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## The Evolving Philosophical Stance of Richard Wagner and the Effects on His Female Characters from Senta to Kundry

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## The Evolving Philosophical Stance of Richard Wagner and the Effects on His Female Characters from Senta to Kundry

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The Evolving Philosophical Stance of Richard Wagner and the Effects on His Female Characters  
from Senta to Kundry

**Annotated Bibliography**

This bibliography analyzes the multiple effects of the philosophers Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche on the works of Richard Wagner. By analyzing the contradictions of these philosophers and the different manifestations of their ideas in the different works of Wagner, it is easy to see which philosopher held the greatest hold on Wagner at a certain time. Wagner marries the philosophies of Hegel and Schopenhauer despite the fact they considered themselves to be on polar opposites of the philosophical spectrum. However, asceticism and a quest for purity ultimately seem to be the driving forces behind Wagner's operas and depictions of women in his operas.

**Dissertations and Theses**

1. Barnes-Burroughs, Kathryn. "From the WomanGround: Wagner's Transformative Heroines." D.M.A. diss., University of Houston, 2000. PQDT.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/304592619/D0325404906C4315PQ/1?accountid=14608>.

Dr. Kathryn Barnes-Burroughs studied Wagner and his women extensively at the University of Houston in pursuit of her doctorate. In this article, Dr. Barnes-Burroughs argues that Wagner writes everything from a WomanGround, Wagner's term for all things "feminine, fertile, and creative," which was highly influenced by the women surrounding him in his adult life. Dr. Barnes-Burroughs argues that Elsa exhibits the true freedom of a nineteenth century woman in her sacrifice herself for Lohengrin. Elsa, Elisabeth, and Kundry all exhibit characteristics that were not typical of the bourgeois nineteenth century woman. They all act outside of the home and are motivated and transformed by love, which are actions directly contrasting with Hegel's idea of the ideal bourgeois woman as stated in Bahmbhri's "Domesticated Women: Questioning Hegel." Dr. Barnes-Burroughs makes the argument that Wagner was not as misogynistic as his primary influences, namely Hegel and Schopenhauer, and that he in fact has a great deal in common with the emerging feminists of the nineteenth century as evidenced in the numerous parallels between himself and American author Margaret Fuller. Dr. Barnes-Burroughs argues that Wagner's WomanGround extended beyond his characters into the music composition itself with harmony functioning as a womb for melody.

2. Bhambhri, Arvind. "Domesticated Woman: Questioning Hegel." Master's thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2010. PQDT.

[https://www.proquest.com/central/docview/858609946/B8524905E89E4234PQ/5?accountid=14608.](https://www.proquest.com/central/docview/858609946/B8524905E89E4234PQ/5?accountid=14608)

Arvind Bhambhri's master's thesis on the contradictory nature of Hegel's misogyny is a highly referenced source on Hegel, his fascination with Sophocles's Antigone, and his overwhelmingly biased opinions on women. Hegel argues that women have no place outside the home; their job is to birth and raise children. However, Hegel never gives solid evidence as to why this should be. As Jean-Philippe Deranty writes in his article on Hegel, if Hegel were to truly follow through with his line of philosophical thinking, women would be equal to men, but, unfortunately, a great deal of circular thinking had to take place to keep the nineteenth century status quo and women subjugated. Women were meant to be the passive creatures in a "civil society" while men were the active ones. Bhambhri strongly disagrees with Hegel that women cannot be equal to men in a perfect society. Hegel's thinking greatly influenced the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century which became the largest consumer of opera. Wagner wrote all his operas in this culture, but many of them are highly reactionary to this thinking, particularly evidenced by Kundry in *Parsifal*, Elsa in *Lohengrin*, and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*.

### Essays in Collections

3. Grimwood, Tom. 'Schopenhauer's 'On Women': The Limits of Misogyny.' In *Irony, Misogyny and Interpretation: Ambiguous Authority in Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*, 33- 57. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.  
[http://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login..aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=523763&site=ehost-live&scope=site.](http://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login..aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=523763&site=ehost-live&scope=site)

Associate professor of philosophy at the University of Cumbria, Dr. Tom Grimwood has published multiple books on the topics of hermeneutics and philosophy. In this essay, he argues that the idea of Schopenhauer being a serious misogynist has been prevalent since the 1930s; however, he argues that the general understanding has not delved into how sophisticated Schopenhauer's misogyny truly is. Grimwood furthers the idea that Schopenhauer did not hate women. Rather, he believed women to be "other." If one is other, it is impossible to be equal to man. The idea that women function as passive forces in society is virtually identical to Hegel's ideas as seen in Bhambhri's dissertation "Domesticated Women: Questioning Hegel." This is highly ironic as Schopenhauer is well known for despising Hegel and vice versa. Interestingly, Wagner does not appear to share this idea fully, especially in *Tannhäuser* when Elisabeth intercedes between Tannhäuser and the other knights for his salvation. These are not the actions of a woman who is only passive. Grimwood explores Schopenhauer's immense dislike of women's one "action:" seduction. Seduction is the only power women hold over men. Seduction destroys man's ability to overpower men; the worst of these women are prostitutes as they profit from the destruction of man using this action. Grimwood dismisses the authors who claim that

Schopenhauer is just misunderstood and not a misogynist at all, but he also refutes the claims of the authors who say Schopenhauer was nothing but an outright misogynist.

4. ———. “Nietzsche’s ‘Woman and Child’: Exceeding Misogyny.” In *Irony, Misogyny, and Interpretation: Ambiguous Authority in Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*, 115-37. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.  
<http://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=523763&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Associate professor Dr. Tom Grimwood explores the continuation of Schopenhauer’s ideas through their manifestation in Nietzsche in this essay. Whereas only some of Schopenhauer’s works can be viewed through a lens of irony, Grimwood claims that it would do the works of Nietzsche a great disservice to not be viewed through this lens. Nietzsche supports traditional gender roles not because of the two genders like Hegel and Schopenhauer before him, but because anything causing the rigidity of the family structure to crumble will affect society as a whole. Grimwood makes sure to point out that just because Nietzsche is slightly less overtly misogynistic than Schopenhauer, he is still a misogynist. Nietzsche posits that women are vain and shallow creatures who defer endlessly in their actions to their vanity. Nietzsche claims that the woman is the opposing figure to the Free Spirit (man). This statement is just as condescending as anything Schopenhauer wrote in “On Women.” Whereas Grimwood argues that Schopenhauer’s stance on prostitutes is the worst way a woman can control power over man in his essay “Schopenhauer’s ‘On Women:’ The Limits of Misogyny,” Nietzsche takes the stance in this essay that perverted maternal actions are the worst actions a woman can inflict on a man.

### **Journal Articles**

5. Atwell, John E. “Schopenhauer on Women, Men, and Sexual Love”: *The Midwest Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 143- 57.  
<https://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/schopenhauer-on-women-men-sexual-love/docview/195701589/se-2?accountid=14608>.

Having published multiple books on the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Emmanuel Kant, John E. Atwell is a well-known figure in the field of philosophy. In this article, Atwell emphasizes that Schopenhauer’s belief about women is that they contribute greatly to the intellect of children and whereas men contribute to the moral development of children. Moral development is tied directly to Schopenhauer’s idea of Will, which can only really be understood by men. Women symbolize the “denial of the will.” Atwell argues that if the world where only inhabited by men and ruled solely by Will that everyone would be worse off for it. Interestingly,

Schopenhauer's view on women changes greatly from *The World as Will and Representation* to "On Women." Atwell focuses more on the former in this article as mentioned above in Grimwood's article about Schopenhauer, "On Women" is a large perpetrator in the extensive misogyny often associated with Schopenhauer. Atwell furthers the idea that Schopenhauer believes women's cunning should not be praised as it is intrinsic to their personhood. This idea links to Nietzsche's misogyny as seen in Grimwood's essay on Nietzsche. The inherent traits of men and women are unalterable, so their places in society should simply be accepted. Atwell makes sure to include that even at the end of his life Schopenhauer is noted to have still been expanding his philosophy towards women; the assumption is that Schopenhauer was going to a less misogynistic stance.

6. Barry, Elizabeth Wendell. "What Wagner Found in Schopenhauer's Philosophy." *The Musical Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1925): 124–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738390>.

Published in the oldest academic music journal in the United States, Barry's essay takes the stance that Wagner found a great deal in Schopenhauer's philosophy, including that man is active and that "Intellect is the slave of the Will." According to Schopenhauer, "music can express the Will directly" and music is the most supreme form of art. This idea was furthered by Wagner in his quest for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Barry uses Wagner's own words to explain his fascination with Schopenhauer's philosophy. Interestingly, Barry explores the admiration of Buddhism that both Wagner and Schopenhauer shared. This fascination culminated in a desire for asceticism in Schopenhauer, but also the idea that the negation of will was the most supreme action any person could commit. Wagner uses this idea to its fullest potential in *Tristan und Isolde* as at the end they are only redeemed through their sacrifice of passion and physical love. From Buddhism, Schopenhauer gleaned that pity is the chief virtue of humanity. Using this, Wagner creates the physical embodiment of this virtue in the character Kundry in *Parsifal*. Kundry is essentially Mary Magdalene. Barry's lack of addressing Schopenhauer's misogyny in his philosophy is quite intriguing. Did Wagner despise his female characters like some mentioned in Atwell's article? Or was the misogyny so ingrained in the society as Deranty's article would imply that it was simply not worth mentioning at the time of this article's publication?

7. Coleman, Jeremy. Review of *Richard Wagner's Women*, by Eva Rieger, translated by Chris Walton; *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*, by Laurence Dreyfus. *Current Musicology* 96 (Fall 2013): 125-36. <https://doi.org/10.7916/cm.v0i96.5317>.

Musicologist at the University of Malta Jeremy Coleman, does not mince words in his scathing review of Eva Rieger's book *Richard Wagner's Women*. Because Coleman has written extensively on Wagner himself, this criticism should be taken as more than just a hit piece

against Rieger. Rieger writes from a feminist perspective about the women in Wagner's opera. Rieger paints Wagner's women as "sacrificial victims on the altar of men's salvation." From a cursory glance, this does seem to be true; however, Rieger does not address the philosophy that led to this being the case. Interestingly, Rieger hints at Wagner's composing from a WomanGround, as described by Barnes-Burroughs, without ever using that term herself. Coleman's repudiation of this book stems not from the rejection of a WomanGround, but from the careless editing and translation of this book as well as Rieger's overly simplistic analysis that any negative portrayal of a female character is just a fact of the time. Coleman is not as disappointed in Dreyfus's book; however, he points out that Dreyfus is almost fetishizing the erotic impulse in Wagner and perhaps adding some undertones to the music and stories that are not really there. The main critique of Dreyfus is his glaring omission of the theme of female subjugation.

8. Deranty, Jean-Philippe. "The "Son of Civil Society": Tensions in Hegel's Account of Womanhood." *The Philosophical Forum* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 145 - 62.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/0031-806X.00033>.

Editor of *Critical Horizons*, a journal on philosophy and social theory, and professor of philosophy at Macquarie University, Dr. Deranty's essay analyzing the contradictory views of Hegel on women in this article holds substantial weight in the field of philosophy. Deranty immediately states that if Hegel had truly followed his own philosophy to its natural conclusion, then Hegel would absolutely have been considered a radical feminist in the late eighteenth century. Hegel supports his claim of female inferiority with his implication that woman is only passive and can never be more than that; he uses male and female sexual biology as evidence of this. Hegel claims that society is rooted in reciprocal family units. How can a family unit truly be reciprocal if the man and woman cannot stand on equal footing? Hegel reinforces the idea of sexual division of labor, but qualifies that women should only raise babies and infants; anything beyond that and she will corrupt the minds of the male children. Deranty critiques Hegel's non-rational thinking in regards to this. Hegel viewed the modern woman as a parallel to Roman women, who the more freedom and personal autonomy they gained, the further society decayed. Hegel clearly overlooked some of the larger and far more important reasons for the decline of Roman civilization including the general excess of the ruling class. Deranty critiques Hegel's use of gender neutral and non-specific language as it should apply equally to men and women, but Hegel does not reach that same conclusion. Hegel's fascination with ancient Greek culture, as described in Bhambri's thesis "Domesticated Women: Questioning Hegel" is the perfect counterpart to this article by Deranty. Both reach the conclusion that Hegel changed his stance on women to fit into the social status quo even though that response does not follow his own line of thinking.

9. Labrie, Arnold. "Purity and Danger in Fin-de-siècle Culture: A Psychohistorical Interpretation of Wagner, Stoker, and Zola." *Psychoanalytische Prospectieven* 20, no. 2 (2002): 261- 74. <https://www.psychoanalytischeperspectieven.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Labrie.pdf>.

Professor of social and cultural history at Maastricht University in the Netherlands, Labrie is a leading source on social sciences in Europe. Labrie analyzes Wagner through a lens of searching for purity. He furthers the thought that purity is often associated with nationalism and racism, and, in Wagner's case, extreme antisemitism. The concept of purity manifest in Wagner's music with the idolization of chastity. In *Parsifal*, Kundry is derided because she is not chaste. In *Siegfried*, Wotan's punishment of Brünnhilde manifests itself in her having to stay chaste until she is freed from the circle of fire by Siegfried. Wagner's personal asceticism is also evidence of this quest for purity. In *Siegfried*, Wagner's desire for a pure Aryan and Christian her manifests itself in the form of Siegfried. He must free himself from Mime, a character based on terrible stereotypes of Jews, and, only when Siegfried is free of that burden, will he be able to truly fulfill his destiny. The purity of a chaste love is the ultimate form of love, and this is to be found in Elisabeth's love in *Tannhäuser*. She breaks the code of expected female behavior to intercede on behalf of a man whom she loves but has never been with in an "impure" way.

### **Secondary / Tertiary Monographs**

10. Wagner, Richard. *Opera & drama*. Translated by Edwin Evans. London: William Reeves, 1913.

As the source of great contention in the field of music, Richard Wagner wrote extensively about his thought process and how he synthesized the different philosophies of his time. This book explores Wagner's thoughts in making a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, including his reasoning for destroying the opera chorus. Opera choruses were simply noisy machines that distracted from the true meaning and action of the opera. This idea plays into Wagner's quest for purity as described by Labrie. Wagner admits that music is a WomanGround as all music is by nature feminine. True opera is a woman who loves and takes pride in her sacrifice. This idea is present in all of the heroines of Wagner's operas. Perhaps this is what Rieger was referencing when Coleman lambasted her book? Harmony is the womb that gives birth to melody; without harmony, no opera could ever exist. All action on stage is only possibly because of the verse-melody that comes forth from the harmony.

### **Sound and Video Recordings**

11. ———. *Siegfried*. Conducted by Artur Bodanzky. Recorded January 30, 1937, streaming audio. Accessed October 24, 2021. Met Opera on Demand.



This cast is comprised of world class Wagnerians including Artur Bodanzky, the leading Wagner conductor of the early twentieth century in America, as well as Lauritz Melchior as Siegfried, Kirsten Flagstad as Brunnhilde. In this opera, Wagner explores the concept of purity as described by Labrie, particularly is Siegfried's rejection of Mime's, the Jewish, influence in his life. As an audio only recording, it is easy to hear how the motifs are born in the harmony before they manifest in character or item appearances on the stage. The "birth" of characters from the music very much supports the idea that the music is female, a WomanGround as defined by Barnes-Burroughs. This opera also explores the consequences of an unchaste love between Siegmund and Sieglinde. Their deaths serve as a warning against the indulgences that Schopenhauer despised as seen in Barry's article about the connection between Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Buddhism.

12. ————. *Tannhäuser*. Conducted by Sir Colin Davis. Staged by Götz Friedrich. Recorded July 10, 1978. Deutsche Grammophon 2008, streaming video. Accessed October 24, 2021. [https://youtu.be/Yf8-S\\_1rNFI](https://youtu.be/Yf8-S_1rNFI).

One of the most sought-after conductors of his time, Sir Colin Davis is a leading authority on excellent conducting and musicianship as well as what happens when a conductor is truly connected to the text, the orchestra, and the singers all at once. This production is doubly valuable as it was recorded live at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, designed and created by Wagner himself. As a visual and audio recording, this serves as a perfect example of how Wagner wanted his works to be experienced, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This opera explores the idea of a self-sacrificing woman in the character of Elisabeth. She is so pure that she cannot let her love suffer. Elisabeth's death, a pure Christian death, redeems Tannhäuser and frees him from the clutches of Venus. This opera is an example of the negative side effects of purity as described by Labrie. This production is interesting because Gwennyth Jones, a world-renowned Wagnerian, portrays both Venus and Elisabeth. Venus holds the power of seduction as defined by Grimwood, but she also holds the power of redemption as Elisabeth. Having both character's be played by the same singer emphasizes the consequences of a woman leaving the home, safety, and subjugation of her family. This idea has lots of roots in Hegel as seen in Deranty's article.