PARSIFAL AS A PALINODE TO TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

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Wagner's discovery of Arthur Schopenhaur and his philosophy created a divide between the operas before and after *Tristan und Isolde.* In a letter to Franz Liszt dated December 16, 1854, Wagner writes that while he held many of these philosophies on his own, Schopenhaur was the first to brilliantly make this idea clear, that "the final negation of the desire of life… is the only salvation possible."[1] After 1854, Wagner would begin to wrestle with the Schopenhaurian yearning of complete non-existence through death, and it would seep its way into his operas. Later in the letter, Wagner writes about his conception of a new opera, *Tristan und Isolde,* which would satiate his own desires of love and explore his newfound philosophies from Schopenhauer.[2] Wagner had then created a paradoxical problem for himself. If the freedom from dreams and desires, or the renunciation of the will, is the only means of achieving true salvation, where does it fit in Wagner's artistic expression of the medieval courtly love? *Tristan und Isolde* would be Wagner's first attempt at this fusion of the Schopenhaurian will and courtly love, but this union of ideas was flawed. The following operas, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Siegfried,* and *Götterdämmerung* would continue to explore Wagner's own philosophical struggle until he finally achieved what would become the "palinode" to *Tristan und Isolde* through his last opera, *Parsifal.* Just as the medieval palinode served as a way for courtly love authors to retract previous claims, Wagner's *Parsifal* would retract the key theme of *Tristan und Isolde.*

The plot of *Tristan und Isolde* is rather straight-forward, and is Wagner's most passionate representation of the courtly love model. Isolde is betrothed to King Marke, Tristan's uncle. As with many medieval aristocratic marriages, this is arranged for political purposes. Tristan was the brave warrior of Cornwall who slayed Morold, a knight of Ireland, and in doing so achieved a

[1] *Wagner on Music and Drama* p. 271
[2] Ibid. 272

victory for Cornwall against Ireland and a new wife for the King, Isolde. After Tristan's battle, Isolde healed him while pretending she did not recognize Tristan. This interaction led to Isolde unknowingly falling in love with Tristan, and during their trip to Cornwall in Act I, she tries to poison herself and Tristan with a death potion to avoid these feelings. But death would not find the two lovers, for Brangæna, Isolde's servant, gave her a dud potion. In this realization, the two realize their love for each other and quickly find themselves horrified in their predicament.

During Act II, a friend of Tristan, Melot, arranges a hunting party for King Marke and his courtiers so that the two lovers can meet under the guise of Night. Melot betrays Tristan by revealing Tristan's own betrayal to King Marke. Writhing in his own shame, Tristan challenges Melot to a duel in which Tristan purposely loses, leading to a mortal wound. In Act III, Tristan awaits for Isolde's arrival and yearns for the eternal realm of night, or more simply, death. Isolde arrives only to quickly witness Tristan's death. King Marke arrives to forgive the lovers, but creates a misunderstanding that leads to the deaths of both Melot and Kurwenal, Tristan's friend and caretaker. Isolde remains fixated on Tristan until her own transfiguration into the Night through death.

One theme that is consistent between all of his operas from *Tristan und Isolde* onwards is the catastrophic nature of passionate love, which correlates to Schopenhauer's concept of the Will that creates desires within human beings. It is evident in Act III that the repercussions of Tristan and Isolde's actions not only lead to their own demise, but also the betrayal of King Marke and the deaths of Tristan's two friends, Melot and Kurwenal. But the suicide of Tristan and the transfiguration of Isolde are their means of eternal union, and therefore, result in a positive outcome for the lovers. Wagner expresses in his essay, *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde,* that their deaths represent "the bliss of quitting life, of being no more." The freedom from the

harshness of Day into the "wondrous realm" of Night to Wagner is best represented by the ending of the legend where an ivy and vine sprang from their graves and embraced each other.[3] Wagner achieved his goal in conceiving a syncretism between the medieval concepts of Night and Day and the Schopenhaurian ideas of the *phenomenal* and *noumenal* realms.[4] Desire is a key theme of the opera. Tristan's desire for an eternity in the *noumenal* realm with Isolde reflects Wagner's own yearning for a satiation of love he himself never got to experience. He writes the following in his letter to Liszt:

> "As I have never in life felt the real bliss of love, I must erect a monument to the most beautiful of all my dreams, in which, from beginning to end, that love shall be thoroughly satiated. I have in my head *Tristan und Isolde,* the simplest but most full-blooded musical conception; with the 'black flag' which floats at the end of it I shall cover myself to die."[5]

The key problem with *Tristan und Isolde* lies in the contradiction between achieving transfiguration into the *noumenal* realm through the execution of the Will rather than through its renunciation. According to Schopenhauer, this method of entering total non-existence is not possible. Wagner's problem also manifests in the ending of the opera where the two lovers leave existence as individuals rather than becoming one with the singularity that is the *noumenal*. While it is true that Wagner could not possibly express his own desires of eternal love through death without keeping the souls and identities of the lovers separate, by executing the story in this manner, Wagner fails to completely adhere to the Schopenhaurian nature of the *noumenal.*

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[3] Ibid. 273

[4] The metaphysical concepts of the *phenomenal* and *noumenal* realms were first expressed by Kant, but would be elaborated upon and "corrected" by Schopenhaur. Schopenhauer would go on to describe the *noumenal* as the singular *Will* while the *phenomenal* is a product of the *noumenal* as a *Representation* of the *Will,* which Schopenhaur explains in his collection of books, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 2,* p. 112

[5] *Wagner on Music and Drama* p. 272

In 1867, eight years after the completion of *Tristan und Isolde,* Wagner completed his next opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.* As a comic opera, *Die Meistersinger* largely lacks the existential dread of its predecessor, but Wagner uses this light-hearted platform to highlight his ability to interweave several contrasting themes into the narrative. On the surface exists the courtly love plot of Walther and Eva, the latter of which is to be betrothed to the winner of the upcoming Mastersinger contest. Walther in his naïvety is determined to become a Mastersinger and win Eva's hand in marriage, but he quickly realizes the challenges of becoming a Mastersinger after studying with Han Sachs's apprentice, David. In his frustration, Walther plans to meet Eva secretly the following night to elope.

That night while Walther and Eva are hiding from the Watchman during their attempted escape, they witness the Mastersinger, Beckmesser, serenading who he believes to be Eva but is actually her friend, Magdalena, from outside her window. In a hilarious exchange, Han Sachs interrupts Beckmesser's terrible serenade by hammering away at the shoes he is fixing for Beckmesser while singing his own song about Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden, a reference from the Book of Genesis. The song is Sachs's way of communicating to Eva and Walther the negative consequences of eloping. In Act III, Sachs elaborates on this idea further with a direct reference to *Tristan und Isolde,* which is also represented musically with the desire motive, or "Tristan chord." This exchange causes Walther to write his new Mastersong and properly win Eva's hand in marriage, thus integrating them as a couple into society as opposed to a tragic exile or, in *Tristan-like* fashion, death.

Wagner uses the surface plot of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* to symbolize several deeper themes. As a political and societal commentary, Wagner uses the Mastersingers, specifically Beckmesser, as representations of his critics who resided in academic settings. In this

dichotomy, Wagner himself is represented through Walther, an outsider who creates a new art that is misunderstood by the musical elites but is adored by the common folk of Nürnberg.

In Wagner's representation of himself, he also explores the courtly love narrative introduced in *Tristan und Isolde.* Walther's relationship to Eva is similar to that of Tristan and Isolde regarding their sudden yet passionate love. What differentiates *Die Meistersinger* from *Tristan und Isolde* is its outcome for the lovers. There are two reasons for this outcome. The first, and more obvious reason is due to *Die Meistersinger* being a comic opera. It would not be appropriate for the main characters of a comic opera to meet a tragic death at the end. The second reason lies in the problems outlined in *Tristan und Isolde.* Full indulgence into the Will leads to destruction. Walther and Eva almost fall into this trap with their planned eloping, but the character of Han Sachs, who acts as an older and wiser Wagner, directly warns the two of the dangers of the Will*,* using *Tristan und Isolde* as a direct reference during his conversation with the two in Act III. Wagner uses the "desire" leitmotif from *Tristan und Isolde* in this opera to illustrate the horrors of the Will. It's placement in both *Die Meistersinger* and later in *Parsifal* are abrupt and unnatural. This is in part due to Wagner's mastery of his leitmotif technique, where he is able to weave different leitmotifs into a texture in ways that can sound new, but also recognizable to the audience. However, the main reason for this treatment of the "desire" leitmotif is to renounce the Will that was explored in *Tristan und Isolde.* While *Die Meistersinger* is a comic opera with many functions that explore narratives outside of the courtly love plot of *Tristan und Isolde,* it can only briefly begin the renunciation of the Will rather than fulfill its role as a palinode.

Before exploring *Parsifal's* relationship to *Tristan und Isolde,* it is important to note the latter two operas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* which were completed between *Die Meistersinger*

(1867) and *Parsifal (1882). Siegfried (1871)* and *Götterdämmerung (1874)* had their librettos completed before the composition of *Tristan und Isolde.* Being unknown to Wagner at the time, the libretto of the entire Ring cycle had no influence from Schopenhauer, but Wagner would later reinterpret his own work through a Schopenhauerian lens.[6] Wagner claims to Liszt in his letter that the truths laid out by Schopenhauer were not new to him, rather, it was Schopenhauer's ability to reveal these truths with such clarity that impressed Wagner.[7] Thus it is evident that Wagner would be able to, even if artificially, view the narrative of *Der Ring* with the ideas of the Will in mind. While the libretto of *Der Ring* was completed by 1852 before Wagner's discovery of Schopenhauer, the music of the latter two operas would be completed with years of Schopenhauerian study under Wagner's belt. Schopenhauer writes that music is the only artform that is a direct "voice" of the Will and not merely a representation.[8] This idea directly impacted Wagner's ending for *Götterdämmerung.*

Before his fascination with Schopenhauer, Wagner was an avid admirer of the philosopher, Feuerbach, who was a large inspiration for the plot of *Der Ring.* In his ending for *Götterdämmerung,* Wagner wrote what was considered a "Feuerbach ending" and later a "Schopenhauer ending."[9] It would be this belief that music is an emanation of the Will rather than a representation that ultimately led Wagner to omit the ending monologue. With the libretto cut, the music would be able to tap into the Will directly and reach the audience as Wagner intended.

After completing *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* Wagner was able to once again tackle the Schopenhauerian problems in *Tristan und Isolde* with his final opera, *Parsifal. Parsifal* is

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[6] Müller *Wagner Handbook* p. 293
[7] *Wagner on Music and Drama* p. 272
[8] Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation Vol. 2* p. 264
[9] Swanepoel *Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and the Ring of the Nibelung* p. 5 and p. 11

strikingly unique to its predecessors in several ways. The first is its disorienting dream-like quality which is brilliantly portrayed through Wagner's greatest display of orchestration. The Prelude to Act I is mystifying. The arpeggiation in the strings mixed with the pulsing asymmetric rhythmic figures in the winds creates a cloudy texture that is pierced through with the opening theme. This hazy texture persists through the entire prelude until Gurnemanz's entry in the first scene. The moment a human voice is heard, the music changes to give clarity and focus to the singers, as if the listener were waking up from a dream and being drawn back into the reality of the plot. But an attentive audience member will notice occurrences throughout the opera that can only be described as bizarre. The most obvious of these are the mid-act set changes, such as the transfiguration scene in Act I that leads Gurnemanz and Parsifal to Titurel's castle or the destruction of Klingsor's castle in Act II, both of which involve radical set changes such as a rotating backdrop or the removal of background imagery on the set. There are also more subtle occurrences that manifest through strange gaps within the plot. These include Parsifal's rather unmotivated journey to Klingsor's castle[10] and the enormous and abrupt time skip between Act II and Act III where Gurnemanz is depicted as an old man and Parsifal is a weathered and more wise knight. These details make little sense in a coherent story, but within the world of dreams, these rapid changes within time and space are regular.

Like in *Die Meistersinger,* Wagner is using a surface plot to cover a deeper narrative, but rather than subtly hide this narrative under the superseding plot, Wagner makes the surface plot secondary to the underlying message. In reality, the plot of Parsifal has very little to do with the story that Wagner is trying to tell, and he is telling it through a world of dreams. This was a topic

[10] Gurenmanz had cast Parsifal out of Titurel's castle out of frustration of Parsifal's ignorance at the end of Act I, and presumably, Parsifal has no idea how to even get to Klingsor's castle. Klingsor foresees the arrival of Parsifal in Act II, but again, there is no mention of why or how Parsifal arrives. It can be assumed that Parsifal took it upon himself to become the Savior figure to Amfortas out of pity, as is explained later by Parsifal after Kundry's kiss in Act II, but Wagner intentionally obscures this information.

of high interest to both Wagner and Schopenhauer. Wagner writes in his essay, *Music and reality*, about the Schopenhauerian "dream organ" and its perception of a secondary world that lives beneath the "world of waking:"

> "…in waking as in dreams, we are conscious of the experience of a second world, perceptible only through the ear, manifesting itself through sound; literally a *sound world* beside the *light world*, a world of which we may say that bears the same relation to the visible world as dreaming to waking… music enters our consciousness through a kindred operation…"[11]

Wagner is realizing the dream-like quality of *Parsifal* through a *sound world* that radically interferes with the surface plot to a degree that separates the two narratives. By contrast, the surface plot of *Tristan und Isolde* is beautifully intertwined with the underlying Wagnerian plot of the catastrophe of executing the desires of the Will, and thus, the music correlates with the plot with clarity and deliberation.

This separation of plot and musical setting is necessary for Wagner to truly renounce his expression of the Will in *Tristan und Isolde.* In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner writes that Amfortas is his Tristan from Act III. [12] Though Wagner does not discuss this duality in his letter, Amfortas's character is executed as an opposite to Tristan in the following ways. Both characters succumb to the clutches of passionate love, though Amfortas's sexual relationship to Kundry was that of tempress and tempted as opposed to the mutual love between Tristan and Isolde. Both men betray their loved ones through their desires, Amfortas betrays his father Titurel and his fellow knights by breaking his vow of chastity and Tristan through his affair betrays his uncle King Marke which leads to the deaths of his friends Melot and Kurwenal. The difference here is that while Tristan dies as a consequence of his betrayal and is thus freed to the

[11] *Wagner on Music and Drama* p. 181
[12] Ibid. p. 295

land of the *noumenal,* Amfortas's wound by his own spear is cursed to constantly open and cause pain, but not kill Amfortas. Amfortas's immortality represents a version of Tristan that must bear the responsibility of guilt despite constant pleas for death. By making Amfortas carry that burden, Wagner is telling the audience that one cannot escape the repercussions of betrayal caused by the Will.

In contrast to *Tristan und Isolde,* many of the side characters of *Parsifal* represent different failed renunciations of the Will. Amfortas writhes in his guilt for giving into his desires through Kundry. The knights of Klingsor's castle all fell to the temptations of the Flower Maidens, and thus lost their essence of being, living the rest of their lives as hollow husks of their former selves enslaved to their lustful and passionate desires brought about by the Will. Klingsor himself tried to artificially renounce his desires for sex by removing the possibility of temptation by castration in order to join the Knights of the Grail. This crude form of renunciation is punished by the Knights through Klingsor's banishment. Wagner chooses to represent the consequences of giving into the Will through the side cast in *Parsifal,* whereas in *Tristan und Isolde,* the side cast are merely witnesses, or casualties, of the desires of the lovers.

The key motivator of the Will is desire, so to renounce the Will is to renounce the desires it imposes on the human heart. The greatest of all desires to Wagner is passionate love. As earlier mentioned in his essay to Liszt, Wagner realized his goal with *Tristan und Isolde* in creating a musical explosion of passion and freedom through death. The problem is that as Wagner stated in the letter, salvation into the world of non-existence can only be achieved through the rejection of that desire.[13] Thus, there is no place for passion. *Parsifal* uses this idea to act as a palinode to *Tristan und Isolde.* The relationship between Tristan and Isolde mirrors that of Parsifal and Kundry. Just as Isolde requires her salvation from an arranged marriage to Marke from Tristan,

[13] Ibid. p. 271-2

Kundry needs Parsifal to save her from her cycle of sexual addiction. Due to a curse for mocking the original Savior,[14] Kundry is cursed to immortality. She searches for salvation through a forced passion as a seductress, and when she meets Parsifal in Klingsor's castle in Act II, she does what she always had and tries to seduce Parsifal through three trials. As the pure-hearted fool of prophecy, Parsifal triumphs over these trials, and through his mercy grants Kundry a chance at redemption, which she later takes during Act III. Kundry only utters one word in the entirety of Act III, "service." After the baptism of Parsifal, he in turn baptizes Kundry, thus saving her from an endless cycle of destructive passion and allowing her a transfiguration into the world of eternal non-existence to commence.

Wagner denounces passionate love through an unconditional love that claims no ownership over another person. This idea is reminiscent of the Buddhist idea of detachment. Just as Nirvana can only be achieved through detachment from the physical world, the only way to Schopenhauer's depiction of salvation into the endless singularity of the *noumenal* must be devoid of passion. By highlighting passion as the ultimate sin of *Parsifal,* Wagner effectively creates a palinode to the tragically beautiful ending of *Tristan und Isolde.*

[14] Though this Savior is never named, it can be assumed through the Christian imagery of *Parsifal* that the original Savior is Jesus Christ, and Kundry's mocking of Jesus is a reference to the legend of Herodias, who was forced to wander the earth as an immortal for mocking Jesus while he bore his cross.

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