

BOOK REVIEW

Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks. By Daniel H. FOSTER. Cambridge Studies in Opera. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xx + 377. Hardcover, £58.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-51739-3.

Mark Twain famously quipped that Wagner's music is better than it sounds. On the other hand, Nietzsche (sometimes) loved the music but came to detest the composer. Few listeners and critics are neutral regarding the man and/or his music, and both subjects continue to attract critical attention. The relationship between Wagner and the Greeks has received especially close scrutiny these days. Here, Daniel H. Foster offers an exciting and original view of the relationship between Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and Greek literature.

According to Foster, Wagner conceived the *Ring* through the lens of an Hegelian-inspired theory of the development of Greek literature, so that much about the four operas can be explained in terms of their gradual movement through four stages followed in the development of literature: epic, lyric, tragedy, and comedy, the last of which Wagner believed to be implicated in the downfall of Greek civilization. In this Hegelian system, each stage in the development retains something of the prior stage and anticipates what is to come later. The first two operas create German national identity in two Greek-inspired epic stages. *Das Rheingold* exudes the epic flavor of cosmogony through its musical metaphor for the creation of the world. As in Hesiod, the opera also features two brothers, Mime and Alberich, who are at odds over an unfair distribution of wealth. *Die Walküre* then ushers in Siegmund as an epic hero. *Siegfried*, the third opera, deals with a hero's search for freedom and identity and thus mimics the historically later Greek search for individualized personhood characteristic of the lyric age. Siegfried, the son of Siegmund, is uncertain about his parentage and begins the opera concerned that he might share a bloodline with his guardian Mime. In the end, Siegfried kills him. Just so Foster claims, "Wagner's German hero must kill the Jew" (149). This identification of Mime with the Jewish people may be something of an overstatement. True, Wagner was anti-Semitic, but I am not aware that he ever explicitly identified *any* of his characters with the Jews, but I may be mistaken. In creating Mime, however, Wagner was perhaps thinking of his (Jew-

ish) rival Mendelssohn. Siegfried only starts out as a lyric figure. After vanquishing the dragon and drinking its blood, he begins the transformation into a tragic hero, a process brought to fruition in *Götterdämmerung*. Foster considers the fourth opera as both tragedy and comedy.

Foster avoids the pitfalls characteristic of scholarship that seeks out parallels between an artist's work and something in the past and makes claims for the presence of unmediated, direct influence. (Teresa Rondon Rota's *The Classic in Wagner: A Search for the Ring of the Nibelung in the Iliad* is an extreme example of such scholarship.) Foster has a more nuanced version of reception studies. His interest is focused not on Wagner and his relationship with ancient sources but on the whole nineteenth-century German *Zeitgeist* through which antiquity was mediated and presented to him. Wagner was fired by *scholarship* on the Greeks as much as by their literature. In addition to studying the works of philosophers and scholars like Hegel and Karl Otfried Müller, Wagner authored a number of theoretical works. Foster demonstrates that Wagner's theoretical writings do not always accord perfectly with his musical practice. For example, in his writings Wagner extols Greek tragedy and criticizes the role of Greek comedy in the dissolution of the Athenian state, but, Foster says, "the finale to the *Ring* is anything but a straightforward approval of the one and disapproval of the other" (195f.).

The analysis of *Götterdämmerung* as tragedy *and* comedy leaves me unsatisfied. In terms of comedy, Foster sees the opera as a kind of "Aristophanic parody." He compares the conflagration at the end of *Götterdämmerung* to the conclusion of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, though in the opera not even the gods escape the "cosmic bonfire" (233). Few critics, he says, have even glimpsed the joke (220f.). I have enjoyed three productions of the *Ring* Cycle, but I have never glimpsed the joke, nor have I even once thought of Aristophanes while sitting through *Götterdämmerung*. Foster argues that elements of New Comedy are also present in that characters in such comedy are often converted to a new order rather than banished from it (248). Viewing the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* as a kind of Greek tragedy seems to me equally problematic because the fall of Valhalla and the demise of the gods resemble nothing to be found in Greek tragedy—except for possible intimations in the *Prometheus* that Zeus might eventually be overthrown.¹ (Novelist John Gardner once said that he loved German mythology because in the end the gods lose.)

¹ For possible connections between the *Ring* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, see Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts: Classical Influences in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centu-*

Fans of Wagner will find this book a stimulating enterprise likely to change the way they look at Greek influence on the *Ring Cycle*. Even those who, like Mark Twain, think Wagner's music is better than it sounds will read the book with enjoyment and profit—and without the pain of having to listen to how the music *sounds*.

ROBERT RABEL

University of Kentucky, rlabel@email.uky.edu

ries (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 140–1. Foster has very little to say about the *Oresteia*, which is surprising given the extent of Aeschylean influence others have discerned in the *Ring Cycle*: see, for example, Michael Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).