such as these is that, though the encoded messages would have been quite easily decoded by audiences in the late nineteenth century, they have to a large extent lost their meaning—meaning *intended* by the composer—in the intervening period. Revelations of this kind remind us, if we need reminding, that Wagner's music dramas extend beyond the realm of mere narrative and action, that they take us into rather deeper levels of signification. They are shown here to contain a level of meaning representative of particular social concerns of the *Zeitgeist* in much the same way that Verdi's *Nabucco* is a document of the *Risorgimento* or *Fidelio* celebrates the triumph of loyalty, justice, and freedom in post-revolutionary consciousness. The

⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898; reprint, New York: Dover, 1967).

⁶ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991); originally published as *Versuch über Wagner* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1952).

⁷ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968); Hartmut Zelinsky, "Die 'feuerkur' des Richard Wagner, oder die 'neue religion' der 'Erlösung' durch 'Vernichtung,'" *Musik-Konzepte* 5 (June 1981): 79-112; Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (London: Faber, 1992); Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Barry Millington, "Is there anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3 (November 1991): 247-60.

obvious difference, of course, is that Wagner's message, and that of late nineteenth century German nationalism, is not as ideologically consonant with our age as Verdi's or Beethoven's, but the message is there nonetheless.

Although this thesis will consider the reception history of *Parsifal* with a view to demonstrating that it has been partially fashioned by social concerns—in particular those relating to male sex and gender roles—I would like to present by way of an introduction some observations regarding the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reception of Wagner's character Siegfried in order to show how issues of gender in society at large were hinted at in commentary on the Siegfried operas. One tendency that has been noted in studies of masculinity of the *fin de siècle* is the appearance and, in some quarters, almost veneration of the so-called hypermasculine type. Social historians have recognised this as one outcome of a society fraught with anxiety over what were perceived to be challenges to the stability of gender binarisms that emerged in post-Enlightenment Europe and were hitherto taken as fact.⁸ For most of the nineteenth century there was a clear perception in prosperous, industrialist societies of the fundamental attributes and social functions of male and female and, by extension, the fundamental differences between the two. These societies, collectively, considered gender types in uncompromisingly essentialist terms. To summarise the position as it applied to the family: the male was authoritarian, courageous, physically fit, rational, unemotional, and the dominant figure in the household; the female, by contrast, was irrational, submissive, sentimental, denied an individual voice, but was fundamentally important in her role as mother and homemaker. Society at large and government were organised along similar lines; they were simply a representation of the dynamics of the family unit writ large. (Men had the vote, women didn't. Men

⁸ For a discussion of the emergence of modern gender stereotypes see George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapters 1-3 in particular. For discussion of the gender crises of the *fin de siècle* see Mosse, *The Image of Man*, chapters 4 and 5; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*

made the laws, women didn't. Men worked in professional, merchant, and manual labour intensive positions. Women, if they worked at all, were employed in nurturing and caring occupations such as teaching and nursing.)

In the last decade or so of the nineteenth century and until at least the outbreak of World War One, however, the comfortable scenario presented by male and female stereotypes was seen to be under attack through the disturbingly visible appearance of countertypes: male and female homosexuals, androgynes, dandies and decadents, pacifist men, and women demanding both the right to vote and legal rights independent of a spouse.⁹ The increasing urbanisation of industrial Europe and the closing of the frontier in America also played a subtle but noticeable part in challenging traditional concepts of "manliness" as the male became locked into the modern cityscape and alienated from nature and the outdoors. This, together with the appearance of the countertypes, contributed to what at the time was quite alarmingly recognised as the "feminisation" of culture and society, an attack on the stability of hitherto secure binary oppositions. Baden-Powell's founding of the Boy Scout movement was one attempt to stem the tide of feminine influence, to inculcate in boys and youths solid masculine values such as camaraderie and a love of the outdoors. In the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, mindful of the need to counter any threat to the nation's masculine culture, "elevated compulsive masculinity and military adventurism to the level of national myth."¹⁰ In his discussion of the masculinity crisis in America at the *fin de siècle* Michael S. Kimmel summarises his observations thus:

At both the textual and the institutional levels—in works of fiction, sermons, and scientific tracts, as well as in public policy and voluntary associations—the late-nineteenth-century crisis of masculinity revealed three important reactions to the perceived feminization of American culture. First, there was a considerable antifeminist backlash, which cast women as the source of men's troubles and sought to reestablish a perceived erosion of male dominance. Second, a "promale" backlash sought vigorously

(London: Bloomsbury, 1991); and Joe L. Dubbert, "Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis," *Psychoanalytic Review* 16 (1974), 443-55.

⁹ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, chapter four, Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 1-18.

¹⁰ Michael S. Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in *The Making of Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 148.

to reassert traditional masculinity, especially as a cultural and political ethos, against social and political trends of which feminism was but a symptom, not a cause. Finally, a small but important group of men openly embraced feminist ideas and ideals as the signposts pointing toward a radically different future.¹¹

I would argue that the reception of opera may also be added to Kimmel's list of primary source documents that illustrate the phenomenon, for in appraisals of Wagner's character Siegfried (and, as I shall later demonstrate, Parsifal too) we find the gender anxieties of the era—specifically, the “promale” backlash to which he refers—borne out in music criticism.

At precisely the time when conventional notions of masculinity appear to be under attack we find Siegfried lauded by one commentator as “the incarnation of free, untrammelled Manhood”¹² and by another as “the free, untrammelled youth of *all time*” (emphasis mine).¹³ Here is a male figure who “must be big in every way—big in the brawn of his brandished limbs, big in the bursts of his blithesome enthusiasm, and big in the beauty and bloom of his song.”¹⁴ Not for this hero is the sophisticated, potentially degenerate, urbanised, (feminised?) world of the *fin de siècle*, for in *Siegfried* we find “a perfect incarnation of the spirit of old Germany, virginal and gross, sincere and malicious, full of humour and sentiment, of deep feeling, of dreams of bloody and joyous battles, of the shade of great oak trees and the song of birds.”¹⁵ Implicit in all of these comments is the kind of male stereotype that the “promale” backlash sought to project: an exaggeration of the masculine ideal, a warrior type who was one with nature and who exuded strength, virility, health, and naturalness. An American essay on Siegfried that was published in the early 1890s presented him in terms not altogether unlike those used to describe the robust trailblazers of the wild west, he was a pioneer who “ruthlessly harness[ed] the wilderness as he scaled

¹¹ Ibid., 143.

¹² Charles A. Lidgey, *Wagner*, 3d ed. (London: Dent, 1904), 230.

¹³ W. J. Henderson, *Richard Wagner: His Life and his Dramas* (New York: Putnam, 1901): 403.

¹⁴ Ibid., 404.

¹⁵ Romain Rolland, *Musicians of Today*, trans. Mary Blaiklock (London: Kegan Paul, 1915), 71; originally published as *Musiciens d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1908).

Brünnhilde's mountain."¹⁶ To Western nations engaged in the ferocious scramble for land in the late nineteenth century—the age of high imperialism—and in the campaign to fashion an imperial race with the tenacity to go forth and conquer that land, the image of Siegfried must have seemed like a recruiting poster come to life.

That Siegfried's qualities were understood and appreciated in terms of the masculinity anxieties of the era is suggested in Romain Rolland's *Siegfried* essay when he makes the point that our perception of an artwork changes over time and is subject to external and internal events ("a work of art, and above all a work of musical art, changes with ourselves"), that "*Siegfried*, for example, is for me no longer full of mystery. The qualities in it that strike me *to-day* [1908] are its *cheerful vigour*, its clearness of form, its *virile force and freedom*, and the *extraordinary healthiness of the hero*, and, indeed, of the whole work" (emphasis mine).¹⁷ Rolland, in fact, wished that Wagner had ended the *Ring* with *Siegfried* and spared his audience "the gloomy *Götterdämmerung*," the demise of a hero of this stature evidently too much to bear:

For those who have sensitive feelings the fourth day of the Tetralogy has a depressing effect. I remember the tears I have seen shed at the end of the *Ring* and the words of a friend as we left the theatre and descended the hill at night: "I feel as though I were coming away from the burial of someone I dearly loved."¹⁸

George Bernard Shaw also voiced his dissatisfaction with the closing opera of Wagner's tetralogy. In fact, he advocated the superiority of the scenario of *Siegfried's Tod* over its reworked form as *Götterdämmerung* (i.e. the scenario before Siegfried was unseated by Wotan as the focus of the cycle, before pessimism gained the upper hand in Wagner's *Weltanschauung*). Again, it is the healthiness of the protagonist, his non-comprehension of fear, his "joyous vitality" that so captivated Shaw.¹⁹ He

¹⁶ Burton W. Peretti, "Democratic Leitmotifs in the American Reception of Wagner," *Nineteenth Century Music* 13 (Summer 1989): 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

¹⁹ Shaw, *Perfect Wagnerite*, 57.

discusses Wagner's hero in a chapter titled "Siegfried as Protestant," and we may be sure that this is the most muscular of pseudo-Christians ever to grace the stage.

Wagner himself was partly responsible for the notion of Siegfried as hypermasculine archetype when, in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* [1851], he describes his hero as a latter day incarnation of the unfettered *Urmensch*:

What here I saw, was no longer the Figure of conventional history, whose garment claims our interest more than does the actual shape inside; but the real naked Man, in whom I might spy each throbbing of his pulses, each stir within his mighty muscles, in uncramped, freest motion; the type of the true *human being*.²⁰

Not surprisingly, this passage is quoted by at least one of the commentators referred to above and was possibly known to more.²¹

One critic whose *Parsifal* commentary will be referred to at length in this thesis but who appears to have had ambiguous feelings regarding Siegfried, is the Englishman John F. Runciman. While he describes *Siegfried* as an opera that "carries a message" that is "entirely moral, healthful and sane"²² (as opposed to the "immoral" message of *Parsifal*), the youth Siegfried is dismissed as "the least lovable [*sic*], perhaps the most inane and detestable character to be found in any form of drama. He is a combination of impudence, stupidity and sheer animal strength—mere bone and sinew; his courage comes from his stupidity."²³ Damning though this is, it is significant that Runciman makes it clear that his assessment of Siegfried stems from his abhorrence of this type of character in the world at large. He extends his discussion of the character beyond the parameters of the dramatic setting and places him in the context of contemporary (or near contemporary) people and events:

He [Siegfried] possesses not one fine trait: he is as weak in will and intellect as he is strong in muscle. In the 'fifties and 'sixties not only Germans but men of all other

²⁰ Richard Wagner, "A Communication to My Friends," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, 1892), 1: 358.

²¹ Henderson, *Richard Wagner*, 404.

²² John F. Runciman, "Parsifal," *Saturday Review* (London), 28 August 1897, 219.

²³ John F. Runciman, *Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas* (London: Bell, 1913), 378.

nationalities seemed to have vainly imagined they had solved all the problems of this very difficult world by assuming and proclaiming that might is right. Bismarck acted on this belief; our own Carlyle, Tennyson and Ruskin preached it; and Wagner, being a feeble creature physically, fell naturally, inevitably, a victim to the old delusion, and set to work to glorify the strong man.²⁴

Comments such as these make abundantly clear the validity of opera criticism as social document. The critic demonstrates that the art work is subject to a response measured by the appraisal of a character type who exists both on and off the stage. Runciman, furthermore, expresses his disquiet at another ideological issue seemingly at work in the opera: the glorification of the natural realm in favour of the "over-civilised world," the very feature of *Siegfried* that appealed so tremendously to Rolland and others and, as pointed out above, was recognised as one of the anxieties of the era. Runciman might not buy the hypermasculine heroics of the young Heldentenor nor the yearning for a less sophisticated, more natural world, but he does show that his assessment of *Siegfried* rests to a large degree on his reaction against social trends and currents which he found thoroughly objectionable. As I will later demonstrate, this critic evaluated Parsifal (and *Parsifal*) in much the same terms—as an operatic work with contemporary social resonances. The protagonist in Wagner's final opera, however, was a male type (or, more specifically, a *countertype*) who was not only loathsome, but represented a danger to society.

For some critics, however, Parsifal was not necessarily loathsome or dangerous but, as an embodiment of a male type, he was certainly odd. That Wagner's hero (perhaps better described as an anti-hero) renounces passionate entanglement with woman (thereby presenting us in the second half of act two with a strange, lengthy non-love duet) and willingly chooses a life of cloistered asceticism, was considered unorthodox behaviour in a man, to say the least. Roosevelt makes a point of speaking out against precisely the type of man Wagner places before us in his final opera when, in one of his speeches, he declares that it is "the cloistered life which saps the hardy virtues in a

²⁴ Ibid., 378-9.

nation, as it saps them in the individual.”²⁵ It was the Siegfrieds of the world, the robust custodians of empire, and not the Parsifals who gloriously embodied the strong, healthy nation. New York critic Henry Krehbiel was clearly troubled by the fact that, in *Parsifal*, Wagner “endowed his hero with scarcely another merit” other than the rather dubious reclusive ideal of “monkish theologians.”²⁶ Where is Parsifal’s wife, he asks? Where are his children? Fellow New Yorker, William J. Henderson, draws a most unfavourable comparison between the decidedly unmasculine Parsifal and the macho Siegfried:

Siegfried blazes with all the glory of manhood: he has hot blood in his veins; and he carves his way through fire and wrath of a god to the mountain of his heart’s desire. Parsifal loves no woman. He cannot, for he is the embodiment of ascetic, or at least monastic, denial.²⁷

Both critics lament the fact that *Parsifal* presents us with no affirmation of the phenomenon of the “redeeming woman,” which, according to one, is “an ethical idea which is at the basis of all the really beautiful mythologies and religions of the world,”²⁸ and, in the words of the other, is a “beautiful” doctrine that is “so eloquently preached in some of Wagner’s other dramas.”²⁹ *Parsifal*, in other words, upsets gender conventions of opera (men are supposed to win women, women are supposed to redeem men—often through self-sacrifice), conventions as entrenched on the stage as gendered oppositions in society.

“Overcivilised” is a word that entered American English in the late nineteenth century.³⁰ A term of derision, it was bound up with anxiety concerning the perceived danger to society posed by feminisation. An overcivilised man was one who had lost touch with nature and the outdoor life and had fallen prey, excessively so, to the

²⁵ Quoted in William David Johnston, *TR Champion of the Strenuous Life: A Photographic Biography of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1958), 8.

²⁶ Henry Krehbiel, *Studies in the Wagnerian Drama* (New York: Harper, 1891), 164.

²⁷ William J. Henderson, “Parsifalia,” in *Modern Musical Drift* (New York: Longmans, 1904), 6.

²⁸ Krehbiel, *Wagnerian Drama*, 164.

²⁹ Henderson, *Modern Musical Drift*, 6.

³⁰ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 251.

refining influences of civilisation. *Parsifal*, as I shall demonstrate in later chapters, was seen to be the work of an overcivilised composer about an overcivilised milieu. Living proof of the danger to the male sex of overcivilisation emerged in the late nineteenth century in the form of the dandy and the decadent. The attraction of *Parsifal* to men who identified as such (or were identified as such)—men who existed either in works of fiction or in real life—muddied further the already murky waters of masculinity and sexuality in the reception of Wagner's opera at the *fin de siècle*.

CHAPTER III

THE DIVINE ANDROGYNE

Parsifal as Decadent Opera

"Decadent" is a word that is extremely difficult to pin down to a single meaning particularly when it pertains to usage in the late nineteenth century. What we understand by "decadent" depends to a very large degree upon context. As one scholar has pointed out recently:

As used within bourgeois culture, it implies degeneration and the abandonment of morality. As used within Marxist criticism, it applies to bourgeois culture itself. As used by Nietzsche, it implies a character and mind-set that no longer believes in life, one that has taken on itself the death wish.¹

This chapter will consider aspects of the reception history of *Parsifal* as decadent opera with particular reference to the first and third categories cited above. Specifically, it will focus on the appeal of *Parsifal* to certain figures in late nineteenth and early twentieth century artistic circles who were identified as members of the decadent subculture, a subculture that was pan-European but especially strong in France and, to a somewhat lesser extent, England.

One of the leading decadents in English literature of the *fin de siècle* and, typically, a non-musician who was well acquainted with the Wagnerian aesthetic, was Arthur Symonds. In an 1893 essay, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," he defined decadent writing in the following terms:

The most representative literature of the day, the writing which appeals to, which has done so much to form, the younger generation, is certainly not classic, nor has it any relation to that old antithesis of the classic, the romantic. After a fashion it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence; an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity. If what we call the classic is indeed the supreme art—those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion, the supreme qualities—then this

¹ Jeremy Tambling, *Opera and the Culture of Fascism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 27.

representative literature of to-day, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease.²

It is appropriate that Symons describes decadent style in terms of disease given that decadent literature is obsessed with notions of ill health, physical decline, and decay. These are paramount issues in the seminal and profoundly influential work of decadent prose, J.-K. Huysmans novel of 1884, *À Rebours* (Against Nature), once described by Symons as “the breviary of the Decadence.”³ Nietzsche draws upon illness imagery in one of his later discussions of Wagner and his music when he bluntly states that “*Wagner est une névrose*.”⁴ In his writings after 1878, Nietzsche repeatedly refers to the sickness, the decadence, of the Wagnerian aesthetic and places the composer and his works in the realm of “French romanticism” (i.e. French decadence), writers and poets—“fanatics of expression”—who, above all else, were “covetous of the strange, the exotic, the tremendous, and all opiates of the senses and the understanding.”⁵ Although he declines to mention these writers by name, we may assume that, in addition to Huysmans, Nietzsche implicates Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Catulle Mendès, and other contributors to the journal of French Wagnerism, the *Revue wagnérienne*.

Disease, decay, the exotic, weird, and fantastic were all characteristics of works of literature and art of what is often collectively referred to as the Decadence. Decadent art in whatever form was the realm of “‘femmes fatales’ and ‘femmes fragiles,’ of androgynous figures, of fragile aesthetes, of degenerate geniuses, of the sickly and sensitive, of declining families and dynasties, of decaying towns and kingdoms, of a

² Quoted in Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913; reprint, Hassocks, England: Harvester Press, 1976), 55.

³ Quoted in the frontispiece of J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1959).

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 166.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 672-3.

weary disparagement of any and every belief in progress.”⁶ By these terms, *Parsifal* might be considered to be a decadent work *par excellence*: the ancient, mysterious and decaying community of Monsalvat and the listless knights within, the tormented and mortally wounded Grail King, the fatally seductive sorceress, the exotic plant life in the *Zaubergarten*, and the celibate (androgynous?) youth may well have stepped out of the pages of Huysmans (except that *Parsifal*, in fact, predates the infamous *À Rebours* by a number of years).⁷ *Parsifal* also contains other features that reveal key pre-occupations of works of the Decadence. Its parody of Catholic ritual and the pervading aura of Christian mysticism find resonance in major decadent works of the era. Dorian Gray, for example, was drawn to the ceremonies of Roman Catholicism, and, indeed, had a “special passion” for “everything connected with the service of the Church,”⁸ while his prototype, Jean des Esseintes, the protagonist in *À Rebours*, was likewise captivated by “the poetic and poignant atmosphere of Catholicism.”⁹ (It comes as no surprise to find that both Dorian and des Esseintes were also familiar with the music of Wagner.) The most celebrated line from Verlaine’s celebrated *Parsifal* sonnet—Et, ô ces voix d’enfants chantant dans la coupole!—rhapsodises the sound world of the Christian liturgy.¹⁰ While the elderly Wagner may not have been personally drawn to Catholic ceremony, ritual, and teaching (although Nietzsche

⁶ Erwin Koppen, “Wagnerism as Concept and Phenomenon,” in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. Erika and Martin Swales (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 348.

⁷ Wagner’s libretto was completed in early 1877, Huysman’s novel appeared in 1884. Thomas Mann describes the assortment of characters in Wagner’s opera as follows: “The cast list for *Parsifal*—what a bizarre collection at bottom! What an assemblage of extreme and repellent oddities! A sorcerer emasculated by his own hand; a desperate woman of split personality, half corrupter, half penitent Mary Magdalene, with cataleptic transitions between these two states of being; a love-sick high priest, who awaits redemption at the hands of a chaste boy; this boy himself who brings redemption, this guileless fool, so very different from the awakened youth who wakes up Brünnhilde, and in his own way another case of remote peculiarity: together they remind one of that motley bunch of freaks packed into Achim von Arnim’s famous coach—the ambivalent gypsy witch, the dead layabout, the golem in female shape and the field marshal Cornelius Nepos, who is really a mandrake root grown beneath a gibbet.” *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. A. Blunden (London: Faber, 1985), 129; originally published as *Thomas Mann: Wagner und unsere Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1963).

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Dent, 1993), 111, 116-7.

⁹ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 93.

¹⁰ Paul Verlaine, “Parsifal,” *Revue wagnérienne* (January 1886): 336.

certainly thought otherwise),¹¹ the great majority of decadents *were* members of the Catholic Church or at least became members, sometimes on their deathbeds (Oscar Wilde being perhaps the most famous example).¹² Mystical Christianity in itself is, of course, not necessarily decadent, but it had the potential to be treated as such by writers and artists, and perceived as such by literary and artistic critics of the *fin de siècle*. Max Nordau's lengthy study *Degeneration* (1892), a savage attack on what he believed were elements of decay at work in late nineteenth century European art and culture, draws several chapters together under the broad heading "Mysticism" in which we find one chapter titled "The Richard Wagner Cult." Needless to say, *Parsifal* is cited as a key example of the type of mysticism that Nordau found so abhorrent in contemporary culture.

Another preoccupation of decadent works of art and literature that finds considerable resonance in *Parsifal* is the recognition of the olfactory sense. (Again, we may refer to *À Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for evidence of the importance attached to flowers and perfume in the decadent novel.)¹³ *Parsifal* must surely be one of the most perfumed of operas. Wagner, in fact, likened the unfolding of the musical material in the opera to the unfolding of a flower from its bud, referring to the ease with which the leitmotifs of the *Vorspiel* provided thematic material for the remainder.¹⁴ In addition to the balms and balsams that are administered periodically we are presented with the flowering meadow of Act III (where Parsifal makes particular reference to the scent of the flowers) and the rather more opulent growth of the *Zaubergarten* in Act II with, as Wagner describes it, its "tropical vegetation and a luxuriant growth of flowers." In the original production Wagner was adamant that the Flowermaidens take on the

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, 132.

¹² Holbrook Jackson describes the Roman Church as "the first and last home of Christian mysticism." *The Eighteen Nineties*, 132. Philippe Jullian points out that, "Simeon Solomon, following in Wilde's footsteps, fell under the spell of incense, confessions, Rome; and Beardsley died a convert to Catholicism." *Dreamers of Decadence* (London: Phiadon, 1974), 94.

¹³ In *Against Nature* see chapter 10 in particular; in *Dorian Gray* see pp. 3, 18, 21, 112.

¹⁴ *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 2: 216.

appearance not of women dressed as flowers but of flowers that might possibly be women; that is, he wished to create the "surrealistic impression of singing flowers."¹⁵ "How fragrant you are!" exclaims the innocent fool when confronted by these strange and beautiful (but potentially lethal) creatures. The *Zaubergarten* scene epitomises not only the decadent preoccupation with scent but, more specifically, associations between perfume, flowers, and images of feminine evil that became ever more visible in literature and art from the time of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* onwards.¹⁶ It is, therefore, not surprising to learn that there is no equivalent scene in Wagner's medieval sources for *Parsifal*; the alluring but insidious plant life of Klingsor's garden is pure nineteenth century.¹⁷

As is generally well known, *Parsifal* was composed under the most sweetly perfumed of circumstances. In a letter of 1877 to Judith Gautier (Wagner's distant beloved who supplied him with fragrances from Paris), Wagner requests that she "be lavish with the bath essences, including the ambra varieties" for, as he explains, "my bath tub is underneath the study, and I like it when the odours rise up."¹⁸ This kind of letter is by no means an isolated case: his correspondence with Judith Gautier alone contains constant requests for perfumes and fabrics.¹⁹ In itself, there is nothing fundamentally decadent about the fragrances and balsams of Wagner's study and their conscious or unconscious incorporation into the opera itself, but when considered together with the other hallmarks of the Decadence that are played out in *Parsifal*, we are confronted with what I believe is—in late nineteenth century terms at least—a decadent opera.

¹⁵ Oswald Georg Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premieres to the Present* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 276.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the eroticised flower in art of the late nineteenth century, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of Wagner's medieval sources, see Jessie L. Weston, *The Legends of the Wagner Drama* (London: Nutt, 1896). Oscar Mirbeau's novel of 1899, *Le Jardin des supplices* (translated as *Torture Garden* in 1931) contains lurid descriptions of a "fantastic garden where prisoners are tortured to death amid all kinds of exotic flora." David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 160.

¹⁸ Quoted in Rudolph Sabor, *The Real Wagner* (London: Sphere Books, 1989), 165.

¹⁹ Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 2:528.

Wagner had long been accustomed to composing in an environment of singular luxury (often far beyond his financial means), but nowhere more than in the act of composing *Parsifal* did he indulge his taste for perfumed opulence to such an extent. Perhaps the final word on this should be said by Nordau who, although he makes no reference to *Parsifal* in this regard, warns of the perverted connotations inherent in "scented" literature of the *fin de siècle*:

The predominance of the sense of smell and its connection with the sexual life is very striking among many degenerates. Scents acquire a high importance in their works [at this point he provides quotes from works by Tolstoy, Barrès, and Zola, and refers to Huysmans and others]... Smellers among degenerates represent an atavism going back, not only to the primeval period of man, but infinitely more remote still, to an epoch anterior to man. Their atavism retrogrades to animals amongst whom sexual activity was directly excited by odoriferous substances...²⁰

The indebtedness of the decadent movement to the operas of Wagner has long been recognised. *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde* are usually singled out as the two works above all others that appealed to the decadent imagination—*Tristan* in particular.²¹ This is not altogether surprising given that these two operas were in circulation a number of years before the *Ring* and *Parsifal* (*Parsifal*, of course, was at this time restricted to Bayreuth anyway), were not as demanding to stage as the *Ring* and, as far as Paris audiences were concerned, appeared in productions prior to official contempt for, and neglect of, Wagner and his works following German victory in the Franco-Prussian war.²² The relative inaccessibility of *Parsifal* to the decadents—it required a special pilgrimage to Bayreuth—did not, however, render it a completely

²⁰ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1895; reprint, with an introduction by George L. Mosse, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 500 and 503; originally published as *Entartung* (Berlin, 1892).

²¹ Koppen, *Wagner Handbook*, 349.

²² Frederic Spotts points out that, in the nineteenth century, *Tannhäuser* was Wagner's most frequently performed work, in *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 107. Huysman's makes a brief reference to official opposition to Wagner's operas in France at the time: "the intelligent patriotism of the French [has] made it impossible for any theatre in the country to put on a Wagner opera." *Against Nature*, 204-5. For a brief survey of performances of Wagner's operas in France in the late nineteenth century, see Gerald D. Turbow, "Art and Politics: Wagnerism in France," in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. David C. Large and William Weber, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 134-66.

unknown quantity. It was, after all, a published work and was widely available in piano reductions, transcriptions and arrangements. One of the most fascinating and nowadays somewhat forgotten figures of the French Decadence and someone who did, in fact, make the pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear *Parsifal* was Sâr Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918). Péladan's life was changed forever as a result of this experience.

Péladan was an author, playwright, critic, and art impresario with a strong occultist bent. Like many other figures caught up the late nineteenth century French vogue for *les petites religions*, Péladan was open to a wide range of doctrines and beliefs. Catholic mysticism, kabbalism, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, elements drawn from eastern religions, and other like-minded esoterica appealed to him in varying degrees throughout his life. His adoption of the title "Sâr" (the Assyrian word for king) further added to the exotic persona he invented for himself. The works of Richard Wagner, and *Parsifal* in particular, held a central place in his religious and philosophical outlook. It has been said that, as far as Péladan was concerned, "the highest intellectual aim of man is to hear and thoroughly appreciate Wagnerian music."²³ The manner in which Sâr Péladan staged art events—with much theatricality and the incorporation of music (including excerpts from Wagner)—was obviously influenced by Wagner's theories, above all the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Similarly, his practice of blurring the distinction between the art museum and the shrine or temple also reveals the unmistakable influence of Wagner's concept of art-religion.

After an early career in which he wrote articles for the Catholic press, Péladan soon moved on to contribute to various art journals (including the prestigious *L'Artiste*) and began to formulate his own artistic position—it was one that rejected both the neo-classical, conservative art of the official Salon and modernist trends exemplified by the Realists and Impressionists. His taste was for Italian paintings of the Renaissance

²³ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 222.

(above all, Leonardo da Vinci) and for mystical art; in fact, he believed that “art mystique” was the consummate style of the day and did his best to champion it at every opportunity. His enthusiasm for contemporary mystical art (works by painters such as Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau and Félicien Rops, artists who are often described as “Symbolists”) was motivated by the belief that it was “capable of expressing religious aspirations and private fantasies of men disappointed by contemporary bourgeois taste and critical of social norms.”²⁴ In other words, “art mystique” was consequential because it was able to invoke the religious, the fantastic, and the perverse. The Sâr’s desire to challenge “contemporary bourgeois taste” and “social norms” was revealed not only in his art criticism and in his capacity as an impresario but also in his works of fiction. In particular, his novels reveal decidedly unconventional—but not altogether idiosyncratic—views that defied sex and gender conventions of mainstream society. This is perhaps most apparent in his glorification of the androgyne as the ideal gender specimen, a character type who appeared in his astoundingly successful first novel, *Le Vice Suprême* (1884), as well as later works such as *L’Androgyne* (1890) and *La Gynandre* (1891).²⁵

The androgyne, according to Péladan, is a superior being because it transcends mere physical desire for another in favour of sexual passion on a higher plane. The eroticism of the androgyne is spiritual, cerebral, and physically chaste. (Péladan’s commitment to the androgyne cause was such that he assumed a feminine first name, Joséphin.)²⁶ In his analysis of the story of Adam from *Genesis*, Péladan explains that, although Adam was happy and whole in his original, virginal, androgynous state, he was, nevertheless, imperfect since he was devoid of any consciousness of desire, being at once both male and female. The separation of Adam into two parts with the creation

²⁴ Ingeborg M. Kohn, “The Mystic Impresario: Joséphin Péladan, Founder of *Le Salon de la Rose+Croix*,” in *Secret Texts: The Literature of Secret Societies*, ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts and Hugh Ormsby-Lennon (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 234.

²⁵ Péladan’s twenty novels form a cycle which he named *La Décadence Latine*.

²⁶ Shearer West, *Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 81. His given name was Joséph.

of Eve was therefore necessary in order to awaken him to a fuller consciousness. The Sâr argues, however, that while man is richer for the experience of desire, he ought to use desire as the means by which he can return to his original, androgynous state. Man's desire for physical union with woman provides but a momentary experience of the *ur*-condition of the combined male and female, whereas desire on a purely spiritual level, ultimately leading to the spiritual *possession* of the female by the male, brings a return to the instinctive androgyny of man, the state of Adam.²⁷ Péladan's credo of androgyny through misogyny—it amounts to the spiritual annihilation of woman, no less—is capped off by the claim that the intensity of the cerebral passion leaves the commonplace behind and enters the elevated realm of art. Art and love are the ultimate means that beget the androgyne, the ultimate being.

Max Nordau, as has already been pointed out, was highly critical of mystical currents in European culture at the close of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, he appears to have had at least nominal respect for Sâr Péladan, describing him as "intellectually the most eminent" of the "master-sorcerers" so prevalent in France at the time.²⁸ In discussing Péladan's novels, Nordau claims that, essentially, they can be reduced to the one scenario:

...in every romance a hero appears who unites in himself the distinctive marks of both sexes, and resists with horror the ordinary sexual instincts, who plays or enjoys the music of Wagner, enacts in his own life some scene from the Wagnerian drama, and conjures up spirits or has to repel their attacks.²⁹

A more recent summary of the plot of *Le Vice Suprême* is as follows:

Léonora [Princess Léonora d'Este] is depicted as extremely beautiful and wealthy; she has everything, and has done almost everything imaginable; indulged in every luxury, practiced every vice. Her new companion-mentor is the Magnus, or Sâr Mérodack (one of Péladan's pseudonyms) a handsome, priestly character whose persona, one suspects, is a wishful extension of Péladan's own ego. Together, they seem endlessly to torture each other: she, demanding and perennially unsatisfied, does not understand why he

²⁷ A. J. L. Busst, "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century," in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 67-9.

²⁸ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 219. Discussion of Nordau's rather amiable relationship with Péladan is found in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York: Garland, 1976), 164-6.

²⁹ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 222.

insists on a platonic relationship; he, afraid of giving in, and fearful of her charms, tries to guide her towards his 'ideal,' and wallows in cerebral eroticism while craving a sort of spiritual fulfillment.³⁰

Clearly, we are to understand that woman is temptress and seductress, in fact, the narrator of the novel warns that she is "possessed by the devil."³¹ This is a theme that we encounter in Péladan's review of the Salon of 1883 (the year before the publication of *Le Vice Suprême*), in which we find the axiom: "Man, puppet of woman, woman puppet of the devil."³²

Resonances of *Parsifal* appear to have filtered through to the scenario of *Le Vice Suprême*. Kundry, who is clearly a puppet of the evil Klingsor (as are the Flowermaidens), is the bait used in the attempt to ensnare Parsifal in Act II and bring about his spiritual downfall (not to mention bodily harm). Like Amfortas and other fallen knights of the Grail, Parsifal is expected to succumb to the physical charms of the fatal seductress(es). Indeed, we are led to believe that Kundry represents the eternal temptress given that she is greeted by Klingsor with a string of titles, "First she-devil!," "Rose of Hades!," "Herodias," and "Gundryggia." At the moment of her kiss, Parsifal experiences the physical anguish of Amfortas and recognises the destructive potential of Kundry's embrace ("these lips too, yes, they tempted him thus"). When her attempt to seduce Parsifal fails, Kundry, like the Princess Léonora d'Este, cannot understand the spiritual salvation offered by the (now) enlightened youth and persists with her entreaties:

Parsifal:

For evermore
you'd be condemned with me,
For that brief hour,
forgetful of my calling,
within your arms enfolded!
For your salvation I was sent,
If of your yearnings you repent...

Redemption, sinful one, I offer you.

³⁰ Kohn, *Secret Texts*, 236-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

³² Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 58.

Kundry:

Then as a god let me love you,
redemption you would bring to me...

Mercy! Mercy on me!
And for one hour be mine!...

Parsifal:

Begone, accursed woman!

In place of physical union, Parsifal offers redemption through the state of chastity, an offer unacceptable to (or perhaps not understood by) Kundry. According to Péladan's philosophy, Kundry, through her inability to ascend to Parsifal's purely spiritual level of sexual consciousness, is guilty of *le vice suprême*: the unwillingness to forego mere physical desire (to opt for the body in the mind-body split), to choose not to enter elevated spiritual and intellectual realms and, as a result, deny the pre-eminence of the soul.³³

It is quite possible that, despite these resonances, Péladan may not have been aware of the scenario of *Parsifal* at the time of writing *Le Vice Suprême*. What is known for certain is that when he did in fact hear Wagner's opera—at Bayreuth in 1888—he was profoundly affected. In May of that year, Péladan, together with the Parisian mystics Stanislas de Guaita and Dr Gérard Encausse, founded the occultist secret society the *Ordre de la Rose+Croix+Kabbalistique*.³⁴ It was during the performance of *Parsifal* a few months later, however, that the Sâr received the sudden inspiration to dissociate

³³ Kohn, *Secret Texts*, 237.

³⁴ Kohn, in *Secret Texts*, rather clumsily uses two slightly different names for this group (*La Société de al Rose+Croix Kabbalistique*, 228; and, *L'Ordre de la Rose+Croix+Kabbalistique*, 240) without offering any further explanation. The organisation is described as the *Ordre de la Rose+Croix Kabbalistique* in Joscelyn Godwin, *Music and the Occult in French Musical Philosophies, 1750-1950* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 170. Christopher McIntosh explains that the Rosicrucian brotherhood, which was founded in Germany in the early seventeenth century, began as a sect of philosophers who "shunned worldly satisfactions in favour of spiritual ones and were said to have conquered death through the elixir of life." *The Rosicrucians* (n.p.: Crucible, 1987), 17. (In this respect, they bear a resemblance to the knights in *Parsifal* who have also conquered death through nourishment provided by the Grail. For a discussion of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal* and Rosicrucianism, see McIntosh, *Rosicrucians*, 32-3.) Their history is marked by a tendency to divide into factions and splinter groups, some of which became intermingled with Freemasonry, while others cultivated Eastern magical and religious rites. One commentator describes Péladan's sect as a "pseudo resurrection" of Rosicrucianism that "bore almost no relation to the authentic eighteenth-

himself from this group and to form, single-handedly, a breakaway Rosicrucian order, the *Ordre de la Rose+Croix du Temple et du Graal*.³⁵ This was a clear renunciation of the wide-ranging doctrines and beliefs of the of the former group (which encompassed Eastern, Judaic-oriented Rosicrucianism) in favour of a more strictly Christian Rosicrucianism, one that sat comfortably within the Catholic tradition.³⁶ (Indeed, Péladan's society also went by the name of the *Ordre de la Rose+Croix Catholique*.)³⁷ It was also a clear indication of the influence of Wagner's opera. By Péladan's own admission, *Parsifal* was the catalyst for the formation of the new society, as he explains:

I conceived at that time, in a single flash, the foundation of the three orders of the Rose+Cross of the Temple and the Grail, and resolved to become so far as concerned the literary theatre, a disciple of Wagner.³⁸

From the start, the *Ordre de la Rose+Croix du Temple et du Graal* was far more than simply an occult order, for "Péladan envisaged it as a nucleus from which would emerge a whole set of religious, moral and aesthetic values."³⁹ The Sâr's devotion to Wagner, and particularly *Parsifal*, was clear to all when, in 1892, he launched the inaugural exhibition of Rose+Croix art, the *Salon de la Rose+Croix*, an event that was truly Wagnerian both in its combination of art and ritual and in its unreserved endorsement of the notion of the redemptive function of art. Péladan's Salon, an alternative to the established *Salon des Artistes Français*, and the more recent *Salon de la Société des Artistes Indépendants* and *Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*, was governed by a stringent code of aesthetics in which mysticism was the defining influence. Among the official rules set down by Péladan was a long list of subject matter completely unacceptable to the Salon ("All rustic scenes,... All

century movement." Jacques Chailley, *The Magic Flute Unveiled: Esoteric Symbolism in Mozart's Masonic Opera* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 63.

³⁵ The schism was described by some at the time as the "War of Two Roses." Kohn, *Secret Texts*, 242.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Godwin, *Music and the Occult*, 170.

³⁸ Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 67-8.

³⁹ McIntosh, *Rosicrucians*, 107.

humorous things...”), subject matter considered appropriate (even if the execution was imperfect), and a statement of the ideal:

The Order favours first the Catholic ideal and Mysticism. After Legend, Myth, Allegory, the Dream, the Paraphrase of great poetry and finally all Lyricism, the Order prefers work which has a mural-like character, as being of superior essence.⁴⁰

The rules also contained the following declaration, added as a postscript: “Following Magical Law, no work by a woman will ever be exhibited or executed by the Order.”⁴¹ The opening of the first Salon took place on 10 March 1892 and commenced with the celebration of a mass at the church of Saint-Germain l’Auxerrois at which music by Satie was performed (three fanfares for trumpet and harp, the *Sonneries de l’Ordre*) as well as four extracts from *Parsifal*: the Prelude, consecration scene, Good Friday music, and the Finale.⁴² Among the Rules of the *Salon de la Rose+Croix* we find a passage in which Péladan spells out the proceedings for the inauguration where *Parsifal* is described as the work of “the superhuman Wagner.”⁴³ The ceremonies continued at the gallery itself (the Galerie Durand-Ruel) where, in a room perfumed by flowers and incense, there was a reprise of Satie’s fanfares along with the Prelude to *Parsifal*, which was played by a consort of brass instruments.⁴⁴ The Wagnerian inspiration for the Sâr’s art and music extravaganza is spelt out in the manifesto of the Rose+Croix where he forecasts that “the solemn day... will begin with festivals of the mind as noble as those celebrated at Bayreuth; this day the Ideal will have its temple and knights...”⁴⁵ Festivities were not merely confined to the opening day, however. Further music by Satie and Wagner was performed at soirées at the gallery over the next few weeks (including a performance of most of Act III of *Parsifal*, until that point never heard in Paris before) as well as works by Palestrina and Judith Gautier (who, as was mentioned earlier, supplied perfumes to Wagner used during the composition of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 212.

⁴¹ Ibid., 216.

⁴² Satie was the official composer of the Rose+Croix but broke with Péladan’s order later that year and formed his own sect, the Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus the Conductor.

⁴³ Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 215.

⁴⁴ Godwin, *Music and the Occult*, 170. For further discussion of the opening events, see Martine Kahane and Nicole Wild, *Wagner et la France* (Paris: Herscher, 1983).

⁴⁵ Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 209.

Parsifal).⁴⁶ The Wagner soirée was conducted by one of the leading French conductors of the day, Charles Lamoureux, a passionate supporter of Wagner's music in France and the conductor of *Lohengrin* at the Opéra the previous year.⁴⁷ A play by Péladan, *Le Fils des étoiles* (described as a "wagnérie") with incidental music by Satie, was also performed on several occasions.⁴⁸

The artists represented at the *Salon de la Rose+Croix* appeared by invitation only and included works by Wagner devotees such as Spanish artist Rogelio de Egusquiza and Belgian painter Jean Delville. Péladan's rules made it clear that "no bust will be accepted except by special permission,"⁴⁹ something evidently granted to Egusquiza who exhibited a bust of Wagner, a portrait of Wagner, and an etching titled "The Grail" (Figure 3.1), in which we find a radiant vision of two heads of androgynous appearance looking down on the Grail and dove and, in semidarkness around the edge of this glowing tableau, a serpentine gargoyle and a hooded figure clutching the holy lance with its shimmering tip.⁵⁰ It is evidently the artist's depiction of the closing moments of *Parsifal* where the lance is returned to the brotherhood, the Grail emits its healing radiance, the dove descends, and the Monsalvat community is reunited and

⁴⁶ Presumably, the Order did not object to the inclusion of theatrical works by women (or perhaps Gautier's status as a former Wagner intimate accorded her special privilege). On *Parsifal* and Palestrina, Péladan wrote: "one would have to turn back to Palestrina to hear Catholic accents similar to those of *Parsifal*." *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner* (Paris: Chamuel, 1895), 215.

⁴⁷ Godwin, *Music and the Occult*, names Benedictus as the conductor (171), but Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, claims that he was replaced by Lamoureux (142).

⁴⁸ According to Pincus-Witten, it was very badly received, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 142.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 212. An illustration by Egusquiza of his bust of Wagner appears in the frontispiece of *Revue wagnérienne* (February 1887).

⁵⁰ Pincus-Witten identifies this work as "Amfortas," *Occult Symbolism in France*, 118, but it is given the title "Der Gral" in *Der Gral: Artusromantik in der Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Reinhold Baumstark and Michael Koch (Cologne: DuMont, 1995): 202-3. There is also discrepancy between the two sources as to its correct date: Pincus-Witten cites 1884, *Der Gral* cites 1893 (this date is clearly visible in the bottom left hand corner). Quite possibly, Egusquiza made two versions of the same work. It is unclear from Pincus-Witten whether all three of Egusquiza's Wagner works appeared at the inaugural Rose+Croix Salon. They were certainly on exhibit at the 1892, 1893, and 1897 salons either individually or collectively, Pincus-Witten, 118. According to Cosima Wagner's diary (1 September 1881), Wagner was not especially pleased with a portrait of himself he had received from Egusquiza and had the artist Paul von Joukowsky paint over it.



Fig. 3.1. Rogelio de Egusquiza, *The Grail* (1893), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

restored to a state of grace. Parsifal does not appear as such but he may well be represented by the disembodied androgynes who gaze downward to the miraculous scene taking place on the altar.⁵¹ Curiously enough, an entry in Cosima Wagner's diary seems to confirm that this is exactly the effect that Wagner wanted. On 27 June 1880 she records the following: "He [Wagner] then plays the first theme of *Parsifal* to himself and, returning, says that he gave the words to a chorus so that the effect would be neither masculine nor feminine, Christ must be entirely sexless, neither man nor woman."⁵² The chorus referred to here must be the closing one since this is the only moment in the opera where the theme in question is taken up and treated imitatively in all parts. Wagner's "sexless" reading of the final scene thus accords precisely with the androgynes of Egusquiza's etching.

Parsifal-as-androgyne also appears in Jean Delville's charcoal drawing of 1890, "Parsifal" (Figure 3.2). Again, the disembodied figure—only the head remains—makes it difficult to determine the sex of the subject particularly with its billowing hair, voluptuous lips, and finely chiselled cheek-bones. We might *presume* that Parsifal is a male but we are not given strong information to this effect in Delville's sketch. The flaming heart, which, like the head, is not attached to a body, is possibly a reference to the agony of Parsifal at the moment of Kundry's kiss ("Die Wunde!—Sie brennt hier in meinem Herzen!") but Kundry is nowhere to be seen and the face assumes an expression of trance-like, quiet ecstasy rather than one of excruciating suffering. Delville is perhaps best known for his extraordinary mural-sized painting *The School of Plato* (Figure 3.3). Painted in 1898, it reveals some of the principal themes of the Decadence, most notably the androgyne (an entire frame full of them in fact), but also the luxuriant, exotic, perfumed garden, orientalist peacocks, and the idealisation of Platonic Hellenism. But is this Plato or is it Christ lecturing to the twelve apostles,

⁵¹ Curiously enough, this tableau is not altogether unlike the male *and* female Parsifal we encounter in the closing scene of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's film version of *Parsifal* nearly one hundred years later (1982). Syberberg's *Parsifal* is discussed in the last chapter of this thesis.

⁵² *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2: 498-9.



Fig. 3.2. Jean Delville, *Parsifal* (1890), Piccadilly Gallery, London.

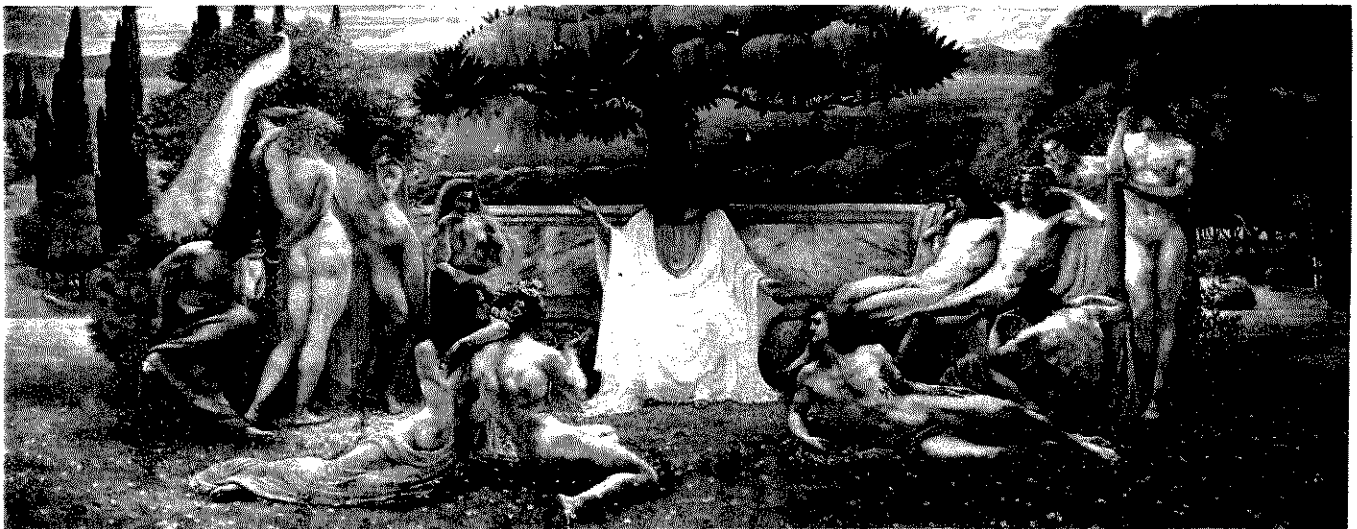


Fig. 3.3. Jean Delville, *The School of Plato* (1898), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

perhaps delivering the sermon on the mount? Would we recognise this as Plato without the assistance of the title? I doubt it. "Plato" equally exhibits all the iconographic features of Christ (minus the halo), as any painting of the nineteenth century Nazarene school will attest. Or, given that this is the work of an ardent Wagnerian, is this Christ-like Plato in fact the enlightened Parsifal delivering a sermon atop Monsalvat? "Plato" certainly exhibits all the iconographic features of the Parsifal of the theatre (Figure 3.4). It seems to me that this painting draws together visual cues of late nineteenth century Christian, Hellenic, and Wagnerian discourses into one teasingly ambiguous and provocatively decadent canvas. I can only speculate that had there been a *Salon de la Rose+Croix* in 1898 (the last was in 1897), *The School of Plato* might have been exhibited. With its epic scale and references to the Classical world (the Sâr, not surprisingly, was a great admirer of the *Symposium*), the androgyne, Christianity, and, possibly, *Parsifal*, it certainly would not have been out of place at a Péladan showing.⁵³

Sâr Joséphin Péladan may have been a singularly eccentric individual but he was by no means an obscure figure in Parisian culture of the *fin de siècle* nor were the Rose+Croix salons fringe events on the artistic calendar. *Le Vice Suprême* was reprinted more than twenty times in the 1880s and 1890s,⁵⁴ his art reviews appeared regularly in the press, and the Péladan-Guaita Rosicrucian schism was front page news in *Le Figaro*.⁵⁵ It is estimated that the inaugural *Salon de la Rose+Croix* attracted nearly 23,000 visitors with traffic congestion in and around the Galerie Durand-Ruel such that the police were required to control the flow of carriages.⁵⁶ In a gesture that illustrates the significant profile of Péladan's Salon, it was moved the following year to

⁵³ It was, in fact, the *pièce de résistance* of the 1899 *Salon d'Art idéaliste* in Brussels, a salon established by Delville that was largely a copycat version of Péladan's *Salon de la Rose+Croix*, Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 171 and 197

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.



Fig. 3.4. Heinrich Hensel, the first London Parsifal (1914), Royal Opera House Archives, London.

the Palais du Champ de Mars, site of the prestigious *Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*.⁵⁷ But this honour was not bestowed in later years, for, despite the success of the early salons (the first especially), the Rose+Croix never quite regained the momentum—nor the quality of work—that greeted its first appearance on the art scene. Nevertheless, it continued to attract crowds, to receive attention in the press and to carve out a place as a forum for contemporary Symbolist art. In 1897, however, the Rose+Croix Salon closed its doors for the last time. It has been suggested that, after six years, Péladan had simply grown tired of the exhibitions, that “he was bored with the endless nuisances they entailed; he had outgrown them.”⁵⁸

Péladan's infatuation with *Parsifal* is usually commented upon in art histories (he is rarely mentioned in music histories, including Wagnerian ones), but this is where the matter usually ends. Little or no attempt is made to suggest why the experience of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth was such a defining moment in his life. Like Parsifal at the moment of enlightenment when, in a flash, his destiny suddenly becomes apparent, Wagner's opera suddenly revealed to Péladan his own calling. Whereas Parsifal returns to Monsalvat as saviour of the grail community, Péladan returned to Paris as saviour of art and Christian mysticism. Clearly, the Sâr believed that *Parsifal* (and Wagner's theories of opera in general) embodied ideals that he considered paramount and clearly it provided him with not only a model for the mystical, all-male community of the Rose+Croix but also a monumental (not to mention fashionable) idealisation of the cult of the androgyne. The opera's pre-occupation with the healing powers of sacred relics, of ritual, mysterious stigmata, miracles, and the mystical transubstantiation of the Eucharist no doubt appealed to both the occultist and Catholic in Péladan. The musical language of *Parsifal*, with its binary divisions between sensuous chromaticism and rarefied diatonicism (complete with pseudo-

⁵⁷ For a brief survey of the Parisian salons of 1895, see Henri Dorra, ed., *Symbolist Art Theories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 255-60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

Palestrina choruses), may well have been heard as the sound equivalent of the sensuous vs. spiritual battle played out in Péladan's novels. In *Parsifal*, as in *Le Vice Suprême*, it is the spiritual that wins the day: Kundry "falls lifeless to the ground" while the androgyne triumphs and is enthroned as Grail King.

The androgyne of the second half of the nineteenth century represented different (but related) things to different artists and writers.⁵⁹ To Péladan, the androgyne was bound by the condition of virginity epitomised, in his view, by the sexually inactive adolescent male. Virginity was presented as the ideal state.⁶⁰ The idealisation of the male virgin and, especially appropriate in regard to this study, the idealisation of Wagner's *Parsifal*, are themes that appear in the writings of the turn of the century Viennese theorist, Otto Weininger (1880-1903).

In 1903, not long before he committed suicide (by a firearm in Vienna's *Beethovenhaus*, no less), Weininger published his uncompromisingly misogynist tome *Sex and Character*. A book of extraordinary popularity (it was still in print in Germany after the Second World War)⁶¹ and something of a sensation in its day, *Sex and Character* is primarily concerned with gender essentialisms typical of the medicalisation of sexuality of the period. In fact, it has been pointed out that Weininger largely synthesised the views (prejudices is perhaps a more accurate word) of others and drew them together under the banner of his own philosophy.⁶² His concluding chapter, "Womankind and Mankind," reads like the work of Péladan, particularly Péladan's interpretation of the story of Adam outlined above. Weininger argues that woman is completely incapable of understanding love in its highest form, non-physical Platonic love, and desires but one thing—to engage in coitus with the male. He points out that, ironically, it is coitus that enslaves the woman—that the

⁵⁹ Refer Busst, *Romantic Mythologies*, for a comprehensive, but somewhat moralistic, discussion.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 48 and 68.

⁶¹ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 218.

⁶² Ibid.

thing she so desperately desires is the very thing that ensures her enslavement. "The ultimate opponent of the emancipation of women," he declares, "is woman."⁶³ In Kundry, Weininger claims that we find "probably the most perfect representation of woman in art."⁶⁴ "Perfect" in the sense that this most dangerous of women, this *femme fatale*, this vampire, is an utterly accurate representation of the female condition. The danger that woman poses to man is that, in her innate desire for copulation, she corrupts his innate desire for chastity and draws him away from his lofty craving for Platonic love into a state of physical sexual enslavement. There is but one way out of this predicament: woman, as we know her, is to be annihilated. Weininger's solution is that,

Man must free himself of sex, for in that way, and that way alone, he can be free of woman. In his purity, not, as she believes, in his impurity, lies her salvation. She must certainly be destroyed, as woman; but only to be raised again from the ashes—new, restored to youth—as a real human being.⁶⁵

Just as Christ in his purity redeemed the fallen Magdalen, so too does the pure, chaste, *Parsifal* redeem the fallen Kundry in Wagner's opera. So great was Weininger's estimation of *Parsifal* that he declared it to be "the greatest work in the world's literature."⁶⁶ As for Wagner, he was "the greatest man since Christ's time," for, like Christ, he recognised that the only solution to the "woman problem" was through the purity of man.⁶⁷

But what exactly "rises from the ashes" in Weininger's scenario if woman is annihilated? This is where he provides what appears to be a carbon copy of Péladan's androgyne:

⁶³ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. of the 6th German edition (London: Heinemann, 1906), 336; originally published as *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1903).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

So long as there are two sexes there will always be a woman question, just as there will be the problem of mankind... truth will not prevail until the two become one, until from man and woman a third self, neither man nor woman, is evolved.⁶⁸

Is this what is implied in Egusquiza's enigmatic *Parsifal* etching (Figure 3.1)? That the two heads locked at the forehead at the closing moment of Wagner's opera represent the utopian vision of the dissolution of male and female and the emergence of the consummate figure of the androgyne?

Discussion of a "third sex" in turn-of-the-century treatises always carries with it the inference of homosexuality and here, too, we find that *Parsifal* is an opera of particular significance. (This will be discussed in the following chapter.) In closing, I would like to provide one further example of the decadent associations heaped upon Wagner's opera by discussing, briefly, an anecdote published by James Huneker (a writer considered in detail in the next chapter) in his collection of essays *Steeplejack*. Huneker's anecdote (which he warns the reader is a "queer yarn" [*sic*], "but true") concerns the physical and emotional collapse of a virtuoso violinist by the name of Oswald. Once the toast of New York, Oswald's withdrawal from the concert platform and state of physical decline (he had become "worn and wan," "gaunt, yellow, almost shabby," "feeble") is noted with alarm by his friend Huneker. Demanding to know why this once great figure has fallen into such a state, Huneker entreats Oswald to provide some answers and, in response, is taken to shadowy premises in an out of the way corner of lower Manhattan:

...[he] guided me up the steps of a low building in semi-obscurity. He did not ring, but rapped with something metallic; at once the door was opened, and I saw a hallway filled with the violent rays of a lamp. I experienced a repugnance to the place.⁶⁹

Had they arrived at an illegal gaming house, a bawdy house, or an opium den ("Alas! It is much worse")?⁷⁰ Oswald had brought Huneker to a gentlemen's club where

⁶⁸ Ibid., 345.

⁶⁹ James Gibbons Huneker, "Montsalvat," in *Steeplejack* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), 102.

⁷⁰ Is the setting of Huneker's "queer yarn" in fact a homosexual club? It would seem that from Huneker's description of the neighbourhood ("We left Union Square behind us and soon reached Astor

Baudelaire is recited, Nietzsche is denounced, music and art are discussed, and the ultimate goal in life is said to be the renunciation of the will. Huneker, who felt "mentally nauseated" in this environment, was in the company of a secret society of "men for whom the world had proved too strong," a "club of moral suicides living, yet dead."⁷¹ The name of this mysterious club for ascetic aesthetes? Montsalvat. The one concession to ornamentation in the austere clubroom? Busts of Wagner and Schopenhauer. The art work that they revere above all others? *Parsifal*.⁷²

Place...we turned down the long, dark street") that they are in or around the Bowery which, at the turn-of-the-century, was the centre of New York's homosexual subculture, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 227.

⁷¹ Huneker, "Montsalvat," 104 and 106.

⁷² The "Redemption" motif from *Parsifal* was inscribed above the entrance and a spokesman for the group describes Wagner's opera as "for all Time a perfect mirror of the souls of pure men who revolted at the banality of quotidian life." Ibid., 105.

CHAPTER IV

A DISGUSTING SPECTACLE

Parsifal as Homosexual Opera

The whole affair is a spectacle which I must say is disgusting to healthy minds. The insinuations are frightful.

John F. Runciman on *Parsifal* (*Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas*, 413).

It is also possible to view *Parsifal* merely as a sickly, *fin-de-siècle* homoerotic fantasy about a group of knights who allow no woman to invade their realm.

Charles Osborne (*The Complete Operas of Wagner*, 271).

The late nineteenth century cult of the androgyne was thought to be linked with a cerebral kind of homosexuality, rather like the love between men glorified by the orators in Plato's *Symposium*.¹ Weininger states that one of his objectives (arguably, his principal objective) in *Sex and Character* is to present a case for "the possibility that homo-sexuality is a higher form than hetero-sexuality"² and it is not surprising to find that he invokes the name of Plato and references to Platonic love on a number of occasions.³ Like Plato in *Laws*,⁴ Weininger does not accept the validity of physical sex between males (as has been pointed out, he denigrates *any* physical manifestation of love), but he makes it clear that chaste love between men is love in its most elevated form.⁵ Delville's *The School of Plato* (Figure 3.3) proffers a homoerotic representation of what might be Plato and his followers, Christ and his disciples, or

¹ Plato's *Symposium* also provides us with an ancient discourse on androgyny. In the speech of Aristophanes we find a discussion concerning the mythical origins and fate of the hermaphrodite, "a distinct sex in form as well as in name, with the characteristics of both male and female." Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1951), 59.

² Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. of the 6th German edition (London: Heinemann, 1906), 66; originally published as *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1903).

³ Plato was required reading for many late nineteenth century homosexuals because his works helped to explain feelings and desires not discussed in a positive sense in other literature, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1977), 50. Wilde invoked the name of Plato when, in his famous courtroom speech, he was asked to explain the meaning of the "love that dare not speak its name." H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Hodge, 1948), 235-6.

⁴ Discussed in K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 154 and 165-6.

⁵ Weininger is often described in commentary as a tortured closet homosexual or bisexual, see George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 145.

Parsifal and the knights of Monsalvat. The implicit homosexuality of Péladan's theories, their representation in his novels, and his passion for homosocial secret societies were phenomena that did not pass unnoticed. His "invention of the asexual hybrid being" was, according to Max Nordau, latent idealisation of "contrary sexual feelings."⁶ While Péladan appears not to have been an active homosexual (nor Delville for that matter), the sexual persuasion of many other figures who were also identified as decadents—Verlaine, Huysmans, Wilde, to name a few—cast the shadow of homosexuality over the group as a whole. Androgynous figures "were particularly attractive as subject matter for homosexual artists" of the period (Simeon Solomon and Aubrey Beardsley, for example), "because they suggested the possibility of a public identity as a 'third sex.'"⁷ "Contrary sexual feelings" were routinely discussed in the same contexts as androgyny, decadence, and degeneration, all of which were key topics for discussion in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, this was the period that saw the invention of "the homosexual" and the medicalisation of homosexuality. As I hope to show in this chapter, this discourse was to permeate and, in some cases, dominate, critical appraisal of *Parsifal*.

Austro-Hungarian translator, Karl Maria Kertbeny (also known as Benkert), is recognised as being the first person to make use of both the term "homosexual" and "homosexuality" in pamphlets published in Leipzig in 1869.⁸ The first appearance of "homo-sexuality" [*sic*] in English appeared over twenty years later, in 1892, in Charles Gilbert Chaddock's translation of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a medical text by Viennese sex researcher Richard von Krafft-Ebing.⁹ Sex between males was, of course, not unknown in Europe in the period before the second half of the nineteenth century. It was regarded as a vice that stemmed from unchecked male lust, a passing abnormality

⁶ Nordau, *Degeneration*, (1895; reprint, with an introduction by George L. Mosse, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 222.

⁷ Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 64.

⁸ David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 and 155.

that had the potential to afflict any man who failed to keep his sexual urges under control (men in same sex communities, prisoners, and military personnel were, for example, recognised as being particularly at risk).¹⁰ What *was* a nineteenth century phenomenon, however, was the identification and codification of “the homosexual,” the recognition of same sex desire as the affliction of persons who conformed to a *type*. “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration,” writes Michel Foucault, “the homosexual was now a species.”¹¹ Now that the species has been identified and given a name, the positivist drive of nineteenth century learning demanded that it be studied and examined in much the same way that the naturalist would analyse a new-found species of the animal or plant world. Physical appearance, family background, habitat, emotional qualities, sexual behaviours, and leisure activities were all taken into account when scientifically-based definitions of the homosexual were drawn up. Germany and Austria, in particular, were at the forefront of medical studies of this kind. The author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (first published in 1886) is able to quote from several decades of German research and opinion concerning the qualities of the homosexual.¹² In addition to drawing upon the work of his colleagues in the medical profession, Krafft-Ebing also provides a brief discussion of the position taken by, arguably, the first advocate for homosexual rights in the modern world, a German civil servant by the name of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.

As early as the 1860s, Ulrichs argued that male same sex attraction was a congenital condition and therefore ought to be afforded legal and social recognition. Under the pseudonym “Numa Numantis,” he published several articles in which he coined (and attempted to popularise) the term “Urning” as a descriptive label for a man who is sexually attracted to another male. Not surprisingly, he derived the term from Plato’s

¹⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), chap. 6.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1990), 43.

¹² Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886; reprint, London: Rebman, 1899), 326.

Symposium where, in the speech of Pausanias, we find discussion of two types of love, the higher form of which (i.e. love between men) is answerable to Heavenly Aphrodite, the daughter of Uranus.¹³ Ulrichs, as leader of the cult of Uranism, was instrumental in attempting to popularise the notion of a “third sex” and described his own condition as that of a biological male in which there lived a feminine soul.¹⁴ Ulrichs’s proselytising did not pass unnoticed. It is with some degree of alarm that Friedrich Engels wrote to Karl Marx in June 1868 expressing concern at the apparent presence of a secret organisation of “pederasts” at work in Germany: his anxiety was in response to the publication—anonously—of a book by Ulrichs.¹⁵ Nearly thirty years later it is the name of Ulrichs or, more specifically, his *nom de plume*, that sets in motion outspoken attacks on what was perceived to be a homosexual agenda at work in *Parsifal*.

In 1895, in the German publication *Die Gesellschaft*, there appeared an essay by playwright, author, and former psychiatrist Oskar Panizza titled, “Bayreuth und die Homosexualität: Eine Erwägung” (Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A Reflection). An alternative title might be “Bayreuth, *Parsifal*, and Homosexuality” since it is principally on the basis of Wagner’s final opera that Panizza argues his case, at the centre of which is the belief that *Parsifal* presents us with a homosexual male community, the rejection of woman, and the glorification of qualities that typify the emotional tendencies of the Urning: compassion, pity, longing, and purity. He presents his argument, in the first instance, by quoting from a personal classified advertisement in a leading, internationally renowned, south German newspaper (unnamed) that, at face value, is simply of a “male seeking male friendship” type. Closer examination of the advertisement, however, reveals a coded reference to homosexuality and the fact that it has been placed by a tourist who supplies a Bayreuth postal address (at *Festspiel* time

¹³ Physical love between male and female belongs to the domain of Common Aphrodite as discussed in Plato’s *Symposium*, 45-6.

¹⁴ Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 16.

¹⁵ The letter is quoted, in part, in Patrick Higgins, ed., *A Queer Reader* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 95-6.

no less) leads Panizza to conclude that the anonymous homosexual visitor is in town for *Parsifal*, "the very opera for which one goes to Bayreuth."¹⁶ The advertisement in question is as follows:

Young (foreign) bicyclist, Christian background, seeks companion from v. good household, up to 24 years old, for cycling holiday to Tyrol in month of August. Must be good-looking and have distinguished manners and enthusiastic character. Offers must be accompanied by photograph, which will be returned at once. Write to "Numa 77", poste restante, Bayreuth.¹⁷

The evidence might appear circumstantial at best except that, as Panizza points out, the pseudonym "Numa" (Ulrichs's *nom de plume*) would have been recognisable to a reader familiar with the writings of this most outspoken campaigner for same sex rights. "What the young man wanted," writes Panizza, "and what he concealed behind the expedient of a bicycle tour—for one always does it in pairs!—is clear."¹⁸ If the word "Numa" proved to be the clue to the sexual nature of the advertisement, the word "Bayreuth" (underlined, as he points out) implicated *Parsifal*, and the two words taken together carried the suggestion that Wagner's opera offered "spiritual sustenance for pederasts."¹⁹ In addition to the quintessentially homosexual sentiments of the opera referred to above, Panizza identifies Amfortas as an ageing homosexual and Parsifal as the pure youth who spurns feminine charms in order to redeem, and to be spiritually united with, the older man and his male brethren. He makes it clear that the opera contains no suggestion of physical sexual activity among these male characters but that this, in fact, *strengthens* the homosexual quality of the work since it confirms the findings of recent medical studies (here he cites *Psychopathia Sexualis*) in which it is pointed out that male-male desire is manifest predominantly in spiritual rather than physical ways.²⁰ This does not make it any less unhealthy, however. There is a clear message that this group of people, this secret society that apparently congregates at

¹⁶ Oskar Panizza, "Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A reflection by Dr. Oskar Panizza (Munich)," trans. and intro. Isolde Vetter, *Wagner*, n.s., 9 (1988): 74; originally published as "Bayreuth und die Homosexualität: Eine Erwägung," *Die Gesellschaft: Monatsschrift für Literatur, Kunst und Socialpolitik* 11 (1895).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-3.

Bayreuth, represents an ailing, decaying view of life, a view endorsed by Wagner's supposedly sacred work. Panizza's article was merely the beginning of what was to become a protracted battle of words over the moral integrity of *Parsifal*, a battle that was to become truly international in scope with controversy raging on both sides of the Atlantic.

Within months of the publication of "Bayreuth und die Homosexualität" we find a discussion of the polemical essay carried out in several issues of the French journal *La revue blanche*. Commentator Henry Gauthier-Villars is highly critical of Panizza's thesis and dismisses out of hand any suggestion that the youthful hero of Wagner's opera might be homosexual (he even goes so far as to suggest that, in his period of wandering—the time lapse that occurs between Acts II and III—Parsifal may well have become a married man).²¹ Gauthier-Villars's less than rigorous analysis of the issues raised by Panizza sparked a hostile response in the following issue of the journal from an anonymous reader ("Un Lecteur"), who points out that it is common among men of genius (Plato, Leonardo and others) to recognise and pay homage to elevated forms of love.²² The anonymous contributor argues that Wagner explored this theme in *Tristan und Isolde* and, furthermore, presented us in that opera with a heroine of distinctly masculine qualities. In conclusion, the correspondent asserts that, in the late nineteenth century, it is time to bring an open mind to discussions of sexuality that challenge conventional positions. Gauthier-Villars' patronising counter-response in the next issue merely reiterates his earlier viewpoint and contends that it is absurd to suggest that Wagner might in any way have pursued a homosexual agenda.²³ The hostility with which "Bayreuth und die Homosexualität" is alternatively dismissed and defended in the pages of *Le revue blanche* provides some indication of the provocative

²¹ Henry Gauthier-Villars, "Bayreuth et l'homosexualité," *La revue blanche* 67 (15 March 1896): 253-5.

²² "Bayreuth et l'homosexualité," *La revue blanche* 68 (1 April 1896): 304-6.

²³ Henry Gauthier-Villars, "Notules wagnériennes," *La revue blanche* 69 (15 April 1896): 379-80.

nature of Panizza's essay. The charge of homosexuality was a very serious one in the late nineteenth century, particularly when it involved a figure of Wagner's stature.

The turn-of-the-century has been recognised as an era of homosexual panic. Following the identification of "the homosexual," the next step was to ensure that, through legislation and moral vigilance, the public was sufficiently protected from these insidious degenerates. A series of sordid homosexual scandals in Britain in the final quarter of the century, including the well publicised Wilde trials, triggered alarm in the community and confirmed the suspicion that there were evil and amoral forces afoot that threatened to undermine the very foundations of civilised society. For the custodians of Empire, there was the unsettling thought that the once mighty Roman empire had collapsed under the weight of widespread and uninhibited licentiousness. As the editor of the London *Evening News* pointed out in the wake of the Wilde conviction, Oscar Wilde was the creature of a "decadent culture," a representative of "moral degeneration," the high priest "of a school which attacks all the wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life."²⁴ Britain was not alone, however, in enforcing anti-homosexual legislation, nor was it alone in having to deal with well publicised homosexual court trials.²⁵ It is not surprising that, with the establishment of the German Empire and the emergence of the German federation as a force to be reckoned with, the prohibitive same sex measures of the Prussian penal code were imposed across the length and breadth of the new Reich.²⁶ Here, as in Britain, the moral fibre of the community could in no way be threatened especially since Germany was determined to carve out a niche for itself as the powerful, industrial, and militaristic force of continental Europe. Germany, too, was rocked by high level homosexual scandals, the two most notable being the Krupp affair of 1902 (which provoked the

²⁴ Quoted in Hyde, *Trials*, 12.

²⁵ On anti-homosexual legislation in late nineteenth century Britain see, Weeks, *Coming Out*, 14-15; for a summary of homosexual scandals of the period see, Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 86, and Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 88.

²⁶ Weeks, *Coming Out*, 15.

suicide of the prominent industrialist Fritz Krupp), and, even more shocking, the Eulenburg trials of a few years later (which uncovered a clique of homosexual men in the intimate circle of Kaiser Wilhelm II).²⁷

In this climate of legislation, scandal, and panic, those in positions of authority were ever mindful of the potentially corrupting influence of works of art. Transcripts of the Oscar Wilde trials, for example, reveal that Wilde was frequently quizzed on the moral implications of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and an attempt was made to try to establish his familiarity with Huysman's *À Rebours*.²⁸ Counsel for Wilde took great pains to distance the accused from any association with a scandalous short story of 1894, "The Priest and the Acolyte," which appeared in *The Chameleon*, a short-lived journal that Wilde had contributed to. The story, which was published anonymously but is now known to have been written by John Francis Bloxham, celebrates, in extraordinarily frank terms, the passionate and intense love between a young priest and an even younger altar boy.²⁹ It was described at the first trial as an "abominable story" and "a disgrace to literature."³⁰ Works of this type were not only considered corrupt in themselves, but, even more dangerously, were seen to have the power to corrupt. It is on these grounds that English music critic John F. Runciman waged a campaign against *Parsifal* that was to last nearly twenty years. He claimed that *Parsifal* preached an "immoral" message and, in what can only be described as wishful thinking, predicted that the opera was unlikely to be accepted by English audiences.³¹ It is hardly surprising that Runciman's campaign began in 1897, a mere two years after the

²⁷ For a discussion of the "Eulenberg scandal" see Isabel Hull, "Kaiser Wilhelm II and the 'Liebenberg Circle,'" in *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations*, ed. John C. G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 193-220.

²⁸ Hyde, *Trials*, 130-1.

²⁹ "The Priest and the Acolyte" is reprinted in Brian Reade, ed., *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970): 349-60.

³⁰ Hyde, *Trials*, 114-5.

³¹ John F. Runciman, "Opera for Poor and Rich," *Saturday Review* (London), 29 November 1913, 680.

Wilde conviction, a period of increasing anxiety over the perceived threat of “the homosexual” to society at large.

It was in his capacity as journalist for the London *Saturday Review* that, in 1897, Runciman travelled to Bayreuth to report on the Wagner *Festspiel*.³² This was his first encounter with the opera that, for him, was repugnant in virtually every respect. It appears that Runciman’s principal objection to *Parsifal* rested on what he believed was the noxious influence of the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. He saw it as an opera that presented an anti-life view of the world: Parsifal, to all appearances, is a young, healthy, individual but he chooses to reject a healthy way of life, one that accepts the love of woman, in favour of the celibate, cloistered life of a monk. For Runciman, the opera is fine up until the moment of Kundry’s kiss (both musically and in terms of ideology), after which it completely falls apart. Whereas Siegfried, when he first encounters woman, “sees that the world is glorious,” Parsifal, at the moment of Kundry’s kiss, “sees that the grief and suffering of the world outweigh and outnumber its joys.”³³ *Siegfried* presents us with a message that is “entirely moral, healthful and sane,” while *Parsifal* presents a view that is “immoral and vicious.”³⁴ In fact, in Runciman’s view, the opera is so completely wrong-headed in its account of what is right and wrong that, by the end of the work, it is “the powers that make for evil and destruction [that] have won.” As for Parsifal himself, he is a hero who “is eternally damned.”³⁵

Runciman’s review of 1897 makes no specific reference to homosexuality but it implies it by other means.³⁶ This, in itself, is not unusual in terms of journalistic style of the period. Newspaper coverage of the Wilde trials, although extensive, was very discreet

³² Excerpts from his reviews of the 1897 festival were reprinted in book form, together with other articles, some years later in, *Old Scores and New Readings* (London: Cecil Court, 1899).

³³ John F. Runciman, “*Parsifal*,” *Saturday Review* (London), 28 August 1897, 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁶ See Introduction to this thesis, n. 2.

in content and utterly lacking in specific detail. The newspaper, after all, was brought into environments of Victorian respectability (the family home, workplace, and club), surroundings that were not to be polluted by detailed references to unseemly conduct. The unspeakable was also the unreadable insofar as mass market publications were concerned. Parsifal, therefore, might not be described unequivocally as a homosexual in Runciman's review but he is clearly denounced as a degenerate and, at the time, notions of homosexuality and degeneracy were inextricably linked.³⁷ Parsifal conforms to the late nineteenth century homosexual-degenerate stereotype in body (he has an "exhausted physical frame" and "lacks health and vitality") and in family history ("probably his father suffered from rickets").³⁸ He is revolted by the kiss of woman but finds comfort in the company of men. The opera itself is not only "an immoral work," but its message is "nonconformist" and "vicious."³⁹ If the opera is "vicious" it is a work of vice which, at the turn-of-the-century, was a very serious accusation indeed—Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years imprisonment on the charge of "gross indecency," had he been charged with being a "vicious person" the maximum penalty was life imprisonment.⁴⁰ At face value, Runciman clouds his review in a good deal of anti-Schopenhauer rhetoric, but this jars somewhat with the occasional outbursts of moral outrage that seem to have less to do with Schopenhauer and more to do with homosexual panic. It is as though his "anti-life" objections are in fact a euphemistic cover for what he sees as the favourable portrayal of same sex desire in the work. Why, for example, does he disparage *Parsifal* on the grounds of its indebtedness to Schopenhauer, yet has nothing but praise for *Tristan und Isolde*, a work that is arguably Wagner's strongest endorsement of Schopenhauer's

³⁷ The two terms were not necessarily interchangeable, however. One could be degenerate but not homosexual.

³⁸ Runciman, "Parsifal," 219-20. Des Esseintes, the protagonist in *À Rebours*, is perpetually ill and exhausted and is the last member of a steadily declining family. Late nineteenth century medical studies did much to reiterate connections between a propensity towards homosexuality and symptoms of inherited neurasthenia, see Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 118-9

³⁹ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁰ Hyde, *Trials*, 13.

philosophy?⁴¹ Is it because *Tristan*, unlike *Parsifal*, is not encumbered with murky and ambiguous sexual undertones?⁴² Two years later, in 1899, Runciman provides a much clearer indication of the real reason for his vehement opposition to *Parsifal*. He concludes a review of recent publications on Wagner with the following comments:

The less we know of Wagner's meanings the higher we will place the stupendous artist. In the fulness [*sic*] of time it may even be practicable to love *Parsifal*, but that will only be after the vile meanings put upon it, meanings which Wagner did or did not intend to be found there, are clean forgotten.⁴³

This is clearly a reference to the view which, by now, must have been some kind of open secret, that *Parsifal* was Wagner's homosexual opera. Presumably, this is in the aftermath of Oskar Panizza's essay of 1895 (and the debate in *La revue blanche* the following year) which might possibly have been brought to Runciman's attention when he was at Bayreuth in 1897.

The first of Runciman's two Wagner monographs appeared in 1908 and demonstrates no waning in his crusade to discredit *Parsifal* in the strongest possible terms (although he still does not write in the *clearest* possible terms with regard to the true nature of his grievance against the opera). The complete entry on *Parsifal* in the 1908 study is as follows:

This disastrous and evil opera was written in Wagner's old age, under the influence of such a set of disagreeably immoral persons as has seldom if ever been gathered together in so small a town as Bayreuth. The whole drama consists of this: at Montsalvat [*sic*] there was a monastery, and the head became seriously ill because he had been seen with a lady. In the long-run he is saved by a young man—rightly called a "fool"—who cannot tolerate the sight of a woman. What it all means—the grotesque parody of the Last Supper, the death of the last woman in the world, the spear which has caused the Abbot's wound and then cures it—these are not matters to be entered into here. Some of the music is fine.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Runciman, "*Parsifal*," 219. Elsewhere, he describes *Tristan und Isolde* as "the finest music drama in the world." "After Wagner—Why?", *Saturday Review* (London), 7 May 1904, 583.

⁴² Some recent writing on *Tristan* suggests that the opera is rather murky in its sexual implications, see Peter Morris-Keitel, Alexa Larson-Thorisch, and Audrius Dundzila, "Transgression and Affirmation: Gender Roles, Moral Codes, and Utopian Vision in Richard Wagner's Operas," in *Re-Reading Wagner*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 73-5.

⁴³ John F. Runciman, "After Wagner, Books About Wagner," *Saturday Review* (London), 29 July 1899, 133.

⁴⁴ John F. Runciman, *Wagner* (London: Bell, 1908), 89-90.

As with Runciman's journalistic pieces on *Parsifal*, decorum has seen to it that aberrant sexuality is not stated outright as the reason for his disgust but the fact that he protects the gentle reader from further discussion of the opera and makes it clear that the work contains issues which are not "to be entered into," merely compounds the impression that the unstated evil must be the unspeakable evil. But who are the "disagreeably immoral persons" evidently responsible for leading Wagner astray? One of them may be the Russian-German painter Paul von Joukowsky, who was responsible for the set and costume design for the original Bayreuth production (designs which remained largely unaltered until the early 1930s).⁴⁵ Joukowsky, who was homosexual, was in close contact with the Wagner family from 1880 until the composer's death in 1883. (In fact, Wagner's last portrait was sketched by Joukowsky in the Palazzo Vendramin, Venice, the night before he died.) For most of this period, Joukowsky was accompanied by his lover-manservant (sometimes referred to, rather discreetly, as his "adoptive son"), a Neapolitan singer by the name of Pepino, who was also a welcome member of the Wagner household both at Bayreuth and on the family's regular vacations to Italy.⁴⁶ Runciman may or may not have known of Joukowsky's sexuality but he certainly did know of the sexual inclinations of Wagner's patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who, although not directly involved with the production of *Parsifal*, followed the progress of the work with keen interest. Ludwig never set foot in the *Festspielhaus* after the Ring of 1876 and most certainly did not meet Joukowsky. That these two figures were associated with the opera in some way or another hardly constitutes an evil clique of the type suggested by Runciman. There

⁴⁵ Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 183-4.

⁴⁶ On 23 January 1880, Cosima writes in her diary: "Herr Joukowsky introduces his servant to us, a Neapolitan folk singer, who delights us with his singing and his passion." *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 2: 431-2. Pepino is referred to as Joukowsky's "adoptive son" in Barry Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 26.

most certainly was no homosexual cabal operating in Bayreuth, although it seems typical of the era of homosexual panic to suggest that there was.⁴⁷

Runciman's second and final book on Wagner, *Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas*, was published in 1913, on the eve of the expiration of Bayreuth's monopoly on performances of *Parsifal* and one year after further consolidation of anti-homosexual legislation in Britain.⁴⁸ It contains a discussion of the opera that attempts, once and for all, to be as candid as possible about the moral dangers of the work, presumably in a bid to deter potential opera-goers from being duped by *Parsifal* publicity and propaganda in the lead up to the first staged performance of the work in London. Wagner's *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, he declares, is "a spectacle which I must say is disgusting to healthy minds. The insinuations are frightful."⁴⁹ In an attempt to elucidate these insinuations he is prepared to discuss, finally, the identity of one of the "disagreeably immoral persons" referred to in the 1908 monograph. Runciman lays the blame for the immoral tendencies of the opera squarely at the feet of Wagner's mad, homosexual, royal patron. The fact that, from inception to performance, Ludwig followed the composition of *Parsifal* closely and encouragingly, and supported the composer financially and artistically throughout, indicts him as the guilty party, the immoral influence who, ultimately, is responsible for the repugnant qualities evident in the work.⁵⁰ For, as Runciman points out,

Ludwig, when not masquerading in woman's [*sic*] clothing, or ordering it from Paris, or appearing at private performances in one opera or another, suffered from great attacks of religion; and, unhappily for the art of music, what appealed to his diseased brain from one side appealed to Wagner's tired brain from the other side. Ludwig asked him to complete *Parsifal* and he did so.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Runciman reiterates this notion several years later when he refers to "mischievous influences" that were at work upon Wagner during the composition of *Parsifal*. "Concerning *Parsifal*," *Saturday Review* (London), 27 December 1913, 804. Unsubstantiated notions of a "gay mafia" in whatever field of endeavour remain with us today.

⁴⁸ Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 87.

⁴⁹ John F. Runciman, *Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas* (London: Bell, 1913), 413.

⁵⁰ Runciman conveniently ignores the fact that Ludwig had provided financial support for Wagner from as early as 1864 and took an avid interest in *all* of his works.

⁵¹ Runciman, *Richard Wagner*, 409.

Parsifal, it would seem, is not the profoundly spiritual opera that Wagner, his followers, and the publicity machine would have us believe it is. It is the camp, pseudo-religious fantasy of a deranged, emasculate monarch. It hardly seems surprising, therefore, that we are presented with such an unmasculine hero ("Siegfried with all his bull-strength shorn away")⁵² or one who "knows and cares nothing about womankind,"⁵³ given that we are subject to the influence of Wagner's poetic and sensitive patron, a King who called off his engagement to Duchess Sophie Charlotte of Bavaria but wrote passionate, effusive letters to Wagner and, towards the end of his life, enjoyed the intimate company of the actor Josef Kainz. Oddly enough, in the final analysis, Runciman exonerates Wagner of any wilful wrongdoing (he was old, tired, and merely following orders), but both the opera and King Ludwig, the evil, cross-dressing muse, are found guilty in the first degree.⁵⁴

In the quest to preach his anti-*Parsifal* sermon beyond a specialist Wagner readership, Runciman embarked upon a concentrated attack on the opera through the pages of the *Saturday Review* in the final weeks of 1913. This was to head off publicity surrounding the Covent Garden premiere of the work that was to take place early in the new year. (Towards the end of 1913 the whole of Europe was, in fact, in the grip of *Parsifal* mania with the imminent expiration of Bayreuth's exclusive performing rights. The first few months of 1914 saw performances throughout Europe, the first of which was a production at Barcelona that commenced at midnight, German time, on 1 January. The London premiere took place on 2 February.)⁵⁵ Within the space of a few short weeks we find Runciman describe the opera as "the barren fruit of Wagner's old age," a work that, on moral grounds, "must be condemned," and pointed reference to

⁵² *Ibid.*, 413.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ This is not unlike Runciman's article of 1899 (see n. 43) in which he states that Wagner may or may not have been aware of the moral implications of *Parsifal*, i.e. he might have been manipulated by others.

⁵⁵ Oswald Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premieres to the Present* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 285-6.

King Ludwig's "unusual notions of sexual morality."⁵⁶ He asserts that Bayreuth has made a tidy sum from an opera that attracts "bishops, the clergy, and neurotic ladies who go there in their thousands."⁵⁷ Runciman's censure did not pass without comment by some of the readership, with one letter to the editor drawing attention to the fact that "it is curious to notice how our foremost musical critics in England seem to be united in an attempt to run down this work."⁵⁸ The assault on *Parsifal* at this time was further compounded by the appearance in the same newspaper of a favourable critique of Runciman's recently published *Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas*, in which the reviewer fully concurs with the writer's assessment of *Parsifal*. In fact, he goes so far as to describe it as a work of "psychopathic" qualities.⁵⁹ (Undoubtedly the inference is to pathological sexual characteristics.) It is significant that this review is the work of American critic James Huneker, a man who was, himself, at the forefront of the campaign against *Parsifal* on the grounds of its supposedly perverted sexuality.

The denunciation of *Parsifal* in turn-of-the-century America was, if anything, a matter of greater urgency than in Britain since it was in New York in 1903 that the management of the Metropolitan Opera invoked the ire of Wahnfried when it staged its own production of the opera and, in doing so, challenged the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* to sole performance rights to the work (the United States was not bound by this agreement). The heated exchanges between Cosima Wagner and her allies and the management of the Metropolitan Opera were reported widely in America and Europe and generated a phenomenal amount of publicity for the Metropolitan's renegade

⁵⁶ John F. Runciman, "Opera for Poor and Rich," 680, and "Concerning *Parsifal*," 804-5.

⁵⁷ John F. Runciman, "Opera for Poor and Rich," 680. His comments echo an earlier view of the work by the art critic Wilhelm Lübke who believed that *Parsifal* was enjoyed by "hysterical women and blasé men of the world," quoted in Henry T. Finck, *Wagner and His Works* (1893; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1968), 430.

⁵⁸ George Gardner, "Parsifal: To the Editor of the *Saturday Review*," *Saturday Review* (London), 3 January, 1914, 15. Curiously enough, this letter quotes disparaging remarks against *Parsifal* that date back to Henderson's *Wagner* monograph of 1901.

⁵⁹ James Huneker, "Review of *Richard Wagner: Composer of Operas*, by John F. Runciman," *Saturday Review* (London), 6 December, 1913, 709.

production. To those loyal to Bayreuth, the apparently grubby dealings of the Americans constituted “the rape of the Grail.”⁶⁰ The New York public, for its part, flocked to performances of the work (the first of which was on Christmas Eve, Cosima’s birthday, 1903). Interested parties in Chicago were able to journey to Manhattan on a special *Parsifal* train, while pastiches and parodies entertained those not able to get to the real thing, including a Lower East Side Yiddish version that catered to the local Jewish community.⁶¹ The success of the New York production generated interest in *Parsifal* throughout the country, the result being that the opera went “on the road” and eventually notched up a total of 354 performances over a two year period. (This is a truly astonishing figure and one that easily outnumbered the sum total of performances at Bayreuth since 1882.)⁶²

But *Parsifal* was not without its detractors in America. It is often remarked that clergymen, in particular, were bitterly opposed to what they believed was a work of sacrilege.⁶³ What is nowadays never recalled is that it was at this time that prominent critic James Gibbons Huneker launched his essay “*Parsifal*—A Mystic Melodrama,” a savage attack on the opera that he had seen and scorned several years earlier in Bayreuth. He believed that had the outraged men of the cloth known the *true* nature of *Parsifal*, the controversy surrounding the opera in America “would have been tenfold greater than it was.”⁶⁴ It was this “true nature” that he so zealously tried to expose. Huneker, who was otherwise well disposed to the works of Wagner, was a great admirer of Nietzsche and obviously drew comfort from the fact that the German philosopher once described *Parsifal* in the following manner:

⁶⁰ Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 120. For a summary of the controversy surrounding the New York premiere of *Parsifal* see, Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), chap. 14.

⁶¹ David Ewen, *The Complete Book of Classical Music* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 558; and, Horowitz, *Wagner Nights*, 266.

⁶² Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 120.

⁶³ Horowitz, *Wagner Nights*, 262.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Arnold T. Schwab, *James Gibbons Huneker: Critic of the Seven Arts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 147.

For *Parsifal* is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life—a bad work. The preaching of chastity is an incitement to anti-nature: I despise everyone who does not experience *Parsifal* as an attempted assassination of basic ethics.⁶⁵

These comments must have seemed like a rallying cry to Huneker for he too, in his own way, believed *Parsifal* to be a work of anti-nature, a secret attack on ethics and, in an interpretation that might not have been exactly what Nietzsche had in mind, a glorification of “contrary” sexual feelings.⁶⁶ “Parsiphallie” was his private nickname for Wagner’s hallowed opera.⁶⁷

In addition to describing the narrative as an embodiment of “the very dust-bin” of Wagner’s philosophies, Huneker dismisses the work as an “artificial medley of faded music and grotesque forms.”⁶⁸ Rather early in his essay he states that, “I cannot admire *Parsifal* and I am giving my reasons for this dislike.”⁶⁹ It is probably significant that he writes “cannot admire” rather than “do not admire” for it becomes apparent that his moral objections to the opera are of such a serious nature that he, and presumably society as a whole, cannot in any way encourage the support of a work that appears to be an incitement to anti-nature. In words that seem to echo Runciman, Huneker warns that *Parsifal* is the most “immoral of operas.”⁷⁰ It is clearly horrifying to him that Wagner has presented us with a hero who, in fact, appears to be nothing of the sort. Parsifal, this “effeminate lad,” is unworthy to stand beside Wagnerian heroes

⁶⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 675.

⁶⁶ Huneker, on occasion, is rather prone to paraphrasing Nietzsche without acknowledgement. Thus, Nietzsche’s comment that, “I should really wish that the Wagnerian *Parsifal* were intended as a prank” (*Nietzsche contra Wagner*, 674) becomes, in Huneker’s essay: “it would not be surprising if some day we should learn that *Parsifal* was one of his jokes on an epical scale,” (“*Parsifal*,” 67); Nietzsche describes the work as “operetta material *par excellence*” (*Nietzsche contra Wagner*, 674), while Huneker describes it as, “surely a theme for comic opera” (“Review of Richard Wagner,” 709); Wagner is described by Nietzsche as, “this old magician! This Klingsor of all Klingsors!” (*The Case of Wagner*, 184), and is described by Huneker as, “the old hypnotist...this Klingsor of Bayreuth” (“*Parsifal*,” 93).

⁶⁷ Schwab, *Huneker*, 147.

⁶⁸ James Huneker, “*Parsifal*: A Mystic Melodrama,” in *Overtures* (1904; reprint, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 93 and 71. He nevertheless concedes that there are moments of musical beauty in the work, rare though they may be.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

the likes of the warrior Siegfried for he is but a shadow of the fearless youth of the *Ring*, he is, tragically, “an emasculate Siegfried.”⁷¹ His music, too, is emasculate, for Huneker claims that Wagner “unconsciously divined the effeminacy of Parsifal’s nature” and provided us with a sorry tone portrait to match.⁷² The seriousness of the protagonist’s gender shortcomings are emphasised to the point where we are informed that “at no time is Parsifal a normal young man.”⁷³ Huneker’s language may be somewhat discreet but his inferences are clear. In addition to the use of pointed terms such as “effeminate” and “emasculate,” he informs us that the opera is “strange,” “morbid,” and “abnormal.” When he makes known that it presents us with “a lot of women-hating men,” he leaves no room for doubt as to the exact reason why he “cannot” admire the work: it is a paean to homosexuality.⁷⁴ It is not until the closing paragraphs of the essay, however, that he acknowledges the influence of “psychiatric literature” on *Parsifal* by Oskar Panizza and others. Here is where the threads start to come together, suddenly everything he has implied up to that point becomes clear. Parsifal feels no sexual passion for Kundry because he is driven by homosexual desire. Once we understand this, “the psychology of Kundry’s kiss and its repelling effect and its arousing of pity for Amfortas in Parsifal is no longer a mystery.”⁷⁵

While it is possible that Runciman may have known of Panizza’s “Bayreuth und die Homosexualität,” Huneker makes it clear that not only is he is familiar with this essay (his biographer suggests that, since it was not available in English, Huneker made his own translation of it)⁷⁶, but also (unnamed) French literature on the subject of Wagner and homosexuality (presumably the 1896 debate in *La revue blanche*), together with what he describes as a “remarkable” study by Hanns Fuchs (not referred to by title, the

⁷¹ Ibid., 96.

⁷² Ibid., 99.

⁷³ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 106-7.

⁷⁶ Schwab, *Huneker*, 79.

work is *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität*). Some perspective on the fervour with which Huneker pursued matters concerning Wagner, *Parsifal*, and homosexuality can be gauged from both his knowledge of the available literature (all of it in languages other than English) and also from the fact that, in the case of Fuchs's monograph of 1903, the extreme newness of the literature.⁷⁷ Just as Huneker knew of the work by others on the subject, so, too, others knew of his *Parsifal* essay. A general music history published in 1906, *The Growth and Development of Music*, raises the matter of the rather poor estimate of *Parsifal*—"morbid and sensual, corrupt in its conception and degrading in its effect"—held by some commentators.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the bibliography at the conclusion of the Wagner chapter in this history directs readers to both Huneker's essay and W. J. Henderson's damaging critique in *Modern Musical Drift* (discussed in Chapter II) in order that they may read up on "disparaging criticism of *Parsifal*."⁷⁹ An essay from the same year by the English commentator Edward Algernon Baughan informs us that, nowadays "Wagner's music is made out to mean all kinds of terrible depravities,"⁸⁰ while the American writer Lawrence Gilman reports that, "this affecting spiritual allegory [*Parsifal*] has become the topical property of the man in the street, a profitable stalking-horse for the pamphleteer."⁸¹ The controversial sexual nature of the opera is hinted at in both cases with the latter essay making specific reference to the writings of both Huneker and Runciman. *An Illustrated History of Music*, published in 1915, includes recommendations for the second of Runciman's two books on Wagner (where he goes the furthest in elucidating his moral objections to *Parsifal*), along with the "brilliantly written" work of Huneker, notably the collection *Overtures* (where, not surprisingly, we find his *Parsifal* essay).⁸²

⁷⁷ *Overtures* was published in 1904.

⁷⁸ Edward Dickinson, *The Growth and Development of Music* (London: William Reeves, 1906), 317.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 329. The omission of Runciman can be explained by the fact that this history predates his two Wagner monographs by a few years.

⁸⁰ Edward Algernon Baughan, "Poisonous Appreciations," in *Music and Musicians* (London: John Lane, 1906), 117. See also additional quote from this essay in the Introduction to this thesis, n. 3.

⁸¹ Lawrence Gilman, "*Parsifal* and its significance," in *Phases of Modern Music* (London: John Lane, 1905), 154.

⁸² Thomas Tapper and Percy Goetschius, *An Illustrated History of Music* (London: John Murray, 1915), 339-40, 342. Nearly fifteen years later we find Runciman's books on Wagner among those

The interpretation of *Parsifal* promulgated by the likes of Runciman and Huneker is challenged head-on in the third of Ernest Newman's studies on Wagner, *Wagner as Man and Artist*, first published in 1914. Newman, in fact, describes the phenomenon of controversial commentary surrounding *Parsifal* as "the pleasant little game of *Parsifal*-baiting,"⁸³ a practice that he claims began with Nietzsche. Mention has been made of the euphemistic style of Runciman and Huneker, at no point do they use the words "homosexual" or "homosexuality" in their *Parsifal* criticism (German critics were far less reticent in this regard), and nor does Newman in his repudiation of these critics and defence of Wagner's opera. All three commentators, however, express their views in such a way that they leave little room for doubt as to inference and meaning. Newman, for example, argues that, contrary to the views of some, *Parsifal* in no way embodies "moral nastiness" and "moral flabbiness," flaws that he associates with a group of men exposed in "a German scandal of a few years ago" (a veiled reference to the Eulenburg trials, discussed above), a scandal that "sent its unwholesome odour though the civilised world."⁸⁴ He seeks to assure the reader that Huneker and Runciman are misguided in their interpretation of *Parsifal* and that we may appreciate Wagner's opera secure in the knowledge that we are not compromising our moral scruples in any way: "we can still go to *Parsifal* without either having our morals corrupted or feeling that we are encouraging race suicide. [!]"⁸⁵

Newman's spirited defence of *Parsifal* is noteworthy because it reveals that nearly twenty years of commentary attempting to link *Parsifal* and homosexuality has neither

recommended in Percy A. Scholes, *The Listener's History of Music*, vol. 2, *The Romantic and Nationalist Schools of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1929), 221.

⁸³ Ernest Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist*, rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 318.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 318-9. Without wishing to press the point too strongly, it is perhaps worth noting that Eulenburg and his homosocial clique (which included Kaiser Wilhelm II) were known as the "Liebenberg Circle," named after Eulenburg's estate where they would meet annually. Liebenberg means, literally, "mount of love." The knights in *Parsifal* gather at Monsalvat, literally, "mount of salvation."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 320.

occurred on the fringe nor has not been forgotten. It has etched a place in *Parsifal* reception such that it requires lengthy, unambiguous, and forthright repudiation. The seriousness with which he defends the opera against the charge of so-called aberrant sexuality might have something to do with the fact that Wagner's own sexuality was under investigation from the time of Panizza's essay of 1895. To Panizza and other commentators, *Parsifal* was a homosexual opera because it was the work of a latent homosexual.

CHAPTER V

THE MYTH OF WAGNER'S DECLINE

A version of Christianity adapted for female Wagnerians, perhaps *by* female Wagnerians—for Wagner was in his old days by all means *feminini generis*?

Nietzsche on *Parsifal* (*The Case of Wagner*, 191).

The whole work, so far as moral teaching is concerned, must be condemned; and in so far as its music is concerned, it is only to be regarded as the decrepit work of a splendid musician's old age.

Runciman on *Parsifal* (*Saturday Review*, 27 December 1913, 805).

If *Parsifal* was a homosexual opera what did this say about Wagner himself? How was it that a man who was infamous for his liaisons with (usually married) women was able to declare in his *Weltabschiedswerk* an explicit renunciation of carnal heterosexual love in favour of an apparent cerebral kind of homosexuality? What was this twice married man and father of three children doing writing a homosexual opera? To some writers at the turn-of-the-century the answer was a simple one: Wagner had become homosexual in his old age. His final opera was but the shameful scrawl of an elderly, once-great composer.

The belief that elderly males were particularly susceptible to homoerotic desire gained currency in the later nineteenth century. (It may well have been influenced by the study of Plato—"the Greek thinker whose spirit brooded over the entire age"¹—for in his *Symposium* we find discussion of the erotic attraction of the older male for handsome, athletic youths.) Schopenhauer, in his Appendix to "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love" (in *The World as Will and Representation*) recognised the homoerotic tendencies of the elderly male (and the adolescent male for that matter) and condoned these desires on the grounds that, due to the deficient properties of mature (and juvenile) semen, it was better spent in non-procreative ways.² Schopenhauer died in 1860, a generation

¹ Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 261.

² Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 51.

before the medicalisation of homosexuality was well and truly underway in Germany and elsewhere, but the link he draws between homosexual desire and the elderly male did not die with him, in fact it accorded very nicely with late nineteenth century notions of degeneration—that homosexuality was symptomatic of a mind and body in a state of decline. In “Bayreuth und die Homosexualität,” Panizza reveals a familiarity with the pioneering sex research of Krafft-Ebing, an awareness of the literature by Ulrichs, together with a knowledge of the work of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer, in fact is crucial to his thesis, for it is largely on the grounds that Wagner was an *aged man* at the time of writing *Parsifal* that Panizza claims to be able to “prove” that the opera promotes a homosexual agenda. He presents as fact Schopenhauer’s observation that “the old, or even the middle-aged, man turns away from the heterosexual inclinations of his youth and directs his attentions towards young men and boys.”³ The concluding sentences of Panizza’s essay are worth quoting at length since he bundles together notions of homosexuality, ageing, degeneration, redemption, effeminacy, and nationalism with regard to Wagner and *Parsifal*:

We know that in this last work of his, Wagner was interpreting the relationship between Parsifal and the Grail Knights in terms of his own relationship with the rest of humankind. And this is how the Wagnerians interpret it: he, Wagner, redeemed humanity through his art. But since the ageing Wagner, like Schopenhauer, had become homosexual (in a purely non-physical way) as a natural result of growing older, he symbolised his thesis in homosexual terms; just as Schopenhauer wrote his well-known “Appendix” to the *Metaphysics of Sexual Love* on the subject of paederasty. What we ourselves shall turn out to be like in old age, we do not know. But while we are young, we should remain healthy. And, as far as Wagner is concerned, the German nation—which will always remain young—should stick to the side of youth, to the healthy, sensual Wagner of *Tannhäuser*, and leave *Parsifal* to the blubberers, the penitents, and the esoteric and old. Be gone!—one could call out to them, travestying a well-known passage—be gone! Be gone to the Mount of *Venus masculinus*!⁴

³ Oskar Panizza, “Bayreuth and Homosexuality: A reflection by Dr. Oskar Panizza (Munich),” trans. and intro. Isolde Vetter, *Wagner*, n.s., 9 (1988): 73; originally published as “Bayreuth und die Homosexualität: Eine Erwägung,” *Die Gesellschaft: Monatsschrift für Literatur, Kunst und Socialpolitik* 11 (1895).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75. It is typical of much nineteenth century writing on homosexuality to locate it among peoples and places far removed from the ethnic background and nationality of the writer himself. Thus, Sir Richard Burton claims that it is widespread in the “Sotadic Zone” (an imaginary global band that takes in southern Europe, northern Africa, the Middle East, central Asia, the Pacific islands, and the New World), quoted in Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion* (1897; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 22-3. Elsewhere in *Sexual Inversion* we are told that “there is a marked tendency for German friendship to assume a sexually emotional warmth” (105). David F. Greenberg points out that in eighteenth century French and English sources, homosexuality is often

As I shall hope to demonstrate in this chapter, Panizza's accusation was not an isolated incident. *Fin de siècle* homosexual panic saw to it that both work and composer were implicated. What is most important about Panizza's concluding remarks, however, is that they very plainly draw Wagner's physical degeneration and his apparent homosexuality into the same arena. In the hands of other writers, these dual points are often fleshed out to include a crucial third one: Wagner's decline as a composer. While later generations may largely have forgotten about Wagner the supposed homosexual, *Parsifal* remained, until very recently, the tainted opera, the product of his physical and intellectual decline. It ought to be known that this view was shaped by concerns that had very little to do with the music itself.

In order to provide some background to the issues surrounding Wagner's alleged homosexuality, a number of preliminary incidents should be mentioned. Wagner, as is well known, led the most public of lives. Here is a composer who began to make annotations for his autobiography before he could boast a single performance of a work for the operatic stage.⁵ By the mid-1850s, not only had he carved out a place for himself as a composer of distinction but also as an essayist, philosopher (of sorts), social commentator, and operatic revolutionary.⁶ But Wagner's success and notoriety as a composer and theorist was but part of a public persona that also took account of, among other things, his reputation as a political agitator, fugitive, German nationalist, and anti-Semite. Ten years later, around the time of the premiere in Munich of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), he became equally well known as a sexual libertine, adulterer, spendthrift and, most worrying of all in the opinion of some, royal confidant.

referred to as an Italian vice and that "present-day Jewish Israelis often associate homosexuality with Arabs, and in Algeria it is associated with the French." *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 328, (n 173).

⁵ This was in August 1835. *Das Liebesverbot* was performed, disastrously as it turned out, the following year. His earlier opera, *Die Feen* (1834), did not receive its premiere until 1888.

⁶ A passage from Wagner's *Art Work of the Future* (1850), in which he glorifies the ancient Greek ideal of male physical beauty and praises the male comradeship that was so revered in ancient Sparta,

Wagner's operatic reforms, intellectual posturing, material comfort at the expense of the Bavarian treasury, and unconventional interpretation of the vows of marriage were seized upon and held up for ridicule by cartoonists and satirists of the period.⁷ But rather more serious commentators also drew upon the scandalous and salacious in Wagner's life in order to undermine his credibility and hinder the enthusiasm of the burgeoning cult of Wagner. One way of doing so was to call his masculinity into question. In 1877, for example, the year following the highly publicised inaugural Bayreuth Festival, the respectable Viennese daily *Neue Freie Presse* published sixteen letters written by Wagner from the mid to late 1860s to Bertha Goldwag, his seamstress in Vienna. What was considered shocking about the *Letters to a Seamstress* was not simply that they revealed the outrageously opulent taste of the composer in the area of clothing and fabric accessories (one invoice alone records an order that required many hundreds of metres of satin),⁸ but that they revealed the predilections of a man of decidedly feminine disposition. Daniel Spitzer, the journalist who brought the correspondence to light, published the letters under the heading "How like the woman he looks!", a quotation from Act I of *Die Walküre* when Hunding notices the physical resemblance between Siegmund and his sister Sieglinde. A caricature of Wagner, extravagantly dressed, measuring reams of fabric beside a substantial bundle of orders and accounts (and totally oblivious to the charge of Spitzer's poisonous quill), appeared in the satirical Viennese weekly *Der Floh* under the title "Frou-Frou Wagner" (Figure 5.1). It is believed that when Goldwag delivered her extravagant fabrics and perfumes to Wagner's Munich address she informed customs officials that the exotic wares were for a countess in Berlin.⁹ It is perhaps significant that it is precisely at this moment—the last decades of the nineteenth

was drawn upon by the late nineteenth century British homosexual rights activist Edward Carpenter, see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994), 115.

⁷ Some examples are reproduced in Herbert Barth, Dietrich Mack, and Egon Voss, eds., *Wagner: A Documentary Study* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

⁸ Isolde Vetter, "Wagner in the History of Psychology," in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. Stewart Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 125.

⁹ Barry Millington, "Who's Who of Wagner's Contemporaries," in *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. Barry Millington (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 25.

Frou-Frou-Wagner.

Fig. 5.1. F Grätz, "Frou-Frou Wagner," *Der Floh* (The Flea), Vienna, 24 June 1877.

century—that so-called effeminate tendencies in males were seen to be a potential indicator of homosexuality.

Less than ten years after the publication of the Wagner seamstress letters we find, in Viennese sex researcher Richard von Krafft-Ebing's monumental *Psychopathia sexualis*, discussion of the abnormal condition of "Effemination," in which a male "develops tastes in female *toilettes*... finds pleasure in the adornment of person, art, *belles-lettres*, etc., even to the extent of giving himself entirely to the cultivation of the beautiful."¹⁰ (Fabric fetishism—notably fur, silk, and velvet—is also singled out by Krafft-Ebing for consideration, not as an effeminate tendency but merely as one among many types of newly codified pathological sexual conditions.) Pre-Freudian psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin counted among characteristics of the homosexual the following traits:

[a] tendency to boastfulness and petty jealousy are typical vices... He shows a sickly sweet, fragile essence, becomes vain, flirtatious, lays much worth on externals, clothes himself with care...writes tender letters on perfumed paper...etc. There is not the slightest doubt, that contrary sexual tendencies develop from the foundation of a sickly degenerate personality.¹¹

When, in 1888, Nietzsche posed the question whether Wagner in his old age belonged to the species *feminini generis*,¹² he must have been making at least tacit acknowledgement of the implications of this in the wake of studies by Krafft-Ebing et al. Nearly one hundred years later, in Martin van Amerongen's Wagner monograph, we find the following observation:

I have the impression that it was not so much his love-life which enjoyed the principal attention of the petty bourgeoisie as his unbridled passion for frills, dark green shirts, pink underwear, artificial purple roses, bright red socks, chamois shirts and lilac coloured cloth... This sort of inclination on Wagner's part led his contemporaries to feel convinced that, at the very least, they were dealing with a fetishist and a homosexual transvestite with feminine leanings.¹³

¹⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886; reprint, London: Rebman, 1899), 373-4.

¹¹ Quoted in Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II, 1888-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 134.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 191.

¹³ Martin van Amerongen, *Wagner: A Case History*, trans. Stewart Spencer and Dominic Cakebread (London: Dent, 1983), 32.

Exaggerated though this may seem, it ought to be recognised that this is one image of Wagner that, along with many others, was etched in popular consciousness at the time.

As has been discussed earlier in this study, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent a period in which Western societies were challenged by hitherto unquestioned gender norms. The already turbulent waters stirred up by the masculinity "crisis" were further muddled by the appearance of the male homosexual. Effeminate men, whether homosexual or not, were looked upon with suspicion if not outright contempt (the same went for "masculine" women).¹⁴ Music biographies at the turn-of-the-century reveal some degree of the gender anxiety of the period. James Huneker, in his much praised Chopin study of 1900, is forced to admit on numerous occasions that his favourite composer was physically fragile, sensitive, and of somewhat feminine disposition, yet he also goes to great lengths to try to masculinise Chopin wherever possible, to win him back from the weak women (and delicate men) of the salon. Some of his chapter headings, for example, reveal the revisionist agenda that he is so desperate to construct: "The Studies: Titanic Experiments," "The Polonaises: Heroic Hymns of Battle," "Chopin the Conqueror." Despite copious signs to the contrary, we are led to believe that Chopin was, in fact, a testosterone pumped warrior trapped inside a consumptive body. Needless to say, Huneker has nothing but scorn for the unconventional George Sand ("abnormal" is his term), principally on the grounds that she dominated Chopin just as she dominated all of the men in her life. Not only did she transgress gender norms, she inverted them ("in her love affairs [she] was always the

¹⁴ Effeminate male and masculine female types are conjured up in the following comments by Ernest Newman regarding Parsifal and Brünnhilde: "Listen to ten bars of Parsifal's music, and you can see at once that Parsifal was no good at sports, and that, for all his talk about his martial adventures, when the time came to loose his snicker-snee on an opponent's abdomen he would have turned conscientious objector. We know from their music alone, not only that Eva and Guttrune and Gretel and Mélisande are nice girls, but that they are different types of nice girls; and that while Guttrune would never have attended a woman's suffrage meeting, Brynhilde would certainly have been there, and in the chair at that." "The Villain in Music," in *A Musical Motley* (London: John Lane, 1920), 127-8.

man"),¹⁵ an infringement that unquestionably casts her as the villain in the relationship. In W. J. Henderson's Wagner monograph of 1901 we find a chapter titled "The Character of the Man" in which, among other things, the author feels duty bound to point out Wagner's shortcomings in the masculinity department. We are left no doubt that Wagner fell victim to the mollifying inducements of overcivilisation. Henderson concludes that Wagner's penchant for indulging his "luxurious [feminine?] tastes" ("rich garments... silken robes... silk underwear")¹⁶ has "*properly* given rise to the largest amount of derogatory comment."¹⁷ In fact, he finds "unmanly weakness" in Wagner's insistence upon the finest personal comforts irrespective of his financial well-being (he does concede, however, that the luxurious environment may have assisted Wagner in the act of composition). But the author is troubled by still more features of Wagner's personality and character: "That there was still further weakness in the metal of this man is shown by the extremities of depression into which he sank. Suicidal thoughts were no strangers to him."¹⁸ Emotional loss of control and hysteria was, of course, the speciality of women.¹⁹ Men, on the other hand, adhered to the policy of the stiff upper lip. What is extraordinary about Henderson's judgements on Wagner "the man" is that they are almost entirely at odds with the tone of the remainder of the book. Henderson's rather lengthy study provides the blandest coverage imaginable of Wagner's life and works with little in the way of insightful

¹⁵ James Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and his Music* (1900; reprint, New York: Dover, 1966), 31. In the context of *fin de siècle* gender anxiety, Sand is yet another embodiment—albeit a very idiosyncratic one—of the all-pervasive *femme fatale*. "She treated Chopin as a child, a toy" writes Huneker, who then proceeds to list all of the other men in her life. There are strong resonances between Huneker's description of Sand and the representation of feminine evil in Ludwig von Hoffmann's painting, "The Valley of Innocence" (1897), in which an oversized adolescent girl treats a naked toylike man as a plaything. "Beside her is a knife and a pile of decapitated male bodies, while a parade of other tiny men wait their turn for the massacre." Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 10.

¹⁶ W. J. Henderson, *Richard Wagner: His Life and his Dramas* (New York: Putnam, 1901), 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158. Ernest Newman, in his first Wagner monograph, also berates the composer for his emotional tendencies, which he claims deteriorated further in the final years of his life: "his thought, which was always at the mercy of his sensations and emotions, [was] now simply being dissolved in feeling"; "Wagner's nature towards the end of his life was becoming ever more emotional and less intellectual." *A Study of Wagner* (New York: Vienna House, 1899), 352 and 354.

¹⁹ "Hysteria," from Greek and Latin roots pertaining to the womb, was originally believed to have been provoked by uterine disturbances.

criticism. It is, by and large, a work of hagiography.²⁰ The attention that he draws to Wagner's personal shortcomings, therefore, provides some indication of the importance attached to these perceived character failings by both the author and his readership. Henderson's priorities read like a barometer of the gender concerns of the period: we need not concern ourselves with value judgements about the music but we *must* concern ourselves with value judgements about the man. Be warned! Depressive states and luxurious tastes are unbecoming in men.

The standard response to the delicate issue of Wagner's supposedly unmasculine tendencies was that behaviour and taste of this kind was bound up with that mysterious and unfathomable thing called artistic temperament. He might be extravagant and emotionally unstable but, "in such a man as Wagner," writes Henderson, "artistic traits are dominant. They rule the personality."²¹ Chopin also receives a partial exoneration from Huneker on the grounds of his artistic personality: "All artists are androgynous; in Chopin the feminine often prevails."²² But the late nineteenth and early twentieth century public was less willing to buy this excuse with the increasing sense that many of these gifted, "artistic" types were, in fact, the sexual deviants that posed such a threat to the moral good of society. The editorial of the London *Evening News* on the day of Wilde's conviction records that, "it has been the fashion to concede a certain amount of immoral licence to men of genius, and it is time that public opinion should correct it."²³

²⁰ On *Parsifal* (an opera that, in 1901, I imagine he probably had not seen), he writes that, "its moving power lies in its grasp of the secret life of every man and woman who goes to witness its performance." Henderson, *Richard Wagner*, 473. In the second revised edition of the book (1923), however, he deletes this sentence and, in its place, writes: "The author has therefore striven to suppress personal opinion and explain exclusively the Wagnerian point of view." William J. Henderson, *Richard Wagner: His Life and his Dramas*, 2d ed. (New York: Putnam, 1923), 475. We know from his essay of 1904 that he loathed *Parsifal* but, for whatever reason, does not allow personal opinion to cloud his hagiographic angle.

²¹ Henderson, *Richard Wagner*, 159 (page reference is the same for both editions).

²² Huneker, *Chopin*, 71.

²³ Quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Hodge, 1948), 12.

It should be noted that medical studies on homosexuality at the time pointed out that the great majority of case studies professed an interest in "artistic pursuits" of some kind or another. To quote the findings of one such study, *Sexual Inversion* (1897) by Havelock Ellis:

An examination of my cases reveals the interesting fact that twenty-four, or 66 per cent., possess artistic aptitude in varying degree. Galton found from the investigation of nearly 1,000 persons that the average showing of artistic tastes in this country [Great Britain] is only about 30 per cent. It must also be said that my figures are probably below the truth, as no special point was made of investigating the matter, and also that in many of my cases the artistic aptitudes are of high order. A taste for music is widespread among them.²⁴

Ellis then proceeds to confirm his findings with those by a number of other sex researchers, including Albert Moll (who will be referred to presently). My point is not to suggest that because Wagner was musical, wore fine fabrics, enjoyed exotic perfumes, and was emotionally driven, he must have been homosexual—this is essentialist fabrication at its most extreme—but, rather, to try to recreate some sense of the levels at which studies of homosexuality and homosexual panic of the *fin de siècle* operated. All of these tendencies were potentially suspect. The social scientists and sex researchers of the period believed that, as with any other species, the homosexual could be identified by any number of distinguishing features; it was merely a question of gathering and classifying the data and writing up the conclusions. It should be noted that the essentialist reading of Wagner I have just described appears in at least one study of the period that seeks to "prove" his contrary sexual inclinations.²⁵

Perhaps the most problematic area regarding the question of Wagner and homosexuality was his relationship with King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Ludwig, unfortunately, conformed very nicely to the homosexual stereotype that was constructed by the sex researchers. He was sensitive (morbidly so, in the opinion of many), emotional, appreciated music, was ostentatious in his taste, appeared disinterested in military pursuits, took no romantic interest in women, but, for a time at

²⁴ Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, 123.

²⁵ Hanns Fuchs, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität* (1903; reprint, Berlin: Janssen, 1992).

least, was completely entranced by Wagner (as the correspondence between the two men testifies). It was in May 1864 that the eighteen-year-old monarch pledged long-term financial support for Wagner, thereby bringing together the composer and his longed-for patron and the patron and the intensely admired composer. The years immediately after this initial meeting were the ones that produced the most effusively worded of the extensive correspondence between the two men. "He sends for me twice a day," Wagner wrote of the King in 1864, "I then fly to him as to a lover [...]. Thus we sit for hours on end, lost in each other's gaze."²⁶ Their written exchanges were frequently of the type: "O most blessed of men! How I worship you!" (Ludwig to Wagner); and, "I am nothing without you... O, my King, you are godlike!"²⁷ Just as Ludwig I scandalised Munich with his affair with the infamous dancer Lola Montez (to the extent that this liaison was the catalyst for his abdication in 1848), Ludwig II, his grandson, scandalised that same city some twenty years later with his infatuation with the controversial composer. Barely had their association begun when local gossips began to see the Lola scenario unfold once again before their eyes (Wagner soon earned for himself the nickname "Lolus").²⁸ And, like Lola Montez, it was well known that Wagner was living in an opulently furnished and decorated house (this is the period of the Vienna seamstress letters), a house fit for a courtesan but not for a court composer.

At the time, the association between the two men was scandalous for a number of reasons, not least of which was that Wagner (a fugitive from justice and self-appointed guru) was seen to be taking advantage of the young, impressionable monarch (and doing so in the most extravagant way possible). The relationship might have seemed

²⁶ Quoted in Barry Millington, "Relationship with King Ludwig II," in *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. Barry Millington (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 121-2.

²⁷ Manfred Eger, "The Patronage of King Ludwig II," in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. Stewart Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 318.

²⁸ Barth, Mack, and Voss, *Wagner*, 210. See also Raymond Furness, *Wagner and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 114.

odd, potentially dangerous (in that Ludwig turned to Wagner for advice on matters of state), and charged with the energy and passion of a sexual relationship, but there was not necessarily the suggestion of an actual physical sexual bond between the two men. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the homoerotic resonances of kitsch paintings celebrating the intense friendship between the two men that appeared not long after the death of both. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 illustrate two examples remarkable for their depiction of what appears to be a comfortable domestic relationship between the two—iconographic clichés typically associated with royalty are strangely absent—we are presented with a kind of “at home” with Ludwig and Richard. “Parzifal” was one of the names by which Wagner addressed the King in correspondence, a name willingly assumed by Ludwig and utilised as a pseudonym in return communications.²⁹ Figure 5.3 places the King and his composer in Neuschwanstein Castle (it records an impossible meeting, as Wagner never visited Neuschwanstein), Ludwig’s fantastic Monsalvat perched on the edge of a ravine and adorned with a neo-Byzantine throne room (Figure 5.4) which was “intended to be the castle’s Hall of the Holy Grail.”³⁰ The throne room and, indeed, the castle itself, remained incomplete at the time of Ludwig’s death (1886). The would-be Parsifal (who was, in fact, a knight—Grand Master of the Order of Knights of St. George) was never to be crowned grail king in his fantasy *Gralsburg*.

Ludwig, unlike Wagner, most certainly *was* homosexual but this of course was officially unacknowledged—during his lifetime at least. It is perhaps significant that this delicate aesthete and patron of the arts was beloved by certain figures in the French decadent movement especially since he appeared to bear living witness to the

²⁹ Kurt Wölfel, ed., *Richard Wagner und König Ludwig II. von Bayern Briefwechsel* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1993), 161, n. 34. See also Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, eds., *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London: Dent, 1987), 587.

³⁰ Gabriele Greindl, *Ludwig II's legacy: Royal Bavarian Castles and Palaces* (Hamburg: HB, 1986), 36. On Neuschwanstein as grail castle see Michael Petzet, “Die Gralswelt König Ludwigs II.: Neuschwanstein als Gralsburg und die Idee des Gralstempels,” in *Der Gral: Artusromantik in der Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Reinhold Baumstark and Michael Koch (Cologne: DuMont, 1995), 63-86.



Fig. 5.2. Fritz Bergen, *Richard Wagner plays for Ludwig II*.



Fig. 5.3. Kurt von Roszynski, *King Ludwig II and Richard Wagner at Neuschwanstein Castle* (1890), Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin.



Fig. 5.4. Neuschwanstein Castle, Throne Room.

androgynous ideal. His death was immortalised in a poem by Verlaine, "La Mort de S. M. le Roi Louis II de Bavière," which closes with the following declaration:

Salut à votre très unique apothéose,
Et que votre âme ait son fier cortège, or et fer,
Sur un air magnifique et joyeux de Wagner.³¹

In an obvious nod to Ludwig, the only kind of architectural designs deemed acceptable by Péladan's Rose+Croix salons were restoration proposals or "projects for fairy-tale palaces."³² The painter Jean Delville (whose *School of Plato* was discussed in Chapter III) wrote admiringly of the "the glorious 'madness' of the Bavarian prince [*sic*]" who, alone amongst sovereigns of the nineteenth century, "appreciated his artistic mission."³³ While Ludwig may have been declared an honorary decadent by some, this "mad" king was also declared an official, legitimate homosexual in medical tracts by the sex researchers Albert Moll, André Raffalovich, and others.³⁴ Needless to say, documents pertaining to his infatuation with Wagner were presented as crucial evidence in support of the charge of contrary sexual feelings. Thus, letters and poems that might once have been considered, at best, charmingly unrestrained and, at worst, embarrassingly effusive, were now considered unquestionably (and quite rightly, I think), homoerotic. Correspondence between Wagner and Ludwig was at the centre of the debate regarding Wagner, *Parsifal*, and homosexuality that was carried out in the pages of *La revue blanche* in 1896. If Ludwig was unequivocally guilty of homosexuality, Wagner, at the very least, was considered by some to be guilty by

³¹ Paul Verlaine, "La Mort de S. M. le Roi Louis II de Bavière," *Revue wagnérienne* (July 1886): 177. Hail to your very unique apotheosis/And may your soul have its proud cortege, gold and iron/On a magnificent and joyous air of Wagner.

³² Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York: Garland, 1976), 213.

³³ Jean Delville, *The New Mission of Art*, trans. Francis Colmer (London: Francis Griffiths, 1910), 98. A rather less than idyllic portrait of Ludwig, however, appears in Catulle Mendès roman à clef *La roi vierge*. The novel, which was published in 1881, caused a sensation (it was banned in Bavaria) for the virginal protagonist was a thinly disguised portrait of the Bavarian king while a secondary character, the composer Hanns Hammer (a nervous, sometimes hysterical, figure) was obviously meant to represent Wagner. For a discussion of Mendès' novel, see the following: Erwin Koppen, *Dekadenter Wagnerismus: Studien zur europäischen Literatur des Fin de siècle* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 297-307; Erwin Koppen, "Wagnerism as Concept and Phenomenon," in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. Erika and Martin Swales (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 350; and, Furness, *Wagner and Literature*, 56 and 128.

³⁴ Cited in Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, 17.

association. One group of documents that have remained unavailable for scrutiny until rather more recent times are the dairies maintained by Cosima from 1869 until the death of Wagner in 1883. On 15 October 1878 we find a particularly curious entry in which she records her feelings of anguish when she reads a letter from Wagner to Ludwig in which he declares that "his soul belongs for all eternity" to the King. Cosima's anguish is such that it pierces her heart "like a serpent's tooth." Wagner's declaration is at the close of a letter in which he announces to the King the completion of Act II of *Parsifal*.³⁵

Panizza's "Bayreuth und die Homosexualität" does not enter into a discussion of Wagner's relationship with the Bavarian king nor does it attempt to present Wagner's "feminine" traits as evidence of his homosexuality. As pointed out earlier, Panizza argues his case purely on the basis of *Parsifal* and Wagner's sexual degeneration in his advanced years. However, Hanns Fuchs's exhaustive study of 1903, *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität*, is testament to the cumulative effect of years of speculation concerning Wagner's personal habits and inclinations re-evaluated in terms of more recent medical theories concerning causes of homosexuality and attributes of the homosexual. The opening chapter, for example, reminds the reader—without referring to Wagner directly—that research has shown that love of flowers, love of animals, and vegetarianism should all be regarded with the greatest degree of suspicion when they occur in men: "Those who have moved in homosexual circles have noticed that many homosexuals are inclined towards vegetarianism."³⁶ We are also reminded that musical proficiency appears on the list of suspicious attributes for it is "an acknowledged fact that the majority of homosexuals are musical."³⁷ Having set out these and other classic features of "the homosexual" in the opening chapter of his study, Fuchs moves on to

³⁵ *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), 2: 172 and 1047-8.

³⁶ Fuchs, *Wagner*, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

consider, among other things, the relationship between Wagner and Ludwig where he provides examples of the florid written exchanges between the two men as discussed above. The fourth and final chapter of *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität* is concerned solely with *Parsifal* and its homosexual overtones. Ludwig is further implicated here with the revelation that in the Wagner circle he was known by the nickname "Parsifal." In his summary of the plot of the opera, Fuchs makes it clear that *Parsifal* projects the message that a life devoted to a community of chaste male knights—a society that is certainly homosexual in a spiritual, if not physical, sense—is more worthy than one offered by the love of woman.³⁸ At least half of Panizza's essay of 1895 is quoted in this chapter including his comments regarding homosexuality and Wagner's old age. Fuchs reaffirms the truth of this observation ("*Parsifal* is undoubtedly proof of the elderly Wagner's spiritual homosexuality"),³⁹ and takes it one step further by pointing out that the aged male who embraces the homosexual ideal is known to have harboured sensual and spiritual homosexual inclinations at some point while younger. In other words, in recognising the truth of the elderly Wagner's homosexuality we must also acknowledge that it represents the presence of long-standing homosexual tendencies.

It would seem that the studies by Panizza and Fuchs did not simply make their point and then quietly disappear (indeed, the eight year gap between the appearance of these two investigations and the extensive quotation of the former in the latter proves the point). In fact, Germany in the first decade of the new century appeared to limp from one highly publicised homosexual scandal to another (the Krupp tragedy of 1902, the protracted Harden-Moltke-Eulenburg trials of 1907-9, and the German Youth Movement controversy of 1911).⁴⁰ It was in 1906, in a climate such as this, that the Wagner-seamstress correspondence was reprinted for the first time since 1877. There

³⁸ Ibid., 198.

³⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁰ George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 57.

can be no doubt that the spectre of homosexuality now hung over that which was originally considered risibly effeminate. The editor of this edition, for example, is very keen to dispel any suggestion that the letters might indicate abnormal sexual tastes. He acknowledges the research of Krafft-Ebing and others but seeks to reassure the reader that these letters "should not and cannot impugn the *artist* and creator of so many immortal masterpieces."⁴¹ Although the Wagner entry in Dr. Albert Moll's *Berühmte Homosexuelle* of 1910 takes a sceptical approach to the charge of homosexuality against Wagner, it cites the seamstress letters, refers to the Wagner-Ludwig correspondence, considers the homosexual interpretation of *Parsifal*, and refers to *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität* all in the name of *defending* Wagner.⁴² The view that Wagner was indeed homosexual must have taken hold to some extent to warrant an entry in the first place together with a refutation that seemingly presents all the evidence. More than two decades later we still find the residue of this controversy in Guy de Pourtalès Wagner biography: "Those who would make Wagner the chaste and sober husband of his two wives are just as wide of the truth as those who would make him a Don Juan or a passive partner, even a 'Damen-imitator' as the Berlin Institute of Sexual Research has labelled him."⁴³ In *The Truth about Wagner*, a somewhat nasty but relatively inconsequential volume that appeared around this time, we find Ludwig's name cropping up in a chapter devoted to the rather tedious cataloguing of Wagner's extramarital affairs for, as the authors point out, "commentators are not lacking to add Ludwig to the list of Wagner's conquests."⁴⁴ For further information, they invite readers to consult the *German* edition of the published correspondence between the two men for, in their view, "Ashton Ellis's

⁴¹ Quoted in Vetter, *Wagner Handbook*, 125.

⁴² Albert Moll, *Berühmte Homosexuelle* (Wiesbaden: J. F. Bergmann, 1910), 64-5.

⁴³ Guy de Pourtalès, *Richard Wagner*, trans. Lewis May (1932; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1972), 352..

⁴⁴ Philip Dutton Hurn and Waverley Lewis Root, *The Truth about Wagner* (London: Cassell, 1930), 210.

translations have toned down their passion until they are almost—but not quite—beyond suspicion.”⁴⁵

It is clear that turn-of-the-century debate in Germany concerning Wagner, *Parsifal*, and homosexuality filtered through to writers on music in the English speaking world and, indeed, influenced the criticism of some. If one acknowledged that Wagner declined morally and mentally towards the end of his life then *Parsifal*, too, had to be recognised as the document of that decline. (Conversely, and perhaps more to the point, if one recognised *Parsifal* as a work of immorality and was persuaded by the mounting charges of immorality against the composer, then according to the precepts of nineteenth century medicine, Wagner *must* have degenerated morally and mentally. As one writer so succinctly puts it: “In every way he had degenerated.”⁴⁶) In 1905, Lawrence Gilman made the following observation:

We hear much of the decadence of Wagner’s creative powers as evidenced in this final legacy of his inspiration [*Parsifal*]. Recent commentators deplore the evil days upon which the magician of Bayreuth had fallen before his death, and eager scalpels have laid bare the supposed defects of his terminal score.⁴⁷

Ernest Newman alludes discreetly to the controversy surrounding *Parsifal* but certainly gives nothing away when, in 1904, he writes that the “sexless atmosphere” of the work “has given rise to much psychiatric discussion in Germany.”⁴⁸ He hastens to add, however, that “we are hardly concerned with this aspect of the matter here.”⁴⁹ (No same sex please. We’re British.) Far more explicit is Huneker who, as was pointed out in the previous chapter, reveals in his *Parsifal* essay of 1904 a knowledge of “psychiatric literature” by Panizza, Fuchs, and other unnamed writers.⁵⁰ He provides, for example, selected extracts (in German) from an effusive poem Wagner wrote to

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴⁶ John F. Runciman, “Opera for Poor and Rich,” *Saturday Review* (London), 29 November 1913, 680.

⁴⁷ Lawrence Gilman, “*Parsifal* and its significance,” in *Phases of Modern Music* (London: John Lane, 1905), 164.

⁴⁸ Ernest Newman, *Wagner*, (London: John Lane, 1904), 182.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ James Huneker, “*Parsifal*: A Mystic Melodrama,” in *Overtures* (1904; reprint, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 107.

Ludwig that is printed in full in *Bayreuth und die Homosexualität*. In the closing paragraphs of the essay he offers the cynical suggestion that *Parsifal* is the product of a composer much too eager to curry favour with the Bavarian king and that the opera exploits Ludwig's homosexual desires by representing Wagner as the fallen Amfortas in need of redemption and Ludwig as the pure saviour who offers him just that. "Wagner needed money and encouragement, badly," he writes, "so it is not difficult to conceive of him playing up to every romantic extravagance of the young king."⁵¹ The repelling effect of Kundry's kiss on Parsifal-Ludwig is thus "no longer a mystery" for it is Amfortas-Wagner that the youth truly longs for. In an essay that offers little in the way of positive criticism, Huneker points out not only the immorality that is at the heart of the opera but stresses the creative decline of the composer at the time of writing it. *Parsifal*, he reminds us every few pages, is "the weakest thing that its creator ever planned," it is "a cunning spectacle devised by a man of genius in the twilight of his powers," an "artificial medley of faded music and grotesque forms," "the work of a man who had outlived his genius."⁵² For the sake of clarity, it would be feasible to reduce Huneker's essay to a simple equation: Degenerate Ideology + Degenerate Composer = *Parsifal*.⁵³

Eduard Hanslick attended the premiere season of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in 1882 and, while he was by no means completely enamoured of the work, he did find much to admire. One aspect of his review is particularly striking: "And Wagner's creative powers? For a man of his age and his method they are astounding."⁵⁴ This is not to

⁵¹ Ibid., 106.

⁵² Ibid., 73, 105, 71, and 107. Nevertheless, while acknowledging "the poverty of his themes," Huneker also praises the work for its "technical mastery:" "Never has Wagner's instrumentation been so smoothly sonorous, so well mixed, so synthetic." "*Parsifal*: A Mystic Melodrama," 105-6.

⁵³ The flip side of the Wagner-*Parsifal*-Decline construct is that *Siegfried*—which was not completed until Wagner's fifty-sixth year—was, in fact, the product of his youth! See Gilman, "*Parsifal* and its significance," 163

⁵⁴ Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms 1846-99*, ed. and trans. H. Pleasants (London: Penguin, 1963), 204.

say that Hanslick recognised no weaknesses in the score at all (he did) yet it is significant that, by the turn-of-the-century, Wagner's creative powers in regard to *Parsifal* were, if anything, described in terms of being astoundingly *degenerate*. I can find no other explanation for this other than the cumulative effect of accusations and doubts concerning Wagner's masculinity and sexuality that occurred in the interim. At the end of the century, *Parsifal*, and late Wagner generally, sat very uncomfortably with the sexual anxieties of the *Zeitgeist*. In 1882, Hanslick expressed his regret that Wagner omitted the "human" element from his telling of the Parsifal story with the exclusion of the protagonist's wife and family, a domestic touch that is described lovingly in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*.⁵⁵ He was able to account for the exclusion on the grounds that Wagner, in his works generally, favoured character types, embodiments of particular ideals, rather than flesh and blood personalities. Some twenty years later the more radical view was that the absence of wife and family pointed to a far more subversive agenda.

One cannot deny that there is a certain languor that hangs over *Parsifal*, a kind of hypnotic, ethereal perfume (or stench, depending upon your point of view) that ordains the time cycle of the mythical, enclosed community. A long standing and oft repeated criticism levelled against Wagner by Hanslick was that his operas were simply too long, that it took an inordinate amount of time for anything to happen in a Wagner opera no matter how simple or complex the event. Not surprisingly, Hanslick returns to this point in his *Parsifal* review claiming that, astounding features notwithstanding, the opera reveals an element of "sterility and prosaism together with increasing long-windedness."⁵⁶ But by the turn-of-the-century, the languor of *Parsifal* was understood to be indicative of Wagner's psycho-sexual decline and fall. *Parsifal*'s slow moving quality takes on a specific sexual meaning when Runciman declares that the mood of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 195.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 204.

the opera is "the mood of the exhausted, the effete man."⁵⁷ The "exhausted" homosexual was one of the most pervasive sexual constructs of the *fin de siècle*, made famous not only by the supremely degenerate (and infinitely fatigued) protagonist in Huysmans's *À Rebours* but in countless homosexual case studies in medical tracts of the period (in fact the good doctors are always incredulous when they encounter the odd patient who does *not* display signs of neurasthenia). And here, in this final opera by this old, weary composer, we find a musical language that apparently expresses the utter fatigue of the sexual degenerate. "Down with the Tango and *Parsifal*" cried F. T. Marinetti in January 1914 as countless performances of Wagner's formerly copyright-restricted opera appeared in European theatres. Down with the "effeminizing poisons of the tango" and the "incurable musical neurasthenia" of *Parsifal*.⁵⁸ The radical Marinetti doubtless set out to shock and scandalise with his polemical pamphlet, probably unaware that his message was but the echo of concerns generated for nearly twenty years in mainstream *Parsifal* criticism.

The view that *Parsifal* was the inferior product of Wagner's old age was perpetuated from one generation of critics to the next. It was a construct of the *fin de siècle* that was to remain constant in general music histories for much of the century. Indeed, in his 1945 history of music, *The Stream of Music*, American writer Richard Leonard commends Huneker's *Parsifal* essay of 1904 as "one of the most penetrating estimates" of the opera that has yet appeared.⁵⁹ Although Leonard tries to present a balanced appraisal of the opera, he nevertheless sees fit to point out that the music of *Parsifal* has long been seen by some as unequivocal proof of the elderly composer's senility.⁶⁰ This is precisely the kind of comment that we find in Robert Jacobs' *Wagner* monograph of 1935: "Wagner was an old man when he wrote *Parsifal*; Gurnemann's

⁵⁷ John F. Runciman, "Parsifal," *Saturday Review* (London), 28 August 1897, 219.

⁵⁸ F. T. Marinetti, "Down with the Tango and *Parsifal*," in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 69 and 70.

⁵⁹ Richard Anthony Leonard, *The Stream of Music* (1945; rev.ed. London: Hutchison, 1961), 244.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

repetitiveness, his obsession with his own ideas, his imperviousness to the effect of what he says are typically senile.”⁶¹ Another estimate from the 1930s claims that, “if *Parsifal* had not been enshrined at Bayreuth and surrounded with the glamour of an almost sacred ritual, it is very doubtful whether thirty years after it was written people would have given it any place beside Wagner’s masterpieces.”⁶² In the grandly titled *Men of Music*, by Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock (the latter introduced and annotated a 1966 edition of Huneker’s *Chopin* monograph), we are reminded that “those who like it [*Parsifal*] least call it a combination of megalomania and senility—the devotional maunderings of an elderly ex-genius.”⁶³ According to the two writers, *Parsifal* is of such poor quality, both musically and dramatically, it ought to be heard in “concert-excerpt” form only—“given as an opera, it is intolerable.”⁶⁴ In Alfred Einstein’s 1947 publication *Music in the Romantic Era*, Wagner is acclaimed for his technique of combining motifs in *Parsifal* but the opera, nevertheless, is said to display “a musical language that has become much thinner, more bloodless,” it is, he adds, “a work of old age.”⁶⁵ Donald Jay Grout’s *Short History of Opera*, also published in 1947, compares the Flowermaidens and Kundry scenes of Act II with the erotic Venusberg music from *Tannhäuser* and the *Siegfried* finale, and concludes that, stacked up against these earlier works, *Parsifal* displays “a slight falling off in Wagner’s earlier elemental power.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Grout’s *History of Western Music* (which remains a standard text in undergraduate music history courses), discusses *Parsifal* in relation to *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger* and finds it “somewhat less

⁶¹ Robert L. Jacobs, *Wagner* (London: Dent, 1935), 175-6. The revised edition of this book (1965) deletes this sentence but perpetuates the notion of *Parsifal* as a work of Wagner’s decline.

⁶² H. C. Colles, “Wagner,” in *From Bach to Stravinsky*, ed. David Ewen (1933; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1968), 222.

⁶³ Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock, *Men of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 406.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (London: Dent, 1947), 245.

⁶⁶ Donald Jay Grout, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 404. The third edition of the Grout history (1988) is less forthright: “there may seem to be a slight falling off in Wagner’s earlier elemental power,” 489 (emphasis mine).

assured, less unified both in content and musical form.”⁶⁷ (This is despite the fact that *Parsifal* exhibits carefully worked out key and motivic unity together with a perfectly symmetrical large-scale structure.)⁶⁸ The current edition of *The Concise Oxford History of Music* repeats the by-now familiar mantra that “*Parsifal* reveals a slight weakening of creative vigour.”⁶⁹ In comparing the final work by Wagner with Verdi’s last opera, *Falstaff*, Charles Osborne makes it plain that his assessment of *Parsifal* is clouded to a very great extent by its “unhealthy” connotations. In fact, he could be hardly more explicit in framing his critique within the parameters of the “normal” in one opera as opposed to the “abnormal” in the other:

At its première, *Falstaff* escaped being called Wagnerian, yet it is today often spoken of in the same breath as that considerably heavier and longer comedy, *Die Meistersinger*. A more proper comparison would be with *Parsifal*, the last opera of that other genius born in the same year as Verdi. The temperamental contrast is immense: on the one hand, *fin de siècle* sickliness and piety, and sentimental homoerotic religious yearning; on the other, the timeless gaiety, silvery coldness and golden warmth of old age, and the ironic laughter. Both *Parsifal* and *Falstaff* are works of genius, but the world could more easily afford to lose five hours of *Parsifal* than the less than two hours of *Falstaff*.⁷⁰

Lucy Beckett, in her survey of critical responses to *Parsifal*, offers the following comments:

No semblance of a critical consensus was arrived at in the first decade of prolific comment, nor has such a consensus been achieved in the subsequent ninety years. If one extreme view, that which saw *Parsifal* as a simple work of Christian edification, has faded, the other, seeing it as vicious in content and evil in influence, has recently strengthened.⁷¹

The “evil” she refers to here concerns issues of German nationalism. At no point, however, does Beckett acknowledge that, from the turn-of-the-century and for a period of decades thereafter, *Parsifal* was seen to be tarnished by the implication of “evil” homosexuality—itself bound up with the “evil” final period of the composer.

⁶⁷ Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music* (London: Dent, 1962), 566. This is a statement that has remained unchanged (and unchallenged) in all five editions (1962-1997) of this history.

⁶⁸ On the psychological symmetry of *Parsifal* see Wieland Wagner’s *Parzifalkreuz*, in Constantin Floros, “Studien zur *Parsifal*-Rezeption,” *Musik-Konzepte* 25 (May 1982): 38-9.

⁶⁹ Gerald Abraham, *The Concise Oxford History of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 726.

⁷⁰ Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969), 449.

⁷¹ Lucy Beckett, *Parsifal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105.

There can be no doubt that Wagner was in a state of declining physical health in his final years, but we are led to believe that his mental health and moral outlook were also seriously compromised and that *Parsifal*, supposedly, was testimony to this. The myth of Wagner's decline may have started out as an attempt to discredit the "immoral tendencies" of his final opera but, over a period of generations, the myth was perpetuated in general histories of music (some of which openly acknowledged the influence of Huneker et al.) while, for the most part, the distasteful issue of "contrary sexuality" quietly slipped out of the foreground of the discussion.

In *Music in Western Civilisation*, Paul Henry Lang points out that, "the decline of Wagner's power of invention is often recognised in this work,"⁷² yet he also hints at something sinister in *Parsifal*: "A strange and alarming perfume, narcotic and enervating, emanates from this romantic, operatic Christianity, which, combined with the doctrines of Buddha and Schopenhauer, was to weigh heavily on the future of German civilisation."⁷³ Lang's inference would seem to be to German aggression and its calamitous repercussions in the twentieth century, yet he clothes the inference in strangely decadent, nihilistic imagery. A rather more recent history of music, Marie Stolba's *The Development of Western Music*, has little to say about *Parsifal* except that it was a work especially favoured by Adolf Hitler. It would appear that in general histories of music, discussion of *Parsifal* has to present the opera, in some way or another, as a "tainted" work. If not the product of a senile has-been, then the work beloved by one of the all-time insidious and destructive figures of humankind. In fact, she declares that, when Hitler was in power, he "wanted it performed annually on Good Friday."⁷⁴ I can find no documentation to support this claim and, in my next

⁷¹ Lucy Beckett, *Parsifal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105.

⁷² Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilisation* (New York: Norton, 1941), 890.

⁷³ Ibid. Some thirty years later, Lang dismisses *Parsifal* as "this sleight of hand, this pious fraud" and claims that "half of this opera would be greater than the whole." *Critic at the Opera* (New York: Norton, 1971), 241 and 243.

⁷⁴ Marie K. Stolba, *The Development of Western Music: A History* (n.p., Wm. C. Brown, 1990), 691.

chapter, will consider the strange case of *Parsifal* reception in the era of National Socialism.

CHAPTER VI

PROBLEMATIC PROPAGANDA

Parsifal as Forbidden Opera

It is supremely ironic that within a generation or so of his death Wagner, who in his later work is such a passionate advocate of regeneration, should have come to be regarded as a composer who fell into a state of moral, intellectual, and creative decay in his final years. The high priest of regeneration was, in fact, condemned as a degenerate. The irony is especially acute given that it was precisely in the final years of his life—the period of his so-called decline—that questions of regeneration occupied his thoughts to the extent that they never had before. *Religion und Kunst* (Religion and Art), published in 1880, together with its supplementary chapters “Was nützt diese Erkenntnis?,” “Erkenne dich selbst,” and “Heldentum und Christentum,”¹ comprise a body of works that are often described as the “regeneration essays.”² *Parsifal*, composed during the same period, was frequently seen as the dramatic counterpart of these essays and was therefore recognised as the “regeneration opera.” In her study of *Parsifal* reception in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, Mary A. Cicora points out that, as far as the members of the Bayreuth circle were concerned (people such as Hans von Wolzogen, Ludwig Schemann, and Otto Eiser), Wagner’s final opera was “the exemplification of the regeneration idea.”³ This may well have been so within the claustrophobic Bayreuth milieu, but, as I have demonstrated, to many in the wider national and international community from at least the time of Nietzsche’s *Der Fall Wagner* (1888) and Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892), *Parsifal*, and its aged composer, epitomised *fin de siècle* degeneration in its most diseased form.

¹ “What Boots this Knowledge” (1880), “Know Thyself” (1881), and “Hero-Dom and Christendom” (1881).

² Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (London: Faber, 1992), chapter 9.

³ Mary A. Cicora, “*Parsifal*” Reception in the “*Bayreuther Blätter*” (New York: P. Lang, 1987), 25.

In recent years, a number of important Wagner studies have emerged which consider, in impressive detail, the ideological links between *Parsifal*, the regeneration essays, and the hysterical and venomous anti-Semitic paranoia of Wagner's final years (in particular) as recorded in conversations, Cosima's diaries, and assorted correspondence. Paul Lawrence Rose argues, very convincingly, that "*Parsifal* was to be understood as a drama of the redemption of the Aryan race"⁴; that,

Wagner intended *Parsifal* to be a profound religious parable about how the whole essence of European humanity had been poisoned by alien, inhuman Jewish values. It is an allegory of the Judaization of Christianity and of Germany—and of purifying redemption.⁵

Marc A. Weiner, in *Richard Wagner and the anti-Semitic Imagination*, states that *Parsifal* is "a work that unabashedly draws upon a host of anti-Semitic images in its scenic representation of a threat to the integrity of a Teutonic and Christian order, the Knights of the Holy Grail."⁶ In the late 1930s, Theodor Adorno highlighted links between Wagner's regeneration essays and *Parsifal*'s apparent master race agenda,⁷ a theme taken up, more recently, by Jean Matter in *Wagner et Hitler*.⁸ Similarly, Robert W. Gutman's controversial study of 1968, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music*, included an in-depth analysis of *Parsifal* within the context of the repugnant ideology surrounding its conception and ultimate completion. According to Gutman, "*Parsifal*, more than the *Ring*, was the gospel of National Socialism."⁹

⁴ Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, 159.

⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁶ Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 183.

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991), 131; originally published as *Versuch über Wagner* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1952).

⁸ Jean Matter, *Wagner et Hitler* (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme, 1977). On the thorny issue of *Parsifal*'s connection with Wagner's "regeneration" writings, Carl Dahlhaus writes: "Whether Wagner's 'theory of regeneration,' supplementing and in part rebutting Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will and renunciation, is the foundation of the dramatic construction of *Parsifal* or vice versa—that is, whether the philosophy grew out of the dramaturgy of the dramaturgy grew out of the philosophy—is uncertain." *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 147.

⁹ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 431. On Wagner, *Parsifal* and National Socialist ideology see also: Hartmut Zelinsky, "Die 'feuerkur' des Richard Wagner, oder die 'neue religion' der 'Erlösung' durch 'Vernichtung'" *Musik-Konzepte* 5 (June 1981): 79-112; and Zelinsky, "Rettung ins Ungenaue: Zu Martin Gregor-Dellins Wagner-Biographie" *Musik Konzepte* 25 (May 1982): 74-115.

Yet what Gutman (along with Rose, Weiner, Matter et al.) fails to point out, is that in 1939, rather than adopting Wagner's opera as its gospel, *Parsifal* was withdrawn from production across Germany by order of the National Socialist authorities.¹⁰ Even at Bayreuth, the theatre that had a monopoly on performances of *Parsifal* for decades, we find, very conspicuously, the withdrawal of the opera after the festival of 1939. (*Parsifal*, alone among Wagner's operas, had been performed at every Bayreuth festival, but one, since its premiere in 1881.)¹¹ Wagner's supposed homage to Aryan supremacy was, in fact, denied a voice by the party *apparatchiks*. Apparently, this was for reasons "never stated"¹² yet such an action suggests that, unlike *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Parsifal* had very little to do with *heilige deutsche Kunst* and quite a lot to do with *entartete Kunst*. In my study of the Wagner literature, I have encountered not one single hypothesis to account for the fact that *Parsifal* was declared a forbidden opera by the Nazi regime. In fact, this is an aspect of the work's reception that has been rarely even acknowledged.¹³ Yet it is truly extraordinary that an opera by the composer whose works were otherwise considered to be supreme examples of German art should be declared *verboten*, off-limits. It is a glaringly strange chapter in the history of the work and demands investigation. I would therefore like to provide my own hypothesis.

While *Parsifal* may well be embedded in an ideology that condones the annihilation of an apparently lower racial caste by its genetic superiors, at a surface level, at least, it projects a message of pacifism rather than one of belligerence. We may presume that the Knights of the Grail are, in fact, Christian soldiers rather than monks given to a life

¹⁰ Adorno's study, written in 1937-8, predates the Nazi ban on *Parsifal*.

¹¹ For a list of works performed at all Bayreuth Festivals between 1876 and 1960, see Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner at Bayreuth*, 2d ed. (London: White Lion, 1976): 221-3. The one and only time that *Parsifal* was not performed was at the festival of 1896.

¹² Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 192.

¹³ Gutman, Rose, and Weiner make no mention of it.

of prayer and contemplation (Gurnemanz, in Act I, refers to brothers fighting in distant lands and, in Act III, Amfortas implores his comrades to draw their weapons and plunge them into his breast), yet key moments of the opera are concerned with *disarming* the protagonist: Parsifal breaks his bow and hurls away his arrows upon reinterpreting his heartless slaying of the swan in Act I; in Act III his armour is removed by Kundry and Gurnemanz and, in place of his military clothing, he dons the mantle of the Grail knights. It is only in this attire, not in the militaristic guise of the warrior, that he is allowed to enter Monsalvat as saviour and king. Indeed, when Parsifal first appears in Act III, he is berated by Gurnemanz for daring to appear on sacred ground bearing arms and in full battle regalia, least of all on a holy day such as Good Friday. (Wagner seems to have overlooked the fact that Gurnemanz's declaration of a weapons-free zone sits oddly with the requirement for the knights to bear weapons in the following scene.) One particularly famous propaganda image of Adolf Hitler is a poster that depicts him as a medieval knight dressed for battle bearing the banner of the Third Reich (Figure 6.1). This is an image that finds precious little endorsement in *Parsifal*. The community of knights, we can gather from Gurnemanz's brief homily, is, weapons notwithstanding, essentially a pacifist community. They may be knights rather than monks yet they certainly *appear* to be celibate ascetics rather than lusty warriors. They represent a *Männerbund* that bears little resemblance to the ferociously masculine and militaristic organisations of fascist Germany.¹⁴ It is also worth remembering that, unlike *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and all of the *Ring* operas, there are no scenes of combat or violent death in *Parsifal*—the closest we get is the moment of confrontation between Klingsor and Parsifal, a non-contest in which

¹⁴ On the subject of violence and *Parsifal*, Silke Beinssen-Hesse makes the following comments: "The masculine sin—if we read the text carefully—and as such the original sin of Amfortas and Parsifal, is violence. Klingsor has sought chastity through violent self-mutilation, and plans to conquer the Grail with violence. Amfortas has tried to conquer Klingsor with violence and been punished by woman with seduction. Parsifal, after shooting the swan, again reacts violently to Kundry's insensitively told news of his mother's death, upon which he is reprimanded by Gurnemanz, the converted pacifist, who dominates the drama." "The ideological implications of Wagner's changes to Wolfram's *Parzifal*," *Miscellanea Musicologia* 14 (July 1985): 137.



Fig. 6.1. Hubert Lanzinger, *Hitler, The Standard Bearer* (1938), Library of Congress, Washington.

the two characters occupy remote spatial areas.¹⁵ Granted, the opera does have a spear as one of its central symbols but it is presented as a religious relic, an object of veneration and of singular mystical powers. Brought to Titurel by a host of angels, the spear and the grail are enshrined at Monsalvat and, in return, bestow spiritual sustenance on the community of knights. It is only when the spear is misused—treated as a weapon rather than as a devotional object (and it is treated as such by both Klingsor *and* Amfortas)—that it becomes an object of harm. In the hands of Parsifal it is once more recast as a sacred relic. Indeed, such are its powers that it renders mere ordinary weapons obsolete for, as Parsifal declares in the final scene of the opera, the sacred spear is the *only* weapon that can vanquish the suffering of the ailing knight (“Nur eine Waffe taugt”). This is a spear that now touches and heals, rather than penetrates and wounds, Amfortas.¹⁶

And what of the opera’s message of compassion? On four occasions in Act I we hear the phrase “durch Mitleid wissend” (made wise through compassion), a message that is absolutely central to the opera. On still more occasions in Act I the leitmotif that accompanies the phrase is heard in the orchestral accompaniment thus further consolidating the importance of this message. Otto Weininger, in *Sex and Character*, describes compassion as a “womanly” attribute (and a rather poor attribute at that),¹⁷

¹⁵ Although we presume it to be so, it is actually unclear as to whether or not Klingsor dies at the end of Act II. The stage directions state that the *Zauberschloss* and *Garten* are destroyed but we do not know, specifically, whether Klingsor is annihilated in the process. Kundry expires at the end of the opera in presumably a non-violent manner. Regarding my assertion that the opera contains no combat scenes, I am discounting Parsifal’s slaying of the lovers of the Flowermaidens on the grounds that these events are narrated rather than staged and are narrated rapidly, without pathos, are quickly forgotten, and involve persons we have never encountered. These events are also inconsequential in terms of plot development. In Act III, Parsifal claims to have endured battles and duels in his long journey back to Monsalvat but, again, the events are narrated and are not dwelt upon.

¹⁶ Although the spear in *Parsifal* is presented as a Christian relic, the notion that the wound can only be healed by the weapon that inflicted it appears to have been borrowed by Wagner from the ancient Greek legend of Telephus, son of Heracles. The subject of a lost play by Euripides, this legend is also alluded to by Goethe in *Tasso*. See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts: Classical Influences in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 131.

¹⁷ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. of the 6th German edition (London: Heinemann, 1906), 197-8; originally published as *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1903). Bram Dijkstra points out that *Sex and Character* “found a place of honor on the shelves of the Reichsführer’s

but in *Parsifal* it is not Kundry who comes to understand compassion but, rather, the masculine protagonist. Wagner's libretto maps a perceived feminine attribute onto the male hero and, in doing so, commits a serious breach of gender identity. I do not wish to recapitulate the perceived gender shortcomings of Wagner's hero discussed in earlier chapters, but I do wish to emphasise that perceptions of masculinity that were solidified in the second half of the nineteenth century reached their peak and became thoroughly entrenched in National Socialist ideology. George L. Mosse, who has written extensively on the history of gender construction and, in particular, gender discourses of the totalitarian state, points out that "fascism represented the fullest expression of modern masculinity."¹⁸ Turn-of-the-century unease regarding *Parsifal* and issues of masculinity might therefore be expected to be amplified somewhat in the hysteria and paranoia of Germany in its fascist period. *Parsifal* may well have been intended by Wagner to be the symbolic saviour of the Aryan race—an Aryan Christ—but he has presented us with far too subtle a hero to meet the exceedingly unsubtle criteria set down by the propagandists. The masculine ideal of Nazi Germany was a man of discipline, self-restraint and will power, coupled with physical strength and Aryan beauty (a Siegfried type in other words). He was also expected to go into battle without the slightest hesitation.¹⁹ These are attributes that *Parsifal* might possibly possess but he is certainly not *defined* by them (whereas he *is* defined by his initial ignorance and, later, his growth to knowledge through compassion). Furthermore, *Parsifal* is a passive rather than an active hero, and passivity, naturally, was not on the list of highly desirable Aryan male attributes. Alfred Rosenberg, one of the chief propagandists of the Nazi era, discusses Wagner's contribution to representations of the Aryan male in his treatise of 1935 *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Myth of the Twentieth Century), a text which, together with *Mein Kampf*, comprises the

library." *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 275.

¹⁸ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 8.

cornerstone of National Socialist ideology. Wagner's operas are praised for their representation of "the Nordic beauty ideal" (he cites *Lohengrin* and *Siegfried* in this respect), their portrayal of the "inner wilfulness of men" (as revealed in *Tristan und Isolde*), and their delineation of "the struggle over that high value of the Nordic-Western man, hero-honour combined with an inner truthfulness. This inner beauty idea is developed in Wotan, King Mark, and Hans Sachs."²⁰ On *Parsifal*, Rosenberg is both brief and dismissive, drawing absolutely no connection between this opera and the Nordic masculine ideal: "*Parsifal* represents a church-influenced enfeeblement in favour of the value of renunciation."²¹ It seems hardly surprising that Nazi ideologues would look with disfavour on a work that, at face value, reads as an incitement to both pacifism *and* compassion.

The guardians of artistic endeavour in the Third Reich maintained that fascist art, in whatever guise, had to represent fascist ideals. The ideal of womanhood in Nazi Germany was of a strong, healthy, abundantly fertile homemaker.²² The only mother in *Parsifal* is a woman who does not appear on stage but one who is described in several monologues, the protagonist's mother, Herzeleide.²³ Herzeleide is a war widow who dies of a broken heart when her only son, who she has deliberately shielded from all knowledge of military life, leaves home in pursuit of the very armed forces she has tried to conceal from him. Germany in the 1930s must have been home to many grieving Herzeleides but, of course, they were expected to raise their sons in the good

²⁰ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*, quoted in *Alfred Rosenberg: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Pois (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 138-9. This extract from Rosenberg's book is also quoted in Joseph Wulf's documentary study, *Musik im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1983), 317-8.

²¹ Pois, *Alfred Rosenberg*, 139.

²² "Woman," according to Mosse, "was the bearer of children, the helpmate of her husband, and the preserver of family life." *Image of Man*, 176-7.

²³ Motherhood, in general, is not a strong theme in Wagner's operas. The earth-mother, Erda, in the *Ring* would seem to be prodigiously fertile yet we only seem to encounter her as a sleepy, weary, sage. Sieglinde, of course, dies at the moment of giving birth. Perhaps the strongest mother figure in the work is, oddly enough, the surrogate Mime. "Have you ever noticed," writes Nietzsche, "that Wagner's heroines never have children?—*They can't*" *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 176.

National Socialist manner and send them out to defend the *Vaterland*, to avenge the shame of Versailles. From the perspective of the Nazi propagandist, Herzeleide is clearly not a positive role model. Kundry, the only woman represented on stage, is an even more serious deviation from the Nazi womanly archetype. She wails and shrieks, her body twists and writhes, she is tormented and tortured, and she feigns maternal instincts for the sole purpose of entrapment. That this aberration of the Nazi womanly ideal is in the service of a necromantic eunuch merely compounds her serious image problem.²⁴ Portrayals of “undesirables” such as Kundry were not forbidden in art of the totalitarian fascist state, in fact they were perfectly acceptable provided they were set against character types who exuded healthy, positive, qualities; character types who would ultimately triumph and crush their decadent opponents.²⁵ *Parsifal*, of course, sets up no such dichotomy. Kundry is without a female dramatic foil, and though some may see her death in the closing moments as the racially motivated annihilation of the Other, it can also be seen as a personal triumph, a longed-for, desperately desired and ultimately peaceful release from torment. A most disconcerting aspect of this closing tableau from the perspective of the fascist censor would surely have been the presentation of a grail king with no queen by his side and, indeed, no woman at all to counterbalance Kundry’s negative personification of womankind. Utmost devotion to the *Männerbund* was taken as a given in Nazi Germany but behind every devoted soldier stood an equally devoted wife and family (or, at the very least, a *desire* for a wife and family).²⁶ In Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzifal* the hero does, indeed, long for the wife and children he has left behind, but this is a feature of the original narrative wholly absent from Wagner’s adaptation. Senior party officials such as Heinrich Himmler recognised the potential for homosexual desires and acts in close knit, all-male organisations such as the Nazi special police force, the SS, and, consequently,

²⁴ For an analysis of Kundry as anti-Semitic stereotype see Weiner, *Richard Wagner*, 239-40.

²⁵ For a discussion of types and countertypes see Mosse, *Image of Man*, chapters 4 and 8 and Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), chapter 8.

²⁶ Mosse, *Image of Man*, 166-7.

made homosexual offences punishable by death.²⁷ So deep was homosexual paranoia that SS men were forbidden from touching one another even when fully clothed,²⁸ and here in Wagner's opera we find directions for Gurnemanz to "gently put Parsifal's arm around his neck" and a community of men to "solemnly embrace" during the *Liebesmahle* of Act I. With the revision of Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code in 1935—a revision which defined homosexual acts in far more general terms than previously had been the case—an embrace between men was, as defined by the amended law, a punishable offence.²⁹ Although a white dove is supposed to hover over the head of Parsifal in the final, quietly rapturous moments of the opera, in the political climate of late 1930s Germany it may well have been the spectre of homosexuality that was seen to hover over the heads of this sacred, knightly *Männerbund*.³⁰

The eradication of homosexuality was one of the stated aims of the National Socialist regime. Homosexuals were described as "national pests" and homosexuality was considered to be a "plague" that had the potential to destroy the German nation.³¹ In keeping with the Nazi obsession with pure and impure blood, homosexuality was said to have an degenerative effect on young blood such that it would lead to "a general weakening of the nation's strength" and, therefore, "the nation's military capacity."³² The proposed solution to the problem of these degenerate "enemies of the state" was that they were to be hunted down, interrogated, brought before the courts, and, if not

²⁷ Apparently, no members of the SS were, in fact, killed as a result of homosexual convictions, in Mosse, *Image of Man*, 175.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ James Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 110.

³⁰ The bloody events of the so-called Röhm Putsch of 1934 (the "Night of the Long Knives") reveals official acknowledgement of the possibility of homosexuality in the ranks and the need for brutal measures to eradicate it, see Steakley, *Homosexual Emancipation Movement*, 108-9. Gutman, in fact, draws a connection between "the monastic homosexuality of *Parsifal*, centred around the leadership of an intuitively inspired youth, and the not dissimilar fellowship of Ernst Röhm's troopers." *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music*, 300.

³¹ Günther Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Cassell, 1995), 87 and 91.

³² Josef Meisinger, quoted in Grau, *Hidden Holocaust?*, 113.

sentenced to death, despatched to concentration camps whereupon they might be subjected to medical experiments or castration.³³ In 1936, the government established the *Reichszentrale zur Bekämpfung der Homosexualität* (Reich Office for the Combating of Homosexuality), an organisation which set up a card file on every known homosexual in the country. The following year, Himmler (who was responsible for establishing the anti-homosexual bureau) declared a fondness for the custom of drowning homosexuals in marshes (as was supposedly carried out by the Germans of yesteryear). "This," he declared, "was not a punishment but simply the snuffing out of an abnormal life."³⁴ We can see from this corroboration of what we already know about the place of compassion in Nazi philosophy.

One aspect of the Nazi war on homosexuality that is particularly noteworthy in regard to *Parsifal* is a series of court trials that took place over a number of years in the mid-to late 1930s that are often known as the "Cloister trials." As the name suggests, these were legal proceedings against the perpetrators of alleged homosexual activities in German monasteries and other Catholic religious communities. "The scale and demagogic zeal" of this anti-homosexual campaign "was the most massive in the history of the 'Third Reich.'"³⁵ The aim of the trials was to discredit the Church in the most powerful way possible by playing on widespread public fear of, and aversion to, homosexuality. Publicity surrounding the trials (they began in 1934) was huge and Nazi propagandists unleashed a barrage of anti-clerical, anti-homosexual, sentiment that reached its peak in the 1937 trials of a number of Augustinian and Franciscan monks.³⁶ A speech in May 1937 by Joseph Goebbels that was broadcast on radio and reprinted in most newspapers, emphasised the "unnatural" life of the unmarried priest

³³ Ibid., 4-5, 96.

³⁴ Quoted in Grau, *Hidden Holocaust?*, 97.

³⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁶ Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), 132 and 135.

or monk and described monasteries as "breeding places of vile homosexuality."³⁷ The German public was subjected to persistent invective of this kind in the media during the 1937 trials and parents were strongly encouraged to withdraw their children from the care of such apparent deviants. "What parents conscious of their responsibility could now take the responsibility of entrusting their boys and girls to an organisation over a thousand members of which are sexual criminals?", asked the *Völkische Beobachter*, a Nazi propaganda newspaper.³⁸ Fear of the corruption of adolescents by older homosexuals was an oft repeated concern of the Nazi war on homosexuality. "Especially dangerous," reads a document from the State Criminal Police, "are homosexuals who feel attracted to the youth... they are constantly winning over and contaminating young people."³⁹ The "Cloister trials" attempted to show that seductions of such kind were being perpetrated by figures of trust and authority in the Church, that pure youths (whether foolish or not) were being deceived by the respectable veneer of religious communities only to be exposed to all kinds of shameful sexual practices.

In April 1937, Josef Meisinger, director of the Reich Office for the Combating of Homosexuality, delivered a savage attack on what he believed were entrenched homosexual practices within the Church:

Monastic life and homosexuality have for centuries been inseparable from one another. Homosexuality is a method the Church used to build the monastic settlements... it is impossible to describe in words the hideous things that came to light in the investigations of recent months in various monasteries. It was impossible to publish anything like that in the papers, starting with the intercourse during confession, at the altar and so on.⁴⁰

³⁷ Quoted in Plant, *Pink Triangle*, 135.

³⁸ Quoted in Nathaniel Micklem, *National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 159.

³⁹ Quoted in Grau, *Hidden Holocaust?*, 96.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 112-3. It has been pointed out that, in the early fourteenth century, Philip IV of France "employed the 'homosexual' smear to destroy the powerful order of crusading knights, the Knights Templar" and that, several hundred years later, "Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell used a similar tactic while they were dissolving the English monasteries." Patrick Higgins, *A Queer Reader* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 3.

Despite the hype, relatively few convictions were made and, although the controversy largely abated in the years after 1937, homosexual trials against members of religious communities continued until the end of the war.⁴¹ As an attempt to deter German Catholics from loyalty to the Church, the “Cloister trials” are generally considered a failure;⁴² however, they must be regarded as significant in making it plain that the official position on monastic communities was that they were, and always had been, seething hotbeds of homosexual vice. Given the tremendous publicity that Nazi propagandists whipped up in their attempt to discredit monasteries and other religious communities, it seems hardly surprising that an opera such as *Parsifal* should find itself, in the late 1930s, suddenly dropped from the repertory. Clearly its monastic-like setting was a liability particularly since the monastery triumphs over adversity at the close of the opera, the point at which the homosocial community rejoices in the restoration of the spear—the retrieval of the venerated phallic symbol. If some aspects of *Parsifal* seemed to be at odds with Nazi ideology (e.g. pacifism), the monastery environment placed the opera in an incompatible position in light of the scandal generated by the “Cloister trials.” Previous generations of German commentators had expressed their disquiet at a perceived subversive sexual agenda at work in the opera; the Nazi solution to similar feelings of disquiet was simply to extinguish the work.

Hitler’s professed admiration for *Parsifal* is often cited as proof of the opera’s special place in the Nazi canon. In *Mein Kampf*, he mentions the *frisson* engendered by a performance of the work at Bayreuth that cannot be replicated in theatres elsewhere.⁴³ In conversations recorded by Hermann Rauschning in 1933–4, Hitler discusses at some length the “real” meaning of Wagner’s final opera:

We must interpret *Parsifal* in a totally different way to the general conception, the interpretation, for instance, of the shallow Wolzogen. Behind the absurd externals of the story, with its Christian embroidery and its Good Friday mystification, something altogether different is revealed as the true content of this most profound drama. It is not

⁴¹ Plant, *Pink Triangle*, 130.

⁴² Ibid., 136–7.

⁴³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1943; reprint, London: Pimlico, 1992), 431.

the Christian-Schopenhauerist religion of compassion that is acclaimed, but pure, noble blood, in the protection and glorification of whose purity the brotherhood of the initiated have come together. The king is suffering from the incurable ailment of corrupted blood. The uninitiated but pure man is tempted to abandon himself in Klingsor's magic garden to the lusts and excesses of corrupt civilisation, instead of joining the *élite* of knights who guard the secret of life, pure blood.

All of us are suffering from the ailment of mixed, corrupted blood. How can we purify ourselves and make atonement? Note that compassion, through which man gains enlightenment, is only for the corrupted man at issue with himself. And that this compassion knows only one treatment—the leaving of the sick person to die. The eternal life granted by the grail is only for the pure and noble!⁴⁴

This interpretation is all very well and, with the exception of some wilful distortions of Wagner's stated intentions (denigrating compassion, de-Christianising the work, implying that Amfortas is left to die), it finds at least partial validation in Wagner's regeneration theories as spelt out in his final essays. But Hitler's reading of the opera (which, incidentally, predates the "Cloister trials") also acknowledges that this is *not* the accepted interpretation of the work, that what he is proposing is a "totally different" way of understanding the opera.⁴⁵ This, I believe, is fundamental to understanding the ambiguous position of *Parsifal* in National Socialist circles for *Parsifal* is, indeed, a richly ambiguous work: it is a "degenerate" opera about regeneration; it is a pacifist opera that fosters Aryan Christian supremacy; it was loathed by Nazi propagandists but loved by the *Führer*. The crux of the ambiguity rests on the age-old disparity between theory and practice. In *theory*, *Parsifal* should, as Gutman states, be "the gospel of National Socialism" but, in *practice* (as he does *not* state), it represents in sound and vision images and, at least in some ways, agendas that are in flagrant contravention of Nazi values and ideals.

Propaganda is not concerned with issues of subtlety. Totalitarian art is not about subtexts, it is art that is notoriously anti-intellectual, comprising images and messages

⁴⁴ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939), 227.

⁴⁵ Members of the Bayreuth Circle, Wolzogen included, had of course long before interpreted *Parsifal* in terms of racial regeneration. Hitler's reading is therefore not unprecedented though it is "totally different," as he states, from the "general conception" of the work. This is a reading that accords with the interpretation of the opera in Friedrich Baser's essay of 1933, "Richard Wagner als Kündler der arischen Welt," part of which is reprinted in Wulf, *Musik im Dritten Reich*, 311-2.

that have to be unambiguous in order to be easily grasped and digested. *Parsifal* may well be a homage to Aryan supremacy but this is clouded by surface issues that clearly disturbed Party ideologues for it was these issues that were easily grasped and digested. Despite what may well be its true agenda, *Parsifal* at least *appears* to preach a gospel of compassion, disarmament, and pacifism. We see a youth reject sexual union with a woman and enter an enclave of Christian male mystics. In short, we see a young man doing everything that a good Aryan lad of the late 1930s was *not* supposed to do.

CHAPTER VII

THE OTHER *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

Mendy: The minute I saw you two at *Parsifal* I said to myself, "He's with a trick."

Stephen: Knowing you, you probably said it to the people you were with.

Mendy: Well, Stephen, it was kind of obvious: two grown men at a performance of *Parsifal*.

Stephen: What's so obvious about two men going to *Parsifal* together?

Mendy: Face it, Stephen, ice hockey at the Garden it's not.

Terrence McNally (*The Lisbon Traviata*, Act I).

At the close of the twentieth century it is difficult to imagine any opera, either new or old, embroiled in so widespread and prolonged a controversy as that which surrounded *Parsifal* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Homosexual panic and anxiety surrounding male gender types (or, more correctly, counter-types) are not the key concerns nowadays that they were one hundred years ago. The panic and anxiety of a century ago was inextricably bound up with nations engaged in empire building ever mindful of historical precedents (Rome, above all) that pointed to the collapse of empire from within the realm brought on by, among other things, "corrupt" morals and sexual license. Homosexuality posed a threat to the well-being of the imperial race whether that race be British, American, or German. In the late twentieth century we still find fear of homosexuality linked to national security in some quarters (witness the U.S. "gays in the military" controversy of the early-mid 1990s), but, in general, Western societies are far more concerned about the social impact of other issues: the destructive potential posed by chronic unemployment, drug abuse, increasing violence, overpopulation, environmental devastation and so on. The era of homosexual panic would appear to have passed. (In any case, guardians of public morals nowadays tend to pore over films and popular songs—rather than operas—in their quest for the glorification in the creative sphere of the potentially anti-social.) A generation or so after the "gay liberation" phenomenon of the early 1970s, we find a memorial to Oscar Wilde in Westminster Abbey and an award-winning, all-male production of

Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. We find memoirs by self-professed "opera queens" and an incipient "gay musicology" movement in academia. What, then, is the state of *Parsifal* reception at this *fin de siècle*?

For one thing, *Parsifal* would appear to have largely shaken off generations of commentary that dismissed it as an inferior work of Wagner's decline. Current research on *Parsifal* by American scholar Anthony Barone considers notions of decay, decline, and *Spätstil* that have been entrenched in critical discourse since the Enlightenment with a view to questioning the validity of the paradigm itself as an effective tool for critical evaluation. *Parsifal*, he argues, "need not be regarded merely as a sign of atrophy or regression, but as a performed rite of self-fulfilment, of transcendence."¹ Robin Holloway's *Debussy and Wagner* argues a strong case for the tremendous influence of *Parsifal* (in particular) on the young French composer. Wagner's late style opera here receives a kind of recognition long granted *Tristan und Isolde*—recognition of its importance in influencing the progressive musical language of the early twentieth century. (I am intrigued by the stylistic links Holloway draws between *Parsifal* and Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* and *Jeux* given that St. Sebastian enjoys the status of gay icon in the late twentieth century—immortalised by the filmmaker Derek Jarman and in the artwork of Pierre et Gilles—and that the original scenario of *Jeux* apparently involved "three young men making love to each other.")² Recent commentary by the English Wagner scholar Barry Millington offers

¹ Anthony Barone, "Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the theory of late style," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7 (March 1995): 53. See also Barone's commentary that accompanies his translation of Adorno's "On the Score of *Parsifal*," *Music and Letters* 76 (August 1995): 384-97. Barone's dissertation at Columbia University (in progress) is titled, "Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style."

² Diary entry by Nijinsky, quoted in Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London: Eulenburg, 1979), 161. Richard Ellman points out that, "Sebastian, always iconographically attractive, is the favorite saint among homosexuals. André Raffalovich, when admitted to the order of Dominicans, took the name Brother Sebastian, and Wilde took Sebastian as his Christian name for his alias in France." *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 68. Derek Jarman's first feature film, *Sebastiane*, a pioneering work of gay cinema, was released in 1976. It is discussed in Chris Lippard, ed., *By angels driven: the films of Derek Jarman* (Wiltshire, England: Flick Books, 1996); and

the suggestion that the languorous quality of *Parsifal* might be understood in terms of gender specific sexuality. "Compared with the phallic aggression of *Tristan*," he writes, "where the very nature of the thematic material dictates a thrusting, penetrating, goal-orientated musical discourse, the lingering sensuousness of *Parsifal* might seem to suggest the less transient quality of female sexuality."³ Millington tenders this in support of a reading of the opera in which the notion of "woman" is rescued from the margins, but it might perhaps shed some light on Nietzsche's thesis that the elderly Wagner belonged to *feminini generis*, on Marinetti's diatribe against the "effeminate" tango and *Parsifal*, and on the great bulk of negative *Parsifal* commentary of a century ago: on purely stylistic grounds, the opera ran in the face of phallogentric gratification.

Robert Gutman's *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* must surely be the first modern biography to consider openly the composer's tolerant attitude towards homosexual friends and acquaintances. Gutman reveals Wagner's association with homosexual German expatriates in Paris in the late 1830s and early 1840s (Gottfried Anders, Samuel Lehrs, and Ernst Kietz), his intense friendship with the homosexual youth Karl Ritter, and, hardly surprising, the passionate devotion of King Ludwig. *Parsifal* set and costume designer Paul Joukowsky (Gutman spells his name as Zhukovski) is described as the last of "Wagner's long line of young male disciples."⁴ Indeed, Gutman points out that, "desiring to possess Paul completely, Wagner came to speak of him as a son of his first marriage—a very strange fantasy."⁵ Since the publication of Cosima Wagner's diaries in the late 1970s, it has become clear that the Wagner household was not in the least troubled by the presence of the homosexual

Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: British Film Institute, 1996). On the artwork of Pierre and Gilles, see *Pierre et Gilles* (Cologne: Taschen, 1993).

³ Barry Millington, "Parsifal: a work for our times," *Opera* 39 (January 1988): 16. See also Barry Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 308.

⁴ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 403.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 404.

Joukowsky and his Neapolitan lover, Pepino. Indeed, as Barry Millington points out, acceptance of this relationship indicates that, "in regard to homosexuality, at least, Wagner was a true liberal."⁶ On the subject of Joukowsky and his partner, Cosima writes, on 25 February 1881: "After lunch Jouk.'s relationship with Pepino discussed in much detail... About the relationship with P., R. said : 'It is something for which I have understanding, but no inclination.'"⁷ Martin Gregor-Dellin cites this entry in Cosima's diary as "proof" of Wagner's unwavering heterosexuality: "That Wagner was entirely without homosexual tendencies is beyond dispute. No hint of any such inclinations can be detected in his boyhood or his literary works, his letters of recorded remarks, nor does anything in Cosima's diaries point in that direction."⁸ Without wishing to deny the essential truth of this, these comments strike me as a little too smug for their own good, in that Gregor-Dellin's study (which purports to be about Wagner's life, work, and *century*), makes no reference to the aura of homosexuality which, in the late nineteenth century, was clearly seen by some to *surround* aspects of Wagner's life and work, *Parsifal* in particular. Gregor-Dellin appears all too willing to close the book on a chapter that he dares not open in the first place.

Recent "gay musicology" has, for the most part, been little concerned with Wagner or his works. He may have been a "gay friendly" composer with a penchant for camp accessories and a preference for vacations in nineteenth century gay resort towns (indeed, Wagner's favourite holiday destination and a place where he composed much of *Parsifal*, was Italy, particularly the southern region and Sicily—historically the favoured locale since the time of Winckelmann for vacationing homosexuals)⁹ but he is

⁶ Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London: Dent, 1984), 103.

⁷ *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin-Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 2: 631.

⁸ Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner: His Life, His Work, His Century*, trans. J. Maxwell Brownjohn (London: Collins, 1983), 203. Gregor-Dellin, along with Dietrich Mack, was the editor of the first edition of Cosima's diaries.

⁹ Richard Jenkyns discusses the "Italy phenomenon" for English homosexuals of the Victorian age thus: "Sexual activity was unsafe in England, but in Italy one was out of danger, and there were plenty of peasant boys and fisher lads who would be happy to oblige. Hence that well-heeled succession of

not a "gay composer."¹⁰ Nor is Wagner the preferred composer of the "opera queen," the gay male opera aficionado obsessed with the cult of the diva (Callas and Tebaldi, are particular favourites) and with both the extroverted vocal coloratura and the introspective pathos of Romantic Italian opera above all. The opera queen feels for the tragic heroines of Verdi and Puccini and revels in the camp possibilities presented by the genre's representation of women.¹¹ The passionate heroines of Wagner's early operas, Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, are probably the closest Wagner comes to the aesthetic realm of the opera queen but late Wagner, by virtue of its lack of formal numbers, its theoretical earnestness, and its intense sobriety is largely off-limits to this sensibility. (Additionally, the great majority of opera queen divas tend neither to perform nor record mature Wagner.)¹² Susan Sontag, in her celebrated essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" reminds us that, although opera *per se* is a supremely camp art form, the operas of Wagner are *not* camp.¹³ (The luxurious Flowermaidens in Act II of *Parsifal* and the orientalist accoutrements that decorate Kundry in this scene exhibit huge camp potential but, thank goodness, it is potential that remains largely unrealised—the Flowermaidens waltz might possibly be camp but Kundry's formless, lengthy, exceedingly difficult but non-coloratura monologue most definitely is not.) A recent experimental, partly flippant and partly

minor *littérateurs* who expired in Tuscan villas or Venetian palazzi, surprising their relations by the size of the legacies bequeathed to their devoted manservants. Ancient Greece had produced the literary treatments of homosexuality and Italy was where it was practised at the present day; in either case the imagination dwelt upon the Mediterranean world. Greece and Italy came together in Sicily, and Theocritus was dragged in to give a colour of respectability." *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 291.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the "gay composer" in the family is Wagner's only son, Siegfried, hastily married to the much younger Winifrid Williams after a history of homosexual dalliances. See Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 122. On Joseph Geobels's repulsion for Siegfried's "effeminate" manner, see Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 144. Did Huneker instinctively divine Siegfried's sexual inclinations when he complained that "Wotan [Wagner] had fathered a Parsifal, Jr"? *Variations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 157.

¹¹ For a personal, insightful, and often hilarious analysis of the aesthetics of the "opera queen" see Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

¹² Surprisingly enough, Maria Callas did sing the part of Kundry at least once, albeit in Italian. The recording, which was made in Rome 1950 and conducted by Vittorio Gui, is available on CD on the Verona label (27085-87).

¹³ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1983), 108.

serious, attempt to "queen the canon," with *Parsifal* as the test case (mainly because of its apparent un-opera queen credentials), excludes any type of gay identity with the protagonist but, rather, singles out processes of identification with the figure of the tormented Kundry above all:

The most interesting person in the opera is Kundry, to all intents and purposes the only woman. And she is a passionate woman, although it is part of her nature that she wants to be rid of passion. Her suffering is likely to evoke a pang of sympathy from every opera queen who has at one time or another wished that he were straight... Parsifal, unfortunately, is a callow bore of interest only to chicken queens.¹⁴

Supposedly homosexual features of the work that were identified a hundred years ago—Parsifal's unmanliness, his rejection of women, his burning desire to redeem Amfortas and to live with the male community—have no bearing whatsoever in this late twentieth century opera queen reading. (Indeed, the final act, where Kundry is subservient and virtually silent, is described as "one long drama of straight male transcendence.")¹⁵ Ironically, it is the *presence* of woman in *Parsifal*, and *not* her elimination, that engenders the strongest sympathies from this modern gay observer.

A very different reading of *Parsifal*, however, is presented by the contemporary American gay philosopher Richard D. Mohr. Mohr's interpretation owes nothing to opera queen aesthetics but, rather, to the elucidation of the thesis that an exclusively male homosexual subculture might offer the model for a truly egalitarian and democratic society. His proposition does not in any way call for compulsory homosexuality or the exclusion of women but, rather, presents the male homosexual fraternity as a social blueprint:

A model for equal respect can be found in erotic, even promiscuous, filiation between males. Such filiations, especially when ritualised, illuminate and preserve equal respect, which can then be put into practice universally in democracy. Equality is the ideal, male homosexuality its model, and democracy the realization of the ideal in practice.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mitchell Morris, "Reading as an Opera Queen," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 198-9. A "chicken queen," also known as a "chicken hawk," is a gay adult male sexually attracted to younger men, typically adolescents.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁶ Richard D. Mohr, *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 196-7.

Mohr's cites *Parsifal* as an artistic representation of the blueprint. The ritualised male community of knights, both young and old, longs for the retrieval of the phallic totem (a spear which, according to the libretto and, indeed, Wagner's medieval sources, oozes fluid from its tip), an object that "once, under the old heterosexual order, killed by penetrating,"¹⁷ but now, at the conclusion of the opera, "heals men by filling them."¹⁸ From the moment he recovers the spear, Parsifal keeps the object unprofaned—despite the many battles he has had to endure—and, once returned to the grounds of Monsalvat, kneels in prayer before the erect phallus and, as indicated by the stage directions, "raises his eyes devoutly to the Spear-head." This scene is brought to a close by the quietly ecstatic "Good Friday Spell,"

with its wondrous depiction of spring's unfurling and of birth in nature, for which various types of asexual, vegetal reproduction provide the models of splendor. The day on which Christ is penetrated is the day in sacred time on which not even Mary is needed for procreation.¹⁹

Mohr's explanation for the seemingly inexplicable death of Kundry in the final moments of the opera is that, "her absence is required for the completion of the masculine world toward which the opera presses."²⁰

The death of Kundry and the potential to read the opera as a treatise on Aryan master race ideology are, without doubt, the key problem areas that confront *Parsifal* reception at this *fin de siècle*. In the aftermath of the horrors of rabid German nationalism and, more recently, of the hard earned and long overdue rights accorded women in the modern Western world, the racial tenets and sexual politics of *Parsifal* are potentially disturbing for modern critics and audiences alike. A discussion of racial (i.e. anti-Semitic) issues is outside the scope of this thesis (in any case, current writing on the subject is discussed briefly in the previous chapter), but the issue of Kundry and

¹⁷ Ibid., 205.

¹⁸ Ibid., 206.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 205.

her interpretation in modern criticism and productions does have some bearing on the contemporary treatment of the potentially homoerotic in this opera.

There can be no doubt that Kundry is the pivotal character in *Parsifal*. Indeed, the entire dramatic structure rests on the lead up to the kiss in Act II and, for the remainder of the opera, the consequences of it. The terminal condition of Amfortas, and its destructive repercussions on the entire Grail community, is likewise the consequence of the actions of Kundry. Gurnemanz provides much of the back-narrative in *Parsifal* but even he is not as well versed in past events as she is. Like Erda in the *Ring*, and alone among characters in *Parsifal*, she is all-knowing: only Kundry knows Parsifal's name, his mother's name, and his family history; she knows more about the seduction and wounding of Amfortas than the ailing knight does himself. Kundry facilitates key moments of action in an opera renowned for its pervasive inaction. But does her crucial importance bestow on her the right to be regarded as the "hero" (or, perhaps more appropriately, the "saviour" figure) of the piece? I think not. However, one recent analysis states that,

There is, in fact, no male Redeemer in Wagner's *Parsifal*. The miracle is not effected by the pure fool at all. Rather it owes everything to the woman; and she, the true albeit disguised Redeemer, is neither pure nor a fool.²¹

The desire to transcend the opera's feminine stereotypes (Kundry as penitent/Kundry as whore) and to draw her away from the margins of Act III and into the centre of the drama is typical of a good many modern, and often influential, productions of *Parsifal*. But how valid is this interpretation? To what extent is it conditioned by what we, in the late twentieth century, want Wagner's drama to speak to us (irrespective of the composer's intentions) and to what extent does it betray residual uneasiness over the potentially homoerotic in the opera? Are we perhaps meeting *Parsifal* on *our* terms rather than the composer's?

²¹ Barry Emslie, "Woman as image and narrative in Wagner's *Parsifal*: A case study," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (July 1991): 121.

Wolfgang Wagner, grandson of the composer, was one of the first directors of recent times to alter the ending of *Parsifal* so that Kundry lives rather than dies. His interpretation of the opera, as borne out by the Bayreuth production of 1975, not only rehabilitated the opera's single female character, it presented the exclusively masculine community of knights in far from idealistic terms—this was a barren, small-minded, inherently flawed society. Klingsor and his domain were presented as one embodiment of evil but Monsalvat represented harm of a different kind. In an analysis of his production, Wolfgang Wagner explains that, “the guardians of the symbols of compassion [Grail and Spear] are devoid of compassion themselves and incapable of healing or redeeming Amfortas...the evil of Klingsor is not primordial; it stems from the lack of goodness in Titurel.”²² In what can only be described as a defiantly revisionist reading of the opera, he argues (with no specific reference to music, text, or other documentation) that,

After the kiss, Parsifal's eyes are opened to the world by his recognition of its 'dark folly.' Realizing that Titurel's and Klingsor's worlds are equally flawed, he renounces them both, seeks his own way forward, and urges Kundry, the temptress who has been unleashed on him, to do likewise.²³

Parsifal does indeed attain a state of knowledge at the moment of Kundry's kiss and he also urges Kundry to seek redemption, but he offers no rebuke of “Titurel's world” (leitmotifs associated with Monsalvat spell this out for one thing) nor does he urge Kundry “to do likewise.” It is astounding to contemplate how Wolfgang Wagner could possibly propose such an interpretation when most of it flies in the face of what is in the opera. In his discussion of the following act, he argues that the “sympathetic” manner in which Parsifal and Gurnemanz treat Kundry represents her inclusion in what was formerly a masculine domain, it is in Act III that he claims she wins “equal rights,” that she too wins access to the Grail.²⁴ (Without wishing to misrepresent his

²² Wolfgang Wagner, *Acts*, trans. John Brownjohn (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), 208-9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 229 and 209.

interpretation, this appears to me to be but one step away from suggesting that the baptised Jew, newly purified, is thus welcomed into the Christian fold.) In this version of the opera, Kundry does not die at the end but acts as a liberating force on the once moribund grail community:

As an embodiment of the feminine principle she remains alive and is admitted to the temple. In one simultaneous, mirror-image-like movement, Titurel's coffin is closed and borne away while the Grail shrine is opened. The temple has been demystified... The temple scene in Act I is dominated by the Titurel-Amfortas-Grail axis. At the end of Act III, Parsifal and Kundry form an axis with the Grail between them.²⁵

One might argue a case for this tableau on the grounds that the closing scene finally brings together the symbolic sexual objects of the grail and spear (even though the stage directions call for Kundry to "sink slowly lifeless to the ground"), but it is surely foolhardy to propose that Wagner's exquisitely beautiful ten-part chorus ("Erlösung dem Erlöser") suggests the *demystification* of the temple. Is it not the *affirmation* of the sacred realm, the fulfilment of the prophecy? The transcendental quality of this chorus (Wagner's reworking of sacred, late Renaissance *stile antico*) jars with Wolfgang Wagner's utterly prosaic interpretation of the scene. Unfortunately, it is an interpretation that has spawned many imitators.

In an era of opera direction where the "text" is often merely the starting point for the director's interpretative treatment (not Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, but Harry Kupfer's *Parsifal* or Götz Friedrich's *Parsifal*),²⁶ it is now almost *de rigueur* to tamper with the scenario of *Parsifal* in order that it sits neatly with the director's "vision." The following examples illustrate my point. At the conclusion of Kupfer's Copenhagen production of 1978, Amfortas dies and Parsifal and Kundry (who does not die) leave the "oppressive" environs of Monsalvat behind (taking the grail and spear with them) to start a new life elsewhere. They beckon the remaining knights to join them in their

²⁵ Ibid., 229.

²⁶ Sometimes it's not even the starting point, as in the case of Wolfgang Wagner's interpretation.

quest.²⁷ (As early as 1897, Runciman expressed the vain hope for a version of *Parsifal* in which moral rectitude prevailed and the evil "monastery" was broken up.)²⁸ In Friedrich's centenary production at Bayreuth (1982), women mingle with the knights in the closing moments of the opera in order to signify the gender-inclusive composition of the newly redeemed realm.²⁹ One critic praises Friedrich's stagecraft in the following terms: "I was relieved that for once *Parsifal* had been stripped of its for me rather painful and embarrassing religious trappings"³⁰ (not to mention its painfully embarrassing homoerotic overtones).

Hans Jürgen Syberberg's controversial and often inspired film version of *Parsifal* (which also appeared in the centenary year), also presents us with a gender-diverse Monsalvat in the closing scene and a final image of Kundry (very much alive) as a surrogate queen to Amfortas' king.³¹ One of the most striking aspects of Syberberg's film is that, from the moment of Kundry's kiss, the role of Parsifal (hitherto played by an adolescent male) is suddenly and unexpectedly played by a young woman. It is this female "Parsifal" who features for the remainder of Act II and for most of Act III (she is reunited with her male counterpart in the closing scene). The transformation from "pure fool" to "enlightened redeemer" is thus signified by a change of gender. Jeremy Tambling argues that Syberberg's treatment of the problematic post-kiss scene (where Parsifal, in a trance-like state, identifies with the shame, sin, and agony of Amfortas—the result of his contact with woman) "makes good corrective sense in making Parsifal female anyway."³² This may well be true, but the gender switch, nevertheless,

²⁷ Oswald Georg Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premieres to the Present* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 292. Bauer further explains that "a handful" of knights agree to follow Parsifal and Kundry while others remain behind "in perplexed confusion." And well might they be perplexed—they know that it is not supposed to end this way.

²⁸ John F. Runciman, "Parsifal," *Saturday Review* (London), 28 August 1897, 219.

²⁹ Spotts, *Bayreuth*, 293.

³⁰ Horst Koegler, "Friedrich's quest for *Parsifal*," *Opera* 33 (Autumn 1982), 77.

³¹ Mohr, *Gay Ideas*, 213-4. For the director's discussion of his interpretation, see Hans Jürgen Syberberg, *Parsifal: Ein Filmessay* (Munich: W. Heyne, 1982).

³² Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 204-5.

reiterates the rather banal nineteenth-century convention of the “redeeming woman” and thus normalises that which is otherwise subversive in *Parsifal*. In the closing moments of Bernhard Sinkel’s Nuremberg production (1994), Amfortas dies, Kundry and Parsifal stand arm in arm, and a swan projection on a back cloth makes it perfectly clear that Lohengrin will be the progeny of the union we see before us. (This, of course, is pure fantasy. In the medieval legends Kundry is *not* the mother of Lohengrin.) As a statement of womanly endurance, one can understand that these interpretations are well-intentioned, but do we really need to have this most strange and elusive of works reduced to the level of a commonplace, heterosexual love story? Surely it is the ambiguity and subtlety of so much in *Parsifal*—from Wagner’s exquisitely refined orchestration to his unconventionally drawn characters—that renders the work at once beautiful and enigmatic? To ignore the sexual ambiguity of *Parsifal* is to do a great disservice to the work. I do not believe that this is an opera whose main concern is to celebrate homosexual love but I believe, even less, that it is an opera that celebrates heterosexual love.

Change of this magnitude to the dénouement (which illustrates potently the continuing function of opera as social document—that in the late twentieth century these resolutions are deemed more appropriate and are less “embarrassing” than Wagner’s) is disturbing not only because it deals a punishing blow to the potentially homoerotic in the opera (and, in fact, suggests that the homosocial community is a thing to be destroyed), but because it maps a crushingly normative and banal layer onto that which is utterly transcendent. It is ironic that, in their quest to provide a radical re-reading of the text, supposedly revolutionary and insightful directors such as Kupfer, Friedrich et al. posit an interpretation that is ultimately conservative and heterosexist. They provide us with precisely the kind of production that some commentators were desperately seeking one hundred years ago. Eduard Hanslick, Henry Krehbiel and others longed for the married Parsifal of Wolfram’s epic and this is exactly what we are

given in the final tableaux of the recent productions of Wagner's opera cited above. It is by no means customary for directors nowadays to save Wagner's other heroines from the claws of death (Senta, Elisabeth, Elsa, Isolde, and Brünnhilde still tend to perish in the closing moments—dream sequences notwithstanding), yet, since the mid-1970s, rare is the production of *Parsifal* that dares to commit Kundry to a similar fate. The deaths of the other heroines (with the exception of Elsa) illustrate the depth of their attachment to the male beloved; their deaths are, in fact, acts of love. The death of Kundry, on the other hand, has nothing to do with attachment to a male beloved; in fact, the strongest suggestion of love in the final scene occurs with Parsifal's redemptive healing of the stricken Amfortas. The man in need of redemption is redeemed by the pure, virtuous man. The woman dies but not out of love for the hero. Wagner inverts the model in *Parsifal* but contemporary directors want nothing of it. It seems that in the late twentieth century Runciman, Huneker, Henderson and other conservatives of a bygone era finally have their day.

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