

‘Blow, Winds, and Crack your Cheeks!’ Shakespeare and Wagner

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*[Shakespeare’s] work is the only veritable drama; and what that implies,
as work of Art, is shown by our rating its author the profoundest poet of all time.*

Richard Wagner, 1871¹

A father cradling his seemingly lifeless daughter—a viscerally powerful image (see Fig. 1). Many would insist that a favourite moment in all of the *Ring*—and one frequently excerpted in concert and on CD—is Wotan’s farewell to Brünnhilde as he places his sleeping daughter within the ring of magic fire he has summoned up from the God of fire, Loge, at the end of *Die Walküre*. The music that accompanies this scene is of profound beauty and emotion, and for many is an iconic moment in the *Ring*. But it is an image that is somehow familiar outside of Wagner’s work. Wagner is often portrayed, largely through his own mythmaking, as the great individualist and reformer, but his operas arise out of a very particular *Zeitgeist* and the formative influences on his work are many. So where has one seen this image before? Shakespeare’s *King Lear* of course, where the father-daughter relationship is at its most poignant and tragic as Lear bears the lifeless body of his daughter Cordelia.

Did Shakespeare’s play influence Wagner’s conception of the *Ring*? There is no direct evidence that Wagner used *King Lear* or any other work of Shakespeare’s as a direct model, but possibly more than any another single dramatist, and probably even more than Greek

¹ Richard Wagner, ‘The Destiny of Opera,’ *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, vol. 5 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1896), 144.

tragedy, Shakespeare is a constant and influential companion to Wagner throughout his life.² In *My Life*, he describes a production of *King Lear* in 1838 'which I followed with a huge interest not only at the performances themselves but also the rehearsals.'³ Many years later, in 1874, Cosima Wagner observed:

We talked at breakfast about ... our particular favourites among the plays. R. says that when we last read *Lear* the tremendous mounting tension, the coming and going, the scene division, the tremendous rapidity combined with an overall leisureliness had made quite a unique impression on him; otherwise *Othello* lay closest to his heart.⁴

Cosima, in an entry on 21 and 22 March 1880, remarks that 'in the evening we read the first scenes from *King John* and the first act of *King Lear*.' The next day: 'R. slept well but is somewhat worn out from his "raging" in *K Lear*!'⁵ A later entry on 31 October 1882 describes Wagner

reading to us several scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* (balcony scene, Tybalt's death, the marriage, the parting), deeply affecting us all, he himself in tears. But who could ever describe or indeed paint him during readings of this kind? His countenance illumined, his eyes far away yet gleaming like stars, his hand magical both in movement and at rest, his voice gentle and girlish, all soul, but then plunging to the depths and soaring to the heights.⁶

From many such descriptions by Cosima in her diaries it is clear that Shakespeare probably fired the imagination of Wagner more than any other literary influence. This fascination with Shakespeare started at the age of thirteen when, as he later related to Cosima, he pronounced Shakespeare's name as 'Shicksper,' which suggested a connection with *Schicksal* (fate) and *Speer* (spear), two extremely pregnant concepts in relation to his later work.⁷

The two great cultural figures that Wagner mentions constantly are Shakespeare and Beethoven:

Oh, to meet someone like Beethoven! That was the dream of my early youth; not being able to do it, no longer seeing such men as Shakespeare and Beethoven about, has made me melancholy throughout my life. And none of my contemporaries has ever given me the impression of being truly great.⁸

Cosima remarked that they talked of Shakespeare 'ad infinitum. R is glad that we have the sonnets here, for they bring him closer as a person; R imagines him to have been a cheerful man, "somewhat like me."⁹ Throughout these descriptions, as well as in Wagner's many other comments on Shakespeare, there is a strong sense of self-identification. Even the great Goethe, the dominant literary presence in Germany in the early nineteenth century, is relegated to a

² Of course, the great German dramatists Goethe and Schiller were major influences on Wagner, as well as writers such as Heine, Feuerbach, E.T.A. Hoffmann and many others.

³ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), 149.

⁴ Cosima Wagner (hereafter CW), diary entry, 15 May 1874, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1977), vol. 1, 758.

⁵ CW, 21 & 22 Mar. 1880, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 455.

⁶ CW, 31 Oct. 1882, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 942.

⁷ CW, 15 June 1874, *Diaries*, vol. 1, 766.

⁸ CW, 23 Aug. 1872, *Diaries*, vol. 1, 527.

⁹ CW, 17 Nov. 1881, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 749.

Figure 1. Konrad Diehlitz, 'Wotan's Farewell to Brünnhilde', 1892; from E. Cobham Brewer, *Character Sketches of Romance, Fiction and the Drama*, vol. 8 (New York: Selmer Hess, 1902), plate 30



position below that of Shakespeare: 'Shakespeare is the truest picture of the world. Faust is a commentary on that picture, a commentary on Shakespeare.'¹⁰

Wagner frequently drew a parallel between the works of Beethoven and those of Shakespeare:

Nowhere do we meet the 'poet' Shakespeare, save in the inmost heart of the characters that move before us in his dramas.—Shakespeare therefore remained entirely beyond comparison, until in Beethoven the German genius brought forth a being only to be explained through his analogy.—If we take the whole impression left by Shakespeare's world of shapes upon our inner feeling, with the extraordinary relief of every character that moves therein, and uphold to it the sum-total of Beethoven's world of motives, with their ineluctable incisiveness and definition, we cannot but see that the one of these worlds completely covers the other, so that each is contained in each, no matter how remote may seem their orbits.¹¹

¹⁰ CW, 3 Sep. 1874, *Diaries*, vol. 1, 785.

¹¹ Wagner, 'Beethoven,' *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 5, 107.

He saw his goal as a fusion of these two worlds:

As to that Artwork itself; we can only conclude that it will be the most perfect Drama, and thus stand high above the work of Poetry. This we may conclude after having recognised the identity of the Shakespearian and the Beethovenian Drama, whilst we may assume, on the other hand, that it will bear the same relation to 'Opera' as a play of Shakespeare's to a literature-drama, a Beethovenian symphony to an opera's music.¹²

Of course the revival of interest in Shakespeare was central to European Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and probably nowhere more deeply widespread than in Germany where Shakespeare became almost a 'German' poet, and Wagner, like many other contemporary composers, could not fail to absorb this influence.¹³ He described the unfinished drama *Leubald und Adelaide*, which he began at fourteen, as 'that stupendous tragedy which afterwards filled my family with such consternation.'¹⁴ He spent two years working on what was probably going to be a play accompanied by music, neglecting his schoolwork. Later in life he declared that

Shakespeare remained my exemplar, and I projected a great tragedy which was almost nothing but a medley of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The plan was gigantic in the extreme; two-and-forty human beings died in the course of this and I saw myself compelled, in its working-out, to call the greater number back as ghosts, since otherwise I should have been short of characters for my last acts.¹⁵

We must remember that Wagner's family circumstances—all his siblings were on the stage—meant that he had an intimate, 'nuts-and-bolts' knowledge of the theatre, including a highly detailed and practical understanding of those Shakespeare plays that featured prominently in the contemporary repertory.¹⁶ He admired the naturalistic and seemingly improvisatory nature of the dialogue in Shakespeare: 'we believe we shall really expedite the solution of an extremely difficult problem, if we define the Shakespearean Drama as a fixed mimetic improvisation of the highest worth.'¹⁷

In Wagner's many theoretical works he frequently refers to Shakespeare, and much of this theorising is central to his continually evolving conception of drama. In 'The Destiny of Opera,' he again links Beethoven and Shakespeare:

The very difficulty of ... applying Beethovenian Music to the Shakespearian Drama might lead, when conquered, to the utmost perfecting of musical Form, through its final liberation from each remaining fetter ... Music now would take the ineffably

¹² Wagner, 'Beethoven,' 112.

¹³ A.W. von Schlegel, whose translation of Shakespeare is still highly regarded, remarked to Ludwig Tieck, 'I hope you will prove, among other things, that Shakespeare was not an Englishman. How did he possibly come among the frosty, stupid souls on that brutal island.' Cited in David Trippett, 'Individual as Worship: Wagner and Shakespeare,' *Berlioz, Verdi, Wagner, Britten*, Great Shakespearians, vol. 11, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 154.

¹⁴ Wagner, *My Life*, 24.

¹⁵ Wagner, 'Autobiographical Sketch', 1843, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 1, 4.

¹⁶ Wagner notes in *My Life* (pp. 43–4) that when his sister Rosalie became a member of the Court Theatre in Dresden, 'through her I could always gain admittance to the performances: and that which in my childhood had been merely the interest aroused by a strange spirit of curiosity now became a more deep-seated and conscious passion. *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Hamlet, the plays of Schiller, and to crown all, Goethe's Faust, excited and stirred me deeply.*'

¹⁷ Wagner, 'Destiny of Opera,' 143–4.

vital shape of a Shakespearian drama, and its sublime irregularity, compared with the antique drama, would well nigh give it the appearance of a nature-scene as against a work of architecture.¹⁸

One of his early operas, *Das Liebesverbot*, is in fact an adaptation—albeit a very free one—of *Measure for Measure*. It is a work that he later rejected but several elements in this opera occur in a much more fully developed form in later operas: a striking case being the nature of the character of Isabella who is given a soaring redemption motif that Wagner would use in many later works; she is an archetype of many of his female characters.

One of the dominant characteristics of Wagner's music is the development of the use of interlocking musical themes which reached an unprecedented level of sophistication and complexity in the *Ring*. Yet Shakespeare does something analogous in many of his plays. Through his use of accumulative imagery, he builds up a series of associations by means of recurring images and image complexes. In *King Lear*, for example, there are frequent references to the 'gods' and their influence on the affairs of mortals. At first they are of 'kindly gods' of good fortune, but later the tone changes to one of man at the mercy of hostile external forces—a sense of the inevitable, relentless and inexorable workings of a remorseless fate. Gloucester's bitter statement is representative: 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;/They kill us for their sport.' (IV. i. 36–37) Wolfgang Clemen notes that Shakespeare's use of imagery 'adds a unifying colour and "key"':

The impression we have in reading the tragedies that almost every passage is in diverse ways related and interconnected with other passages before or after, derives, in a high degree, from the role played by the imagery.¹⁹

It is impossible to argue that Wagner was consciously echoing Shakespeare's practice here, or in any other aspects of his art, but there are very strong parallels in what both were trying to achieve.

There is another, perhaps more tenuous connection between Shakespeare and opera: the voice, and particularly the text-based voice. We know that Shakespeare's theatre had minimal scenery that could surround and contextualise the represented action; a sense of place and the dramatic situation is achieved through the richness of the poetry and the ability of the actor to deliver the text effectively so as to fire the imagination of the audience—it is a theatre of the virtuoso voice:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene! (*Henry V*, I. i. 1–4)

The essence of opera lies in the way the voice is used. The delivery of the text is important in all opera, or should be, but is, perhaps, nowhere more so than in Wagner's operas. Operatic history reveals a constantly shifting balance in the emphasis on words and music, and many of the great reforms in opera were justified on the grounds that the textual basis of the art form had been submerged in musical elaboration or subject to the dominance of pure vocal

¹⁸ Wagner, 'Destiny of Opera,' 149.

¹⁹ Wolfgang H. Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (London: Methuen, 1966), 224.

exhibitionism. Alone among the great opera composers, Wagner was his own librettist, a major influence on his view of the vexed and always fluid relationship between words and music. The *Ring* is primarily made up of dialogue and one of the major transformations Wagner brought about was in the kind of poetry he developed for the libretto which enabled this new form of operatic dramaturgy: a verse form that could deal with ancient myth if necessary, but also with the comprehensibility and naturalness of current speech. His revitalising of an old Germanic and English verse form, *Stabreim*, which had no fixed metrical pattern and thus no fixed line length, allowed him the musical flexibility to construct this dialogic form. It is stylised verse, analogous to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, with a similar flexibility and power and seeming naturalness.

In Wagner's works, characters converse with each other in a manner similar to spoken drama; this freedom within the continuous musical flow may owe something to the example of Shakespeare's freely-flowing dialogue and fluid dramaturgy. This stylised dialogue demands the ability to deliver the text with flexibility and utmost clarity; contrary to popular perception it is often accompanied by relatively light orchestration. However, the singers also need the vocal weight and projection to 'ride' this large orchestra when necessary. In a sense there is the paradoxical situation of a conversation between two singers occurring, sometimes at an extreme dynamic range. Yet this is probably what Shakespeare's actors were used to—they would have needed to grab the attention of a noisy and easily distracted Globe audience through the power of the sonorous voice and evocative richness of the poetic text. However, the shape of the Globe theatre would have lent itself to this. Wagner observed that he would need to discover 'the exact principle on which the mimetic naturalism of Shakespeare' is based. He concluded that Shakespeare's actors

played upon a stage surrounded by spectators on all sides, whereas the modern style has followed the lead of French and Italians, displaying the actors only from one side, and that the front side, just like the painted 'wings.'²⁰

Contemporary opera followed this convention, and Wagner sought to reform the theatre and return to a format as close as possible to Shakespeare's theatrical setup. He envisaged the orchestra as able to comment on the action but also having a central role in the drama itself.²¹

Edward Dannreuther recounted the effect of Wagner reading aloud his *Parsifal* libretto on 17 May 1877:

The reading was a wonderful feat. The great actor-poet at his best—an improvisation perfectly balanced—every part stood forth as that of an individual—voice, enunciation, moderation, exquisite—particularly in the second act. One heard the words, and one heard the latent music. 'Bayreuth in miniature.'²²

David Trippett comments:

The extant descriptions of Wagner performing ... hinge on the vivified sonorities of his voice, that is, physical qualities of an utterance—beyond any implied text and its

²⁰ Wagner, 'Actors and Singers,' *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 5, 191.

²¹ Of course, Wagner's theatre ultimately drew on the typical nineteenth-century proscenium arch model, adapting the Greek-style amphitheatre into a 'theatre of illusion.'

²² Quoted in David Trippett, "'Bayreuth in Miniature": Wagner and the Melodramatic Voice,' *Musical Quarterly* 95.1 (Spring 2012): 73.

embedded meaning—that articulate the material surface of a meaning; a latent music, as it were, demanding attention at a sensory rather than a semantic level. The power of such nonverbal communication is its recalcitrance to the signifier. We might liken this specifically to what Roland Barthes long ago termed the ‘grain of the voice’ as the product of an idiopathic, physical organ, or conceive of it more broadly as a material channel of communication where Wagner’s half singing, half speaking is not supposed to connote understanding, but becomes a ‘performance propelled into movement by various materialized signifiers.’²³

There is an indefinable quality in the spoken voice, and even more so in the operatic voice, that adds a layer of significance and perhaps even ‘meaning’ to operatic performance; this is immediately apparent in the experience of the audience hearing different singers in the same role.

Wagner expressed huge admiration for the singer Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, particularly as Leonore in *Fidelio*. He claims that she was one of the formative artistic influences on his early life—possibly part of his self-mythologising—and she sang in several of his early operas. He fully realised that her voice was technically an imperfect instrument, but it was the other qualities that she possessed in abundance that he greatly admired. Wagner, writing to Liszt at the time of the first performance of *Lohengrin* at Weimar, asked: ‘But what is really the essential and principal thing here? Is it voice only? Surely not. It is life and fire.’²⁴

Wagner realised that he needed singers attuned to his musical aesthetics and he wished to establish a ‘music school’ to train them. He regarded the state of singing in Germany as abysmal, characterised by the inadequacy of the technical vocal training, musical preparation and complete lack of attention to the importance of the relationship between words and music. The school, planned for Munich, never eventuated, but he spent four years prior to the first performance of the *Ring* scouring Germany for suitable singers.

Their training, under Wagner’s direct supervision, was firstly in the thorough comprehension of the text and understanding of the drama, long before a note of music would be sung; he insisted that every word be sung with absolute clarity and every syllable have its correct weight and pronunciation, with no room for singers to change his music to suit themselves or their egos. Every note was important; short notes could not be skated over as singers were inclined to do in much other operatic music. Indeed, the last memo from Wagner to the cast of the premiere performance of the *Ring* was:

Last request
to my faithful artists
Distinctness!
The big notes will take care of themselves; the little notes and their text are the chief thing. Never say anything to the public but always look at each other; in the monologues look either up or down, but never directly in front of you.
Last wish:
Be good to me, you dear children.²⁵

²³ Trippett, “Bayreuth in Miniature,” 74.

²⁴ Quoted in Trippett, “Bayreuth in Miniature,” 85.

²⁵ Quoted in Richard Wagner, *The Story of Bayreuth as Told in the Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. Caroline Kerr (Charleston SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 249.

Wagner certainly knew the capabilities and evocative power of the operatic voice, and his enduring love of the music of Bellini suggests that he valued smooth vocal delivery and the ability to seamlessly meld the word and the musical phrase. Even the *Ring* contains vocal ornaments that were part of the Italian *bel canto* style. His singers would be used to singing the major roles in the Italian and French repertoire and therefore were well schooled in *bel canto* technique, and would have brought vocal beauty and flexibility to Wagner's music. But Wagner was looking for something much more than pure vocalism. He wrote movingly after the sudden and unexpected death of the singer Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, his first Tristan:

Now, the singing-voice has hitherto been trained on none but the Italian model; there existed no other. Italian vocalism, however, was informed with the whole spirit of Italian music; at its prime its most thorough exponents were the castrati, since the spirit of this music made for merely sensuous pleasure, without a spark of nobler passion whilst the voice of the adolescent male, the tenor, was scarcely then employed at all, or, as later, in a falsetto masking as the voice of the castrato. Yet, under the undisputed leadership of German genius, and particularly of Beethoven, more modern music has soared to the height and dignity of sterling Art through this one thing: that, beyond the sensuously pleasurable, it has drawn the spiritually energetic and profoundly passionate into the orbit of its matchless Expression. How then can the masculine voice, trained to the earlier musical tendency, take up the tasks afforded by our German art of nowadays? Cultivated for a mere material appeal to the senses, it here sees nothing but fresh demands on material strength and sheer endurance, and the modern singing-master therefore makes it his principal aim to equip the voice to meet them. How erroneous is this procedure, may be easily imagined; for any male singing-organ merely trained for physical force will succumb at once, and bootlessly, when attempting to fulfill the tasks of newer German music, such as are offered in my own dramatic works, if the singer be not thoroughly alive to their spiritual significance.²⁶

This new direction for vocalism that Wagner was pioneering met with much resistance as a contemporary review noted:

[Wagner's] music only aims to characterize, the singers shall no longer sing but declaim musically; the orchestra shall do nothing but illustrate the poetic contents. With more self-criticism and less hubris this could lead opera to melodrama.²⁷

There is an important distinction to be made in the use of the voice between the two giants of nineteenth-century opera. For Verdi the visceral quality of the voice carries much of the meaning; the voice is frequently pushed to its extremities both dynamically and in terms of range and flexibility; much of the 'meaning' and significance of the performance resides in the sonorous materiality of the voice itself—the way in which language and vocal tone interact—the 'grain of the voice,' or what Roland Barthes further elaborates as 'voices within the voice.'²⁸ Text is very important, and Verdi's exhortations to his many librettists are legendary, but one senses

²⁶ 'Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld,' *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 4, 238–9.

²⁷ Quoted in Trippett, "Bayreuth in Miniature," 89.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice,' *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 184.

that it is in vocal excitement, whether of the *bel canto* kind in the earlier works, or declamation infused with drama as in many of the middle and later operas, that the essential significance lies. For Wagner, however, it is always the crucial amalgam of voice and text—voice itself is important but how effectively the voice delivers the text is fundamental; the voice is a means of conveying meaning, and, of course, not the only one.

After Wagner's death his desire for this challenging combination of vocal beauty married to crisp and flexible articulation degenerated into what became known as the 'Bayreuth bark,' where much of the tonal quality was sacrificed to the projection of the text—this unfortunately persists even to this day! This trend must also be ascribed to the less forgiving acoustics of other theatres compared with Bayreuth, the growth in size of both theatres and orchestras, and the increasing volume of orchestral instruments.

Wagner had highly developed ideas on acting, and as with the musical preparation there needed to be total immersion by the singer in the drama. This is linked to his fundamental ideas as to the nature of drama drawn from the Greeks and filtered through Shakespeare. We do not have detailed knowledge of acting styles in Shakespeare's day, but the famous speech of Hamlet to the players suggests exaggeration and 'ham' were widespread and accepted, which is what Hamlet urges them to resist:

suit the action to the word, the
word to the action; with this special o'erstep not
the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is
from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the
first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the
mirror up to nature. (III. ii. 18–23)

Wagner saw in the dramaturgy and language of Shakespeare's plays a sense of naturalism in presentation that could be translated into music drama. He commented in 'Actors and Singers':

Shakespeare's dramas point us to a histrionic style for which there seem in truth to be no laws at all, as it forms itself the fundamental law of naturalism in all mimetic playing worth the name ... All his figures bear the stamp of faithfulness to nature in such a marked degree, that the first pre-requisite for mastering the task he set appears to be mere freedom from affectation.²⁹

In Wagner's view there was no need for the singer to self-consciously 'act'—gesture and movement would arise organically and spontaneously out of the drama. He viewed the dramaturgical structure of his new music theatre as facilitating an organic approach to dramatic representation arising out of the naturalism of the dialogue, observing that

my singers and choristers know that with the acquittal of their so difficult musical tasks they arrived at the mastery of a continuous *dialogue*, which came to them at last as easily and naturally as the commonest talk of everyday. They who before, when 'opera-singing' was the word, had thought needful to fall at once into the spasms of false pathos, now found themselves led to take that dialogue sharp and crisp with the utmost truth to nature and only from this starting-point to gradually attain the pathos of emotion; which then, to their own amazement, had an effect they never could bring about with their utmost convulsive straining.

²⁹ Wagner, 'Actors and Singers,' 190.

If I thus may claim for my musical signs the merit of having given the singer the surest guide to a natural mode of dramatic delivery, now totally lost by even the 'reciting' actor, I have inversely to explain the hitherto unwonted fullness of my later scores by the sheer necessity of discovering for the singer that correct indication of a thoroughly natural rendering.³⁰

While this approach was highly effective under Wagner's supervision, and despite the detailed stage directions that abound in his later scores through which he endeavoured to attain a Shakespearean naturalism, the 'Bayreuth Style' of acting, as it became known in time, developed rigidity and a lack of innovation and renewal when Cosima took over running the Festival after Wagner's death. The naturalism that he so desired was drained from these later performances where the adherence to Wagner's own stage directions reigned supreme, something it would seem that Wagner himself would have strenuously resisted.

There is perhaps an irony here in the fact that both Shakespeare and Wagner have become such an incredibly fertile ground for the imaginations of directors and stage designers where stage sets sometimes overwhelm everything else; yet both are ultimately and fundamentally text-driven artists—text is the fundamental element of the drama. Wagner remarked how the theatre of Shakespeare became 'corrupted' by an ever-increasing desire for spectacle, whereas in Shakespeare's time it was left to the power of the language to conjure images in the mind of the audience. Of his own time he often despaired, endorsing Ludwig Tieck's desire for a return to the essential nature of this theatre:

Fully recognising the essence of Shakespearean Drama, Tieck demanded the restoration of Shakespeare's stage, with its Scene referred to an appeal to Phantasy. This demand was thoroughly logical, and aimed at the very spirit of Shakespearean Drama [...] The second proposal was directed to employing the gigantic apparatus of Operatic scenery for the representation of Shakespearean Drama too, by a faithful exhibition of the constant change of scene that had originally been only hinted at by him. Upon the newer English stage, people translated Shakespeare's Scene into the most realistic actuality; wonders of mechanism were invented, for the rapid change of the most elaborate stage-mountings: marches of troops and mimic battles were presented with astonishing exactitude. In the larger German theatres this course was copied.

In face of this spectacle, the modern Poet stood brooding and bewildered. As literature, Shakespearean Drama had given him the exalting impression of the most perfect poetic unity; so long as it had only addressed his phantasy, that phantasy had been competent to form therefrom a harmoniously rounded image: but now, with the fulfilment of his necessarily wakened longing to see this image embodied in a thorough representment to the senses, he saw it vanish suddenly before his very eyes. The embodiment of his fancy-picture had merely shewn him an unsurveyable mass of realisms and actualisms, out of which his puzzled eye absolutely could not reconstruct it. This phenomenon produced two main effects upon him, both of which resulted in a disillusionment as to Shakespeare's Tragedy. Henceforth the Poet either renounced all wish to see his dramas acted on the stage, so as to be at peace again to model according to his intellectual aim the fancy-picture he had borrowed from Shakespearean Drama,—i.e. he wrote literary-dramas for dumb reading;—or else, so

³⁰ Wagner, 'Actors and Singers,' 210. The implied reference to *Hamlet* is interesting in this context.

as to practically realise his fancy-picture on the stage, he instinctively turned more or less towards the reflective type of drama, whose modern origin we have traced to the pseudo-antique (*antikisirenden*) drama, constructed according to Aristotle's rules of Unity.³¹

There is a contemporary description by his assistant, Heinrich Porges, of Wagner supervising the first *Ring* rehearsals that paints a vivid picture of what he was trying to achieve in the staging of the work. Wagner himself was described as possessing 'an amazing gift for transformation into any conceivable shape or form—like Proteas.' Porges further notes:

This power to influence and vitalize directly by example bears witness to Wagner's affinity with Shakespeare. What is especially important, though, is that the principles governing his style of dramatic presentation were essentially in accord with Shakespeare's. All the directions that he gave pertaining to the action—to the gestures, the positioning, the articulation of the sung words—were governed by what he himself has described as the basic Principle of Shakespearean drama, namely 'mimic-dramatic naturalness' (*mimisch-dramatisch Naturlichkeit*) ... Though everything Wagner did at the rehearsals—every movement, every expression, every intonation—bore out this principle of fidelity to nature, one must not forget that he was simultaneously handling the whole vast music-dramatic apparatus and endeavouring to convert it into a living breathing organism ... through the performance of the *Ring* the goal was achieved of combining the realistic style of Shakespeare with the idealistic style of antique tragedy; of bringing about an organic union between a highly stylized art, striving for a direct embodiment of the ideal, with an art rooted in fidelity to nature (*Naturwahrheit*). An ideal naturalness and an ideality made wholly true to nature—this is the direction in which Wagner was endeavouring to guide his performers.³²

This combination of the desire for naturalism within a fundamentally stylised dramaturgy is an ideal that still motivates many directors.

It is no wonder that perhaps more than any other operatic work, the *Ring* lends itself to such a wide variety of interpretation and staging. This is particularly evident in the recent flood of filmed stagings beamed into cinemas in HD: one wonders what Wagner would have made of it? He embraced the newest technologies of his day—Theodor Adorno went as far as to claim that 'film was born out of the spirit of Wagner's music'³³—and his operas remain a highly fruitful site for creative teams to explore, much like the theatre of Shakespeare which still attracts a huge range of stage and film directors contributing to the countless re-interpretations and adaptations. But it must be remembered that ultimately the drama is carried by the words in Shakespeare, and Wagner's unique fusion of text and music with his 'speaking orchestra' is where the essence of the drama, and its enduring appeal, lies.

Many of the great innovations Wagner brought to opera owe their origin to his deep immersion in Greek tragedy but perhaps even more to Shakespeare's plays, which he knew so intimately. There is constant reference to Shakespeare in Wagner's theoretical writings as well as the exhaustive anecdotal comments of Cosima, all of which suggest Shakespeare's

³¹ Wagner, 'Opera and Drama,' *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 2, 137–9.

³² Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing The Ring: An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival*, 1881, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), 3–5.

³³ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 2005), 96.

importance for Wagner, whose drama ultimately suggests Greek tragedy as refracted through the individualism of Shakespeare. This fascination with Shakespeare never waned. One of his last recorded comments on Shakespeare occurs in 1882 where, with a sense of frustration as well as wonder, he remarked of the Bard: 'He is unbearable because he is unfathomable! Aeschylus, Sophocles were the products of their culture but he! And he knew everything.'³⁴ Through a supreme act of will, and, primarily, by means of the *Ring*, Wagner changed the course of opera and our understanding of it forever—as Shakespeare did to the course of Western drama through plays such as *King Lear*.

³⁴ CW, 27 Mar. 1882, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 833.