



Illustration 1: 'Aeschylus and Shakespeare, who according to [Heinrich] Porges, are the only two dramatists with whom Wagner can be compared, pay homage to the Master in their historically correct dress', caption to an 1876 cartoon from the time of the first complete performance of the *Ring* at Bayreuth.

## Chapter One

# Wagner and his Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>

Wagner was never shy to acknowledge his indebtedness to Aeschylus and Shakespeare, seeing himself as their heir and a dramatist of comparable, if not superior, stature – a claim that did not escape the attention of a contemporary cartoonist.

It is of course the Aeschylean influence, and that of the Greek tragedians as whole, that has attracted most attention, as from Wolfgang Schadewaldt, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Michael Ewans, Simon Goldhill, Daniel H. Foster and many others.<sup>2</sup> But Wagner was

1. Source: Unpublished talk given at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, 28 October 2013; for the London Wagner Society, 10 September 2015; and in the Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh, 23 September 2016.

2. From the extensive bibliography, I mention a mere handful of titles: Wolfgang Schadewaldt, 'Richard Wagner und die Griechen', three articles in the *Bayreuther Programmhefte*, 1962-64; a translation of the first article by David C. Durst, with a commentary by John Deathridge, in *Dialogos (Hellenic Studies Review)*, no. 6 (1999); Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts* (London: Duckworth, 1982); Michael Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus: The 'Ring' and the 'Oresteia'* (London: Faber, 1982); Simon Goldhill, 'Wagner and the Greeks'

stunningly well read across the spectrum of Western literature. Along with the Greek dramatists his favourite authors included Calderón, Lope de Vega, Goethe, Lessing, Schiller, E.T.A. Hoffmann – and, especially, Shakespeare. I will try to suggest that the Shakespearean influence has been unjustly overlooked,<sup>3</sup> and will conclude by discussing three outstanding post-war stagings of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* that were Shakespearean in character.

Yes, Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a composer. But for Wagner, it was always drama, intensified through and in *music*, that was his goal. Not 'opera' in any Italian or French sense, but German music-drama, an apotheosis of every dramatic form known to him. And it was to Shakespeare's plays, which he knew inside out, that he returned more often than to any other inspirational source.

### A theatrical apprenticeship

Richard Wagner, ninth child of his parents, was born on 22 May 1813 in Leipzig in the old inn *Zum Roten und Weißen Löwen* (The Red and White Lion). He could scarcely have been born into a more theatrical family. His father, Carl Friedrich (1770-1813), was not only a police actuary but also a keen amateur actor. Albert (1799-1874), Richard's elder brother, became a high tenor and later a stage manager. The five daughters, Rosalie, Luise, Klara, Maria Theresia and Ottilie, were named after heroines in Goethe and Schiller.

Carl Friedrich, the father, died very shortly after Richard's birth, and his mother Johanna married the actor, dramatist and portrait painter Ludwig Geyer (1779-1821). It was Geyer whom Richard had to thank for his earliest theatrical experiences. The family soon moved to Dresden where Geyer had been hired as a character actor. He smuggled his young stepson into rehearsals, and soon Richard was himself on stage in various comedies. He recalls figuring in one of these as 'an angel, entirely sewn up in tights and with wings on my back, in a graceful, though laboriously studied, pose'.<sup>4</sup> It was actually as a cupid; but Wagnerian autobiography, however entertaining, has always to be read with caution.

Richard was especially close to his actress eldest sister, Rosalie (1803-37). Her career blossomed, and when the Royal Saxon Court Theatre in Leipzig reopened on 2 August 1829 it was she who was chosen to speak a specially written Prologue.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by a performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, given in August Wilhelm Schlegel's translation.

Most theatres then alternated performances of plays, operas and ballets. Shakespeare's works were the nucleus of the repertory. This was not surprising. For Shakespeare had

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in the programme book for the production of the *Ring* at the Royal Opera House, London, 1991; Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's 'Ring' Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3. A notable exception is Yvonne Nilges' dissertation *Richard Wagners Shakespeare* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007).

4. *My Life (Mein Leben)*, trans. Andrew Grey, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 5. Subsequently *ML*.

5. By Theodor Hell.

long since been hugely influential in Germany. Goethe and many others virtually regarded him as a German: had not Hamlet been educated at Wittenberg?<sup>6</sup>

The plays given in Leipzig included not only *Julius Caesar* but also *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.<sup>7</sup> Rosalie was the company's young romantic lead, her roles including Cordelia, Portia, Beatrice, Desdemona and Ophelia. And of course her teenage brother, long since enthused by the Bard, saw all of these.<sup>8</sup> He was already a fervent disciple, and in 1826 had thrown himself heart and soul into the English language, producing 'a metrical rendering of Romeo's monologue into German as its first-fruit'.<sup>9</sup>

Young Richard's Shakespearean education also owed much to his uncle Adolf (1774-1835), his father's younger brother, of whom he speaks with gratitude and affection in *Mein Leben*. As a young man Adolf had known Schiller and he became a literary scholar and linguist of no mean accomplishment, with an international perspective that was exceptional for the time. He translated copiously from Greek, Latin, Italian and English with equal facility, his publications including editions of Burns, Byron and translations of Augustine Skottowe's *Life of Shakespeare* (1824) and of Mrs [Anna Brownell] Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1832).<sup>10</sup>

Disliking the travesties to suit fashionable taste that were the rule in most Shakespearean performances that the young Richard would have seen, Adolf was the enthusiastic director of, and participant in, readings of the plays in the homes of his friends. In his nephew, Adolf could not have found a more eager pupil. Young Richard had been boarded out in Leipzig with him for some weeks in the summer of 1822. But it was when his family moved there from Dresden at the end of 1827 that Richard was able to spend long and profitable hours with his mentor. In *Mein Leben* Wagner recalled how:

Every day I picked him up for his afternoon constitutional around the gates of the city. I imagine that we frequently provoked the amusement of passers-by, who overheard our profound and frequently heated discussions.<sup>11</sup>

6. See, for example, Roger Paulin, *The Critical Reception of Shakespeare in Germany 1682-1914* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2003). I am most grateful to Professor Paulin for his kind advice and for a copy of Julius Petersen's 1930 article on Ludwig Tieck's Berlin production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of 1843 (which is fully referenced in note 25).

7. Translations by August Wilhelm Schlegel, except for *Macbeth*, where the translation is by Schiller.

8. Although Wagner saw a great many Shakespeare plays in his youth, it is not until 1844 that we have a reasonably documented account of what he would actually have seen.

9. William Ashton Ellis, *Life of Richard Wagner*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. Ltd, 1900), p. 93.

10. The titles of Adolf's translations are: *William Shakespeares Leben* (Leipzig: 1825) and *Frauenbilder oder Charakteristik der vorzüglichen Frauen in Shakespeares Dramen* (Leipzig: 1834). The original title of Mrs Jameson's book was *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. It was subsequently changed to *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. It is regarded as a seminal feminist study, and has often been reprinted.

11. *ML*, p. 23.



Illustration 2: The 15-year-old Wagner on his afternoon tutorial walk with Uncle Adolf, as depicted in watercolour in 1880 by Isolde, his 15-year-daughter. On the right, a scene from *Leubald*, a sin of the composer's youth, presided over by its inspiration, Shakespeare.

Those discussions would doubtless have engaged with the fastidious Adolf's appalled censure of his pupil's *Leubald*, a five-act tragedy:

to which Shakespeare, principally through *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Lear*, and Goethe, through *Götz von Berlichingen*, had contributed. ... nothing I had gathered from tales of chivalry, nor anything I had garnered from *Lear* and *Macbeth*, was left out. ... One of the main ingredients of my poetic fancy, I owed to Shakespeare's mighty language, emotional and humorous. The boldness of my grandiloquent and bombastic expressions particularly upset and amazed my uncle Adolf.<sup>12</sup>

There could be no more eloquent testimony to the importance of Adolf and Shakespeare in Richard's young life than the picture by his daughter Isolde.

It comes from an album of year-by-year watercolours – a sort of 'Daddy, this is your Life' – presented to her father on his sixty-seventh birthday in 1880.<sup>13</sup> Isolde was then 15, exactly the same age as her father when he wrote *Leubald*. Of all the 1828 events

12. *ML*, pp. 25-27. The complete German text of *Leubald: Ein Trauerspiel* was published for the first time in the 1988 *Bayreuther Programmheft* for *Die Meistersinger*, together with an article in German, English and French by Isolde Vetter describing the complex provenance of a text which for many years was considered lost.

13. Dagny R. Beidler, *Für Richard Wagner! Die 'Rosenstöcke-Bilder' seiner Tochter Isolde* (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2013).



Illustration 3: Isolde Wagner's depiction of Ada conjuring Arindal back to life in Act Three of *Die Feen* (The Fairies) by singing to his lyre.

she could have chosen, it is surely significant that she depicted, on the left, her father taking his regular afternoon walk at the Leipzig city gate with Adolf, his mentor in 'everything serious and exalted in the realm of knowledge',<sup>14</sup> and on the right a scene from *Leubald*. The hero, appropriately in a blood-red cloak, strikes a Hamlet-like pose among a handful of the eight corpses he'd slain (the total body count is eighteen). A portrait of Shakespeare hovers above.

The author believed that his 'work could only be judged rightly when provided with the *music* I had now decided to write for it'.<sup>15</sup> That was not to happen. But he pressed ahead with his musical studies. Thanks to the recommendation of his elder brother, the singer Albert, Richard, now 20, became chorus master in Würzburg in 1833. Choral duties were not his only ones, for he had to take speaking parts in plays and even swell mime groups in the ballet.

### ***Die Feen and Das Liebesverbot***

At the same time, he began his first opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies). Though he modelled it on Gozzi's story 'La donna serpente', Wagner unsurprisingly imports Shakespearean elements, including a mad scene in Act Two for its hero, Arindal, that is plainly borrowed from *King Lear*. In Gozzi, Arindal's wife, Ada, is transformed into a snake. But Wagner is surely remembering *The Winter's Tale* when he has Ada not transformed into a snake but petrified into a statue. And Ada is miraculously restored to life through the power

14. *ML*, p. 23.

15. *ML*, p. 27.



Illustration 4: Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, 'daughter of the great Shakespeare', as a trouser-role Romeo in the tomb-scene of Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, known to Wagner in its German version, *Romeo und Julia*.

of music (Arindal singing to a lyre) just as Hermione is in *The Winter's Tale* in response to Paulina's cry, 'Music: awake her: strike!'<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Wagner was unable to secure a performance of *Die Feen*. It was never given in his lifetime – its premiere had to wait until 1888 under Franz Richter in Munich. I was lucky enough to have caught the first performance after the Second World War. This was given by the Bayreuth Youth Festival in 1967, with my future wife Jill Gomez in the role of Lore, sister to Arindal.

The following year, 1834, Wagner moved to Magdeburg as full music director. Within a few months he was swept off his feet by the great singing actress Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient.<sup>17</sup> She was playing Romeo (a travesty role) in Bellini's *Romeo und Julia*, the German-language equivalent of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*; this is actually based not on Shakespeare but on an Italian novella (1554) by Matteo Bandello.<sup>18</sup> We could perhaps

16. Plainly there is a common precedent in Ovid's story of the sculptor Pygmalion, whose infatuation with the beauty of the statue he has made charms it into life. But Wagner's debt is most obviously to Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*.

17. It was actually back in Leipzig in March 1834.

18. Bandello's novella was known to Shakespeare through his immediate source in Arthur Brooke's narrative poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). But there are considerable differences between Shakespeare's version of the story and that of Bellini's librettist, Felice Romani.

think of her as the Maria Callas of her day, though she would have paid less attention to the notes on the page.

A few years later in Paris, in November 1839, Wagner was bowled over by Berlioz's great Shakespearean interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* in his dramatic symphony. Wagner could have paid no greater compliment to Berlioz than with the palpable echoes of the symphony's adagio love-theme that resound through *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>19</sup>

In Schröder-Devrient Wagner discovered the soprano of his dreams – a singer who was as powerful an actress as she was a singer. Heinrich Laube, a close friend of Wagner's, described her as 'the daughter of the great Shakespeare, a descendant of the Greek gods'.<sup>20</sup>

Within a few months, in June 1834, and fired up by this experience, Wagner turned to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, or *Mass für Mass*,<sup>21</sup> as his model for a new opera, *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love). It had to be subtitled 'The Novice of Palermo' in order to placate the censor, and was a shameless bid to capture the high ground of Italianate opera that he was later so vehemently to deride.

Wagner would certainly have had Schröder-Devrient in mind for his Isabella in *Liebesverbot*. The opera is an exceedingly free adaptation of *Measure for Measure*, Wagner calling in Shakespeare to support the libertarian programme of the radical Young German movement to which he himself belonged:

All I cared about was to uncover the sinfulness of hypocrisy and the artificiality of the judicial attitude toward morality. Thus, I departed from *Measure for Measure* entirely and let the hypocrite be punished only by the avenging power of love.<sup>22</sup>

The finales of both acts of *Liebesverbot* end in un-Shakespearean populist uprisings. And Wagner crudely rewrites the ambivalent and darkly troubling ending of the play, with Isabella launching a call to arms:

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| <p><i>Ihr Heil'gen, welche Schändlichkeit! ...<br/>Greift zu den Waffen! Auf zur Rache!<br/>Stürzt ihn, den schändlichsten<br/>Tyrannen!</i></p> | <p><i>(Holy saints, what villainy! ...<br/>Seize your weapons! Vengeance!<br/>Topple this most shameful tyranny!)</i></p> |
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19. In an 1857 essay on Liszt's symphonic poems, Wagner praises Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* but ticks him off for following Shakespeare's play too faithfully, arguing that as a dramatic composer he should have allowed purely musical considerations to have determined the shape of his symphony. The message is that composers, once inspired by a literary drama, should transform it into a superior, because quintessentially *musical*, drama. Wagner surely acknowledged his debt in the inscription in the score of *Tristan und Isolde* he presented to Berlioz: "To the dear and great composer of "Romeo and Juliet", the grateful composer of "Tristan and Isolde." In Berlioz, the Shakespearean influence was of course far more direct and pervasive than in Wagner.

20. Oswald Georg Bauer, *Richard Wagner Goes to the Theatre*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Bayreuth: Bayreuth Festival, 1996), p. 35.

21. As he knew it in Christoph Martin Wieland's translation.

22. *ML*, p. 83. Wagner's detailed description of the action is in *ML*, pp. 113-18.



Illustration 5: To the left of Isolde's spreading tree, the finale of *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love) in which Isabella and the King are married, a flagrant departure from Wagner's source in *Measure for Measure*. On the right of the tree, Schröder-Devrient's Romeo has his shapely leg well over the parapet in the balcony scene from Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*.

Could there be an embryonic *Götterdämmerung* Brünnhilde here too?

In Isolde's picture for 1834, the wicked German killjoy Friedrich (Shakespeare's Angelo), is seen to the left, repentant, with his wife Mariana. And we can see that, because Isolde is thinking of Shakespeare's Duke, she has Isabella marry the King. The scene on the right takes us back to Bellini's *Romeo und Julia* with Schröder-Devrient as Romeo, and an unknown Juliet.

The first performance of *Das Liebesverbot*, conducted by Wagner after ten days' rehearsal, was famously a fiasco. The advertised second performance was abandoned after backstage fighting broke out between Isabella's real-life husband and her real-life lover, the young and handsome tenor playing Claudio. The handsome tenor retreated to his dressing room with a bloodied face. So much, we may think, for the opera's celebration of free love.

In 1837 Wagner moved to Riga as music director. It was there, he tells us, that he enjoyed 'extremely good performances' of *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*.<sup>23</sup> The indelible impression that *Lear* left on him is testified by Isolde's inclusion of the play as a key experience of 1838.

To the left is a scene from Méhul's *Joseph en Égypte* (Joseph in Egypt, in the German version known to Wagner *Joseph in Ägypten*) which Wagner much admired and conducted in Riga, while the central image is of the concluding conflagration in *Rienzi* on which he was working at the time. In Bulwer Lytton's novel, the composer's primary source, it is *Rienzi's wife* who heroically perishes with him in the Capitol. But in

23. Bauer, *Richard Wagner*, p. 46.