

# Degenerate Religion and Masculinity in *Parsifal* Reception

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Our future historians will cull from still unpublished letters and memoirs... the idea that the performances at Bayreuth had really much the status of religious rites and that their effects were not unlike what is technically called a revival.

—Vernon Lee (1911: 875)

The idea that there is something religious about Bayreuth is not new, and goes well beyond clichés about opera houses as the “cathedrals of the bourgeoisie.” The words used to describe the festival by Wagnerians and anti-Wagnerians alike have often been consciously religious. One makes a pilgrimage to the holy site, there are acolytes who serve the holy work and the orthodoxy, heretics are excommunicated—the comparisons are all too obvious. Friedrich Nietzsche referred to this phenomenon in a letter to his friend Malwida von Meysenburg when he suggested that “all this Wagnerizing” was “an unconscious emulation of Rome” (Fischer-Dieskau 1974:202). Even in more recent times, after the moral, ideological, and organizational disasters that the festival was caught up in during the twentieth century, the skies above the Festspielhaus were scoured for signs of the white smoke announcing which member of the dysfunctional clan was to succeed the composer’s grandson Wolfgang Wagner.

If this musical Vatican has a central rite, it is surely *Parsifal*. Not an opera or a music drama but a “Bühnenweihfestspiel” (a “stage-festival-consecration-play”), Wagner’s last work leaves the cheerful paganism of the *Ring* far behind.<sup>1</sup> The composer had toyed with aspects of Christianity as far back as *Tannhäuser*, but in *Parsifal* he went much further, almost to the point, many believed, of creating opera as sacrament. Since the Second World War, controversies about the piece have been essentially political, but it was its religious content that most engaged contemporaries. At the time of the 1882 premiere much ink was spilt about whether the piece was Catholic or Protestant, or even Christian at all. There were plenty of Wagnerites who saw it as a profound new kind of religious experience, but other observers saw the work as heretical at best and out-and-out pagan at worst.

The plot of *Parsifal* certainly offered Christian and secular critics a lot to talk about. Amfortas, the king of the Grail Knights, has been stabbed in the side by the magic spear that pierced Christ’s side on the Cross. This morbid penetration is a symbolic punishment for his weakness in the face

of seduction by Kundry, a kind of female Ahaserus, a woman doomed to wander the earth after mocking Christ's Passion. The Knights guard the Holy Grail, but, as with the legend of the Fisher King, their kingdom is as sick as their king. Only the "Pure Fool" can bring redemption. In the first act Parsifal stumbles upon the Grail Kingdom, experiences the ritual of the unveiling of the grail, but does not yet understand its message. In the next act he resists Kundry's attempts to seduce him, achieving compassionate wisdom at the moment they kiss. Parsifal then takes the spear from Klingsor, the castrated evil wizard whom Kundry serves, makes the sign of the cross and destroys his castle. In the third act, Parsifal returns to the Grail Kingdom on Good Friday after many years of wandering. Kundry washes his feet and the oldest of the Grail Knights, Gurnemanz, anoints him the new King of the Grail. In the final scene, Amfortas refuses to reveal the grail and begs to be killed, but Parsifal heals and redeems him with the spear, orders the unveiling of the grail, at which point Kundry dies, redeemed, and a white dove descends above Parsifal's head. Thus, although Jesus is never named as such, Christian imagery suffuses the whole work.

The debate on the work's religious character occurred in the context of a fierce ideological struggle between church and state in the aftermath of the so-called *Kulturkampf*, which Bismarck had launched to establish the supremacy of the Protestant Prussian order over a united German Reich that had a very large Catholic population, including French and Polish minorities. The new state demanded that priests pass state exams, made church weddings legal only when registered with the state, and excluded the Jesuits from Germany. This "Culture-War" was arguably the most important political issue in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s, with dozens of Catholic priests imprisoned for refusing to accept the authority of the state in Church affairs.<sup>2</sup> There was even an assassination attempt against Bismarck by a Catholic. The death of Pius IX in 1878 calmed the atmosphere to some extent, but relations with the Vatican were only re-established in 1882. There was a strong ideological dimension to this struggle, as the progress, masculinity, and rationality associated with Protestantism were contrasted with the supposed reactionary, effeminate, and mystical nature of Catholicism and other "irrational" creeds. The medical profession, and psychiatry in particular, was one element in the new secular/Protestant Germany that was especially hostile to religious enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), particularly within the Catholic Church. "Rational" Christianity, as a bulwark of moral behavior, was all very well, but religious enthusiasm was scorned by mainstream medicine.

Thus, far from simply making Wagner more respectable, *Parsifal's* religious tone also gave it dangerous associations. It became a key element in the emerging medical-moral critique of Wagner's operas as degenerate, which can be seen in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Nordau, Eduard

Hanslick, and many other writers, journalists, and psychiatrists, and which later provided the psychiatric rhetoric for the Nazi concept of degenerate music. In this context it is striking that although the debate was ostensibly about religion and pathology, issues of willpower and masculinity were never far away. The strange lack of willpower of Parsifal, the “Pure Fool,” and the opera’s Schopenhauerian renunciation ethic seemed to compare unfavorably with the straightforward “healthy” manliness of Siegfried. Combined with the opera’s sensual and mystical ritualistic pomp, and its touch of occult art-religion, this led again to imputations of effeminacy and references to the developing medical discourse on homosexuality in discussions of *Parsifal*.

In this article, I argue that anxiety about masculinity is at the heart of the “diagnosis” of the religious character of Wagner’s last work as degenerate, as the expression of a pathological mystical outlook. I look at this important and neglected aspect of Wagner reception, examining the complex relationship between medicine, religion, and *Parsifal*. In considering the religious aspect of the debate on *Parsifal*, this article is in line with broader trends in historiography. Whereas twentieth-century scholars tended to downplay the influence of religious ideas on events, contemporary historians (who have seen the supposed decline of religion as a historical force dramatically reversed) are increasingly taking religion more seriously. The first section looks at the debate on the denominational character of the piece, its odd mixture of Catholic sensuality and ritualism and Protestant elements. This is followed by an analysis of the way that *Parsifal*’s Catholic elements gave it associations of degeneration and effeminacy for contemporaries. Next, I discuss the position of *Parsifal*’s religiously-tinged Schopenhauerian Pessimism in the light of psychiatry and Nietzsche’s notion of the will, both of which used medical language to denounce its renunciation ethic as pathological and effeminate. Finally, I will look at the way that Wagner’s own “art-religion” was received in esoteric circles, and how that too was related to debates on masculinity and degeneration.

### How Catholic is *Parsifal*?

Wagner’s last work is his most theatrical . . . the art of the theater is already baroque, it is Catholicism, it is the Church; and an artist like Wagner, used to dealing with symbols and elevating monstrosities, must have ended by feeling like a brother of priests, like a priest himself.

—Thomas Mann ([1933] 1985:94–95)

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Wagner himself was brought up as a Protestant and his letters and prose are full of verbal assaults on the Catholic Church, especially the Jesuits. For him, as for many “progressive” Protestants of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church represented political reaction and obscurantism. Even in 1878, Wagner said it was a “scandal” that the Catholic Church still existed, and called it the “plague of the world” (C. Wagner 1977, vol. 2:224–25).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless there are parts of Wagner’s work that clearly show Catholic influence, if not as an ally, then perhaps as a rival. As Wagner makes clear in *Mein Leben*, he had been accused of Catholic tendencies long before *Parsifal*, especially at the time of the premiere of *Tannhäuser*:

It was just at that time when the German-Catholic agitation, set in motion by Czernsky and Ronge as a highly Liberal and meritorious movement, was causing a great commotion. It was made out that by *Tannhäuser* I had provoked a reactionary tendency, and that precisely as Meyerbeer with his *Huguenots* had glorified Protestantism, so I with my latest opera would glorify Catholicism. The rumor that in writing *Tannhäuser* I had been bribed by the Catholic party was believed for a long time. (Wagner [1870–1880] 1963:378)

This lack of clarity in questions of doctrine is borne out in Cosima’s comments on Wagner’s religious beliefs. On January 30, 1880, she recorded in her diary that Wagner admitted to a Christianity “released from all denominations” (1977, vol. 2:224–25)<sup>4</sup> Such ecumenical aspirations would prove especially difficult at a time when confessional divisions were extremely politicized in the *Kulturkampf*, as Protestantism in discourse established itself as the patriotic and masculine denomination, in contrast to the effeminate and ultramontane (i.e., pro-Vatican) tendencies of Catholicism.

Wagner was told all about Catholic Mass by a Benedictine monk in Munich, who later outlined the experience in his book *Die Erinnerungen des Paters Petrus Hamp*. *Parsifal*’s emphasis on the symbol over the word, and of the grail over any doctrine, has clear connections to Catholicism, as does its dialectic of shame and grace—the core of much of the Catholicism espoused by self-declared decadents in particular. Some Catholics viewed *Parsifal* very positively, and without appealing to decadent elements in any way. For example, Abbé Marcel Hébert’s *Das religiöse Gefühl im Werke Richard Wagners* (1895) and Michel Domenech Espanyol’s *L’apothéose de la religion catholique: Parsifal de Wagner* (1902) both strongly argued that *Parsifal* was a Catholic work in the most positive sense.

The Protestant critic Johannes Hermann Wallfisch agreed that it was a Catholic piece, but took a much more hostile view, seeing the adoration of the grail as nothing but Catholic idolatry. He asked, “What do we children of the Reformation, the Bible in our hands, want with the grail?” (1914:9).<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, an anonymous Social Democrat in the *Fränkische Tagespost* in 1882 accused Wagner of siding with the Jesuits in *Parsifal* (Grossman-Vendry 1977–83:67), and in the Anglo-Irish writer George Moore’s novel *Evelyn Innes* Monsignor Martyn denounces *Parsifal* as “a parody of the Mass” (Moore 1898:298).

Wagner’s most famous critic (and former acolyte), Friedrich Nietzsche, reserved his greatest hostility for Wagner’s last work, in which he sensed not only an ascetic Pessimism, but also “a certain Catholicism of feeling,” not a positive thing for the son of a Protestant pastor (1973:135).<sup>6</sup> A poem in *Der Fall Wagner* gets straight to the point:

Is that still German?  
Did this sensuous screech come from a German heart?  
This tearing-oneself-apart from a German body?  
This priest’s hands spreading, German?  
The incense sensuality?  
German this falling, faltering, dizzying  
This sugar-sweet ding-donging?  
This nun’s ogling, ave bell-ringing?  
This entirely wrong over-heavening of heaven?  
Is that still German?  
Think! You are still at the gate . . .  
What you hear is Rome, Rome’s faith without words!<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche did not necessarily believe that Wagner’s “new” Christian faith was sincere. At heart he suspected Wagner of kowtowing to the weaknesses of the German public and of dressing up his own ideas in Christian form. He wrote that he admired “the modesty of Christians who go to Bayreuth. For myself there are some words of Wagner’s that I would *not* be able to stand. There are concepts that do not belong in Bayreuth” (Nietzsche [1888] 1969:124–25; italics in original).<sup>8</sup>

The critics of *Parsifal* who saw it as a move towards Catholicism certainly had a point. The theatricality of the Mass represented on stage owes little to the sobriety of Lutheranism. The powerful rituals of Catholicism, the “mythic symbolism” that Wagner saw as the heart of true religion, are not just present (particularly in the first act), they dominate large parts of the opera. What Wagner sought in Catholicism was surely its aesthetic power, its potential as “art-religion,” an idea that remained a constant throughout his career. The phrase appears for the first time in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807 and became a favorite concept of the German Romantics. For them, as for Wagner, the truth of religion had passed into art, or, as Wagner put it: “One could say that when religion becomes artificial it is the task of art to save the core of religion’s mythical symbolism.”<sup>9</sup> Nowhere is this clearer than in *Parsifal*.

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Such was the theatrical appeal of Catholic ritual in the nineteenth century that Meyerbeer and Scribe used it extensively, even in their depiction of the coronation of the extreme Protestant Jan van Leyden the Anabaptist in Act IV of *Le Prophète* in 1849. Although in the 1850s Wagner had been very critical of Parisian Grand Opéra's Catholicizing religiosity, scathingly describing Meyerbeer's "monstrous piebald, historico-romantic, diabolico-religious, fanatico-libidinous, sacro-frivolous, mysterio-criminal, autolyco-sentimental dramatic hotch-potch" (Wagner [1852] 1963, vol. 10:211), *Parsifal* has a good deal in common with this tradition. Like Meyerbeer and Scribe, Wagner recognized that Catholicism simply made better theater than sober Protestantism.

However, beyond these symbols, it is difficult to find any Catholic influence on the doctrine implied in the piece. It would be hard indeed to argue that redemption in *Parsifal* was in any way the result of good works, and the Protestant doctrine of redemption through grace is certainly present. It is not the virtue of Amfortas, Kundry, or Parsifal that brings redemption; it is the power of the redeemer to forgive all sins. Protestant elements are also present in the music. The male choir, with its relatively simple arrangements, is reminiscent of Protestant congregational singing, and the grail theme had its Protestant credentials as a Lutheran cantus firmus, confirmed by its appearance in Mendelssohn's *Reformation* symphony.

The most observant writers on the subject saw a combination of Protestant and Catholic elements most clearly. Wilhelm Vollert, in his book, *Richard Wagners Stellung zur christlichen Religion* (1906), saw this in a positive light, arguing that, "If the celebration in the Grail Temple is similar to the Catholic celebration of Mass, then the doctrine of salvation through faith in the redeemer alone is at the heart of Protestantism" (29).<sup>10</sup> The Wagnerite Hans von Wolzogen also made a claim that *Parsifal* transcended confessional boundaries rather than breaking them. He noted that "a high-level French clergyman said that last summer's *Parsifal* was his greatest religious experience, and the most important Protestant preacher in Germany, Stöcker, has written the most beautiful words on the Stage-consecration-festival-play" (1895:1).<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, the compiler of fin de siècle cultural sickness and Wagnerphobe Max Nordau was less generous, stating that *Parsifal* combined "the staging of the Catholic Mass with the heretical addition of a Protestant procession" (1993:187).

The theatricality may be Catholic in style, but it is shorn of overt reference to Rome. It is also set before the Reformation: it is a *Germanic* Christianity that we see, something of an Aryan *Ur-Christianity* set in the northern mountains of Gothic [i.e., Germanic] Spain. It offers little comfort to ultramontane sympathies. As Ian Moulton has noted, the Wagnerite

Wilhelm Tappert wrote, significantly, “This is no longer theater, it is divine service. One must think and feel oneself German and Christian if one is fully to recognize the beauties of *Parsifal*” (Moulton 1996:42). The procession implied by the score and the stage directions has obvious Catholic connotations, and it is no coincidence that it is followed by the Protestant “Dresden Amen” as the Grail Knights come onto the stage. A more apt demonstration of the deliberate mixing of Catholic and Protestant themes is hard to imagine.

This combination of (Catholic) ritualism with the idea of a (Protestant) German Church that *Parsifal* implies was an important strand within Pan-German nationalism in the late nineteenth century. Whereas the Protestant elements are used for their national associations, the references to Catholicism seem to have been motivated more for the power of ritual involved, its political allegiances being always suspiciously ultramontane. The pseudo-Catholic religiosity of *Parsifal* clearly fits in with contemporary religious discourse in Germany. It is an example of a *German* religiosity like the so-called “Dombaupatriotismus” movement, which sought to complete Germany’s medieval cathedrals in the name of Germanic Christianity. Other strands of nineteenth-century German nationalism also sought to transcend the sectarian divisions in favor of a pan-German religion; for instance, the Austrian radical German nationalist Georg von Schoenerer’s “Los vom Rom” (“Away from Rome”) movement, which saw Catholicism as an obstacle to real German unity (Trauner 1999).

### Degenerate Catholicism in *Parsifal* Reception

*Parsifal* in particular was bound to overwhelm the neo-Catholics and the mystics.

—Max Nordau ([1892] 1993:213)

The (pseudo)-Catholic elements in *Parsifal* may have been anathema to many Catholics as much as to Protestants, but they were enough to embroil the opera in the ideological battle between the Church and a broad range of medical secular opinion. This was the heyday of a medical critique of religiosity, when the leading French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was comparing the ecstatic movements of Christian saints to the convulsions of his hysterical patients. Few of *Parsifal*’s hostile critics could resist drawing on this psychiatric rhetoric about the dangers of Catholic *Schwärmerei* (Blackbourn 1993:290). The language of perversion and intoxication, of sickness and hysteria was for the most part understood within the context of the theory of degeneration. The theory, which argues that crime, sickness,

and madness were often the result of inherited characteristics, had thrived since the (liberal Catholic) French physician Bénédict Morel published his book *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* in 1857. Morel may have had no brief against the Catholic Church, but his colleague Paul Legrain went as far as to suggest that in general “mystical thoughts are to be laid to the account of the insanity of the degenerate” (Nordau 1993:45).

The Englishman John Runciman turned to degeneration theory when describing Parsifal in the context of the opera's Catholicizing Pessimism as “lacking health and vitality—probably his father suffered from rickets” (1919:212). Which is to say that Parsifal's religiosity was the result of what we would call “bad genes”: degeneration that had produced rickets in his father had caused Catholicism and degeneration in the son. Max Nordau's critique of Wagner is also quite explicit in connecting hereditary degeneration and religious enthusiasm, writing that mysticism is “a principal characteristic of degeneration. It follows so generally in the train of the latter, that there is scarcely a case of degeneration in which it does not appear” (1993:45). Nordau attacked Wagner for his graphomania, persecution mania, and erotomania, but his critique of Wagner is in the Mysticism section of *Degeneration*, and the charge of degenerate religiosity is perhaps his main charge against the composer: “Although he is irreligious through and through, and frequently attacks positive religions, their doctrines and their priests, there have, nevertheless, remained active in him . . . ideas and sentiments which he subsequently transformed so strangely in his degenerate mind” (1993:183). Incoherent superstitious nonsense, he argued, was typical of “confused brains” such as those of Tolstoy, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Symbolists.

Like an impatient schoolmaster, Nordau argues that mystical ideas are simply the product of degenerate artists' inability to pay attention. “Untended and unrestrained by attention, the brain activity of the degenerate and hysterical is capricious, and without aim of purpose” (1993:56), as he puts it. Similarly, art historian Wilhelm Lübke's article *Bayreuther Nachklänge* in the journal *Die Gegenwart* argued that *Parsifal's* sensual Catholic rituals, its bells and smells, were linked to hysteria and vice, and aimed at stopping rational thought. Lübke described Wagner's Catholicizing as “narcotic,” which meant that “healthy human reason is buried with incense fumes” (Grossmann-Vendrey 1977:169).<sup>12</sup> He went on to write that *Parsifal* represented “a refined pseudo-Christianity which uses the holy figures and acts in a masquerade and presents a religiosity with sensual pomp and intoxicating mysticism, whose dizzying effects are calculated to work on hysterical ladies and smug men of the world . . . We have here an art that is related to the Jesuit art of



the Baroque, there too the sensuality of a heightened naturalism is used to glorify intoxicated world-forgetting asceticism and hysterically heightened ecstasies with stupefying effects" (168–69).<sup>13</sup> The debate on *Parsifal's* degenerate religiosity is haunted by such images of the sickly, sensual, and effeminate man, the opposite of the healthy, rational, German bourgeois subject.

Such psychiatric assaults on the sensual manipulation involved in Bayreuth's religiosity have much in common with those aimed at expressions of late nineteenth-century popular piety, such as Lourdes. Perhaps, as Vernon Lee suggested, one should regard Wagnerian reception of *Parsifal* as a very modern kind of unorthodox religiosity. Much of the same Positivist language of sickness was used to attack them as was used against Bayreuth. The religiosity of Bayreuth and Lourdes was seen as a retreat from enlightened, scientific progress, caused by degeneration. This religiosity was "mystical" (only ever a term of abuse), feminine, delusional, over-stimulated, and hysterical. Bernadette's visions were seen (and indeed still are) by many Catholics as genuine religious experiences, but the psychiatric establishment put them down to hallucinations. Dr. Voisin, a doctor at the Salpêtrière in Paris, argued that "the miracle of Lourdes is based on the word of a child suffering from hallucinations who has been locked up in a nunnery ever since" (Deroo 1956:7).<sup>14</sup> The religiosity of the Oberammergau mystery play was another common comparison. Wilhelm Lübke, for instance, suggested that, "The great success of the Oberammergau Passion Play may have shown [Wagner], who understands the desires of his time so well, how to mix modern Catholicizing mysticism with sensual voluptuousness" (Grossman-Vendrey 1977:169).<sup>15</sup>

Not only did Bayreuth, Oberammergau, and Lourdes each have the character of places of pilgrimage, they also all used music and images to overwhelm the visitor. Religious intoxication did not exclude the power of phantasmagoria. In her study of the phenomenon, Ruth Harris writes at length about the role of music at Lourdes (Harris 1999), and the historian David Blackburn in his book on Marpingen (a German version of Lourdes in the Saarland) makes a comparison with Bayreuth: "There was clearly an element of cathartic release involved for pilgrims caught up in the great emotional drama surrounding the apparitions. The occasion touched every sense—sight, sound, touch, smell: it resembled a Wagnerian total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (1994:167). Both Lourdes and Marpingen were mobilized by a Catholic Church on the defensive in the aftermath of the catastrophic period around 1870–71, in which Rome fell to the new Kingdom of Italy, the secular Third Republic was established in France, and the *Kulturkampf* began in Germany. The Catholic elements in *Parsifal* of course have a very different agenda from that of the Vatican, but it is remarkable

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how many of the same means they employ. The response of psychiatric critics was also very similar: they were all attacked as manipulative and illusionist, as a threat to rational autonomy, and also as the result of hereditary sickness which made them corrupting and dangerous.

This dichotomy between rational thought and personal autonomy on the one hand and sensual ritual and mysticism on the other is a common thread throughout such debates on *Parsifal*. Indeed, the propensity for hostile commentators to use metaphors of drugs and hypnosis about Wagner's music and visual aesthetic in general suggest that it is an important factor behind much Wagner reception. In contrast to the autonomous, self-controlled, and rational model of subjectivity implied by critics such as Nordau, Wagner seemed to make listeners passive, sensual, and irrational. As we shall see, this connection between *Parsifal* and irrational, degenerate passivity was intimately linked to anxieties about sexuality.

### The Specters of Effeminacy and Homosexuality

Low church was healthy, High church with all that lace and bowing and scraping was unhealthy, while Popery positively festered.

—Rupert Croft-Cooke (1967:286)

The pathological side of mysticism was seen as principally erotic in character. The sexologist Krafft-Ebing for instance argued that “excessive religious urges are often a symptom of a sickly character or actual sickness and it is often the case that under the cover of religious enthusiasm one finds a level of sensuality and sexual excitement that is diseased” (1888:157).<sup>16</sup> Too much religion seemed to threaten a model of mental health based on self-control, especially in terms of sexuality: it made one sensual, effeminate, “priest-ridden,” and irrational—a decadent in Nietzsche's terms and a degenerate to respectable bourgeois medical opinion.<sup>17</sup> The idea that other forms of passion, especially religious feelings, are a sublimation of physical love has had currency at least since Diderot. The English sexologist Havelock Ellis, for instance, in his *The Auto-Erotic Factor in Religion*, suggested that religious experience was often the result of the sublimation of sexual feelings during adolescence (2008:231–44).<sup>18</sup>

Another connection between religion and pathological sexuality was the tendency of self-proclaimed *décadents* to be interested in Catholic mysticism (Hansen 1997). A mixture of eroticism and mysticism was a crucial element of the neo-Catholic *décadent* aesthetic of the 1880s. The ritualism of the Mass attracted many *décadents* because of its high artifice

and theatricality, as a kind of spiritual dandyism. In Huysmans's *À Rebours* this link is made explicit; for des Esseintes, "the Christian religion had also instilled an unlawful ideal of voluptuous pleasure: licentious and mystical obsessions merged together to haunt his brain" (1959:117). This combination of political reaction, sensuality, theatricality, and homosexuality made Catholicism the religion of choice for *décadents* opposed to what they saw as the banality of modern secularism. Crucially, this erotic mysticism was often linked in the mainstream bourgeois imagination to effeminacy and contrasted with more manly rational Christianity.

In the generation that followed the premiere of *Parsifal*, Catholicism became increasingly marked as effeminate, and indeed homosexual.<sup>19</sup> The sensuality of the Mass, the "bells and smells" of Catholic ritual, were mistrusted by many, as were the celibate clergy, who had been accused of pederasty and effeminacy since the Reformation and before. In the popular imagination, there was a widespread assumption about the connection between Catholicism (and Newmanite Anglo-Catholicism) and what came to be called homosexuality, albeit mostly expressed in euphemisms as David Hilliard (1982) and others have demonstrated. The founder of "muscular Christianity," Charles Kingsley, for instance, wrote the following about the Oxford Movement:

In . . . all that school, there is an element of foppery—even in dress and manner; a fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy, which is mistaken for purity and refinement; and I confess myself unable to cope with it, so alluring is it to the minds of an effeminate and luxurious aristocracy; neither educated in all that should teach them to distinguish between bad and good taste, healthy and unhealthy philosophy or devotion. (1982:188)<sup>20</sup>

German commentators argued along similar lines. A rational male state was seen as being in competition with a superstitious female Church. Women were more likely to vote for clerical parties, and to be regarded as "priest-ridden." The ideological struggle to claim the masculine high ground in discourse was dominated by the secular/Protestant nationalist cause, which succeeded in portraying German Catholicism as effete. The historian Helmut Walser Smith explained it in the following terms:

The dichotomies that underlay Kulturkampf verse and that informed national identities were indeed very stark. In the nationalist imagination, German patriots were loyal, steadfast, honest; in the Kulturkampf they struggled for light and for truth; and they were men . . . Gendered language, central to the German nationalist tradition generally, was especially important to the religious component of that tradition. (Smith 1995:36)

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The so-called Prussian school of history, most notably Heinrich von Treitschke, emphasized the masculine, virile virtues of Lutheran Germany, and of Prussia in particular, contrasting them with the effeminacy of defeated Catholic Germany.

The doctor, journalist, anti-Semite, and future mental patient, Oskar Panizza (who was also the author of an article on Wagner and homosexuality) wrote a book, *Der teutsche Michel und der römische Papst*, listing the crimes of Catholicism and contrasting them with German virtues. He makes the link between Catholicism and homosexuality quite explicit: "the celibacy of priests, which drives them to disgusting acts and makes them into a new psychopathic, homosexual race, so that on hygienic grounds one would be happy if the lords in lilac or the god in purple would touch a woman" (1894:266).<sup>21</sup> Using the perversions supposedly lurking behind clerical celibacy as a stick to beat *Parsifal*, Panizza was the first to connect the opera with homosexuality in 1895. In *Bayreuth und Homosexualität*, he called Wagner's last work "the homosexual opera."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, he argued that it was "a spiritual delicacy for pederasts" (1895:90).<sup>23</sup> He based this on the purely male environment of the Grail Temple and the attitude towards women implied: "In *Parsifal* intercourse with women is seen as 'sin,' as a 'crime,' as a disgrace against the male Order of the Grail. [*Parsifal*] is homosexual willy-nilly" (91).<sup>24</sup>

In 1902 Hanns Fuchs wrote on the subject of Wagner's supposed homosexuality, albeit with a much more positive angle, and again paid particular attention to *Parsifal*. Fuchs asked, "Doesn't *Parsifal* remind one of those homosexuals that enjoy the company of women, enjoy joking around and laughing with them, not shy of kissing them, but who run away when anything more is demanded?" (192).<sup>25</sup> He went on to say that "*Parsifal* undoubtedly proves the spiritual homosexuality of the older Wagner" (199).<sup>26</sup> Nor were Fuchs and Panizza isolated in their views. The famous American writer and critic James Huneker described *Parsifal* as "this effeminate lad . . . only an emasculate Siegfried" (1904:96). And Max Nordau suggested that the *décadent* French writer Josephin Péladan's Wagnerian novels were "entirely composed of reminiscences of *Parsifal* . . . preoccupied with presentations of . . . contrary sexual feeling" (1993:222).

This theme also lurks beneath the surface of Nietzsche's critique of Wagner. He argued that *Parsifal* and its creator were essentially feminine (a short step from effeminate), writing: "What? a Christianity for Wagnerian women of all people, perhaps by Wagnerian women—after all Wagner was thoroughly feminine at the end" (Nietzsche [1888] 1969:124).<sup>27</sup> Again, it is highly significant that Nietzsche chooses to express his hostility to *Parsifal* in the language of sickness and sexuality. In an extraordinary passage, he refers

to “that masculine (oh, so unmasculine) ‘simpleton from the countryside,’ that poor devil and child of nature, Parsifal, who is made Catholic with such compromising methods” (Nietzsche [1888] 1969:141).<sup>28</sup> The questioning of Parsifal’s masculinity in the context of Catholicism is striking. What “compromising methods” does Nietzsche have in mind? The effeminate sensuality of Catholic ritual? Was he made Catholic by the Oedipal kiss with Kundry? Is the music so manipulative for Nietzsche that it counts as a “compromising method”? Nietzsche, in another remarkable phrase, writes of *Parsifal* that “the sermon of chastity remains a stimulus of perversion: I despise everyone who does not regard *Parsifal* as assault on morality” ([1888] 1969:142).<sup>29</sup> The “perversion” found amongst those who sermonize on chastity (i.e., Catholic priests) was widely believed to be homosexuality.

### Schopenhauer, Effeminacy, and Homosexuality

Wagner’s era was sick. Proof: Schopenhauer.

—Heinrich Pudor (1891:15)

*Parsifal* may contain forms that are largely Christian, but the central idea of the piece is in fact closer to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer than to either Protestantism or Catholicism. Salvation (“Erlösung”—a constant theme in *Parsifal*, and, in various forms, throughout Wagner’s career) comes not from “good works” or from faith, but from renunciation. Parsifal gains wisdom and is saved when he rejects sexuality (in the shape of Kundry). Despite the Christian imagery and symbolism, this renunciation ethic owes more to Schopenhauer, for whom the negation of the will was the only means to escape the misery of existence. Schopenhauer’s Pessimism, his ethic of renunciation, brought associations with effeminacy and degeneration to discourse on *Parsifal* just as much as Catholicism.

Previously the composer’s thinking on religion had been dominated by the materialism of the Young Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach.<sup>30</sup> Wagner’s association with the sensuality of the Young Germany movement also took him away from the conventional pieties of Christianity. As Wagner noted in *Mein Leben*, it was his friend Georg Herwegh who brought Schopenhauer to his attention in 1854, radically altering his ideas about religion, or, as Wagner put it, confirming him in the direction he was already going (Wagner [1870–80] 1963:614–15). The failure of the revolutions of 1848–49, which had left Wagner more disillusioned than most, made the late nineteenth century fertile ground for Schopenhauer’s ideas, which had struggled to be heard earlier. In particular, his conception of the will seemed to suit an era

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of social pessimism. For Schopenhauer, desire, the will, was the central fact of the universe: it was “the thing in itself, the inner force, the essence of the world” (1974–80, vol. 1:380).<sup>31</sup> Whereas Nietzsche would argue that the will to power was the glory of life, for Schopenhauer, it bred only misery, and peace could only be gained by extinguishing desire.

This scarcely fitted rationalist progressive thinking on the self. Wagner’s Schopenhauerian attitude towards the will obviously clashed with rationalist notions of the self. A discourse on subjectivity became dressed up as a discourse on health and disease—it was “morbid” and mystical. Precisely for this reason his ideas suited the disillusioned *décadents* perfectly. In *À Rebours*, Huysmans wrote about des Esseintes’s interest in “the consoling maxims of Schopenhauer” (1959:219). Since the will was the center of rationalist conceptions of subjectivity, Schopenhauer’s call for the will to be crushed amounted to degenerate mystical resignation for many commentators, most notably in the 1872 book *Dr Arthur Schopenhauer vom medicinischen Standpunkt aus* by Carl von Seidlitz.

The will, understood as rational self-control, was the centerpiece of nineteenth-century views of subjectivity. Kant’s *Was ist Aufklärung?* provided the classic defense of this view of the self, one that focused on autonomous, rational self-realization. During the nineteenth century this rational, autonomous view of subjectivity became the model of mental health, both for laymen and for professionals. The rise of psychiatry in the nineteenth century was in some ways the enforcement and institutionalization of a bourgeois conception of subjectivity. Self-control was therefore not just a nineteenth-century ideal of behavior; it was a defining factor in ideas of sanity, masculinity, and indeed subjectivity in general. A lack of bourgeois self-control and delayed gratification was pathologized, and seen as a cause of mental illness, effeminacy, and nervousness. The white, male European was characterized by possession of willpower. The insane, the colonial subject, women, Jews, homosexuals, the sexually “perverse,” and drug addicts were all characterized by their lack of self-control.

Max Nordau was quite clear on the relationship between willpower, mysticism, and degeneration. “Mysticism,” he wrote, “is innate or acquired weakness of will” ([1892] 1993:61). His opinion of Schopenhauer is therefore no surprise. This diseased sense of self meant that “the degenerate and the insane are the predestined disciples of Schopenhauer” (20). This is also marked in *Parsifal*’s religiosity and even in Wagner’s compositional technique. He describes Wagner’s “endless melody” in the following terms: “It is musical mysticism. It is the form in which the inability to pay attention is expressed in music” (355).<sup>32</sup> For Nordau, Wagner’s decadence is the

result of a physiologically-based lack of willpower that led him to steal other men's wives, indulge base instincts on stage, and made him incapable of seeing that the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the religion of *Parsifal* were nonsense.

One of Nietzsche's prime objections to the opera was its Schopenhauerian Pessimism, which he saw as symptomatic of contemporary culture's life-negating decadence. His argument may be very different from that of Nordau and other scientific rationalists, but the medical rhetoric of nervous degeneration is the same. He argued that in *Parsifal* Wagner "flatters every nihilistic (Buddhist) instinct and disguises it in music, he flatters every Christian and religious form of *décadence*" ([1888] 1969:118).<sup>33</sup> It was a betrayal of the "healthy sensualism" of Wagner's earlier work.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, Nietzsche brought the idea of the will, which was a largely unacknowledged basis for rationalist hostility to *Parsifal*, very much to the surface. He wrote about "'Selflessness'—the *décadent* principal, the will to end in art as well as in morals" ([1888] 1969:138).<sup>35</sup> Schopenhauer's crushing of the will, like Christian asceticism, was the last word in life-negating Pessimism for Nietzsche as much as it was anathema to psychiatric critics.

*Parsifal* certainly does show signs of the "will to end." There is a rather morbid fixation with death, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, with the inability to die. Already in *Oper und Drama* from the 1850s, when Wagner's attitudes towards religion were radically different, he had written that, "This dying, with the yearning after it, is the sole true content of the art which issued from the Christian myth" (Wagner 1966:159). In *Tristan* the lovers also long for death. The final lines of the opera, "Unbewußt, höchste Lust" (Unconscious, highest joy), express a very Schopenhauerian ideal of losing the ego, although the sexualized ecstasy of the *Liebtestod* owes more to Wagner's own idiosyncrasies than to Schopenhauer. But whereas Tristan and Isolde's sexual sin leads to death, Amfortas, Tristan's wounded alter ego, cannot die. In Act I, Amfortas does not want to be cured from his wound and survive. He wishes to die with the symbol of his sin removed so that he can die redeemed: "Close the wound so that I die, healthy in you!"<sup>36</sup> When finally Amfortas can die, it is the result of Parsifal's overcoming of sex, not of sex itself.

In Act II Kundry, too, longs to die, but cannot. "Eternal sleep [*Ewiger Schlaf*]" is her only wish (Wagner [1882] 1986:262.). Not only does she long for death in a way that was alien to both rationalist and Nietzschean vitalist critics, she is also bizarrely lacking in will. Her apparently will-less behavior, obeying the Grail Knights and Klingsor, marks her as a typical degenerate. She spends half the opera in a hypnotic trance, and the rest as

a sexually predatory hysteric. This combination may make little sense to modern audiences, but in light of contemporary views of the female hysteric psyche, it is more comprehensible. The idea of the will implied by *Parsifal*, with its Schopenhauerian renunciation ethic, seemed to threaten bourgeois ideas of subjectivity with the Kundry-like specter of the feminine and the hysterical—those things that were outside the boundaries of rational, male autonomy.

One much-discussed author who has been the subject of scholarly work on degeneration, Otto Weininger, saw Kundry as the perfect representation of woman's nature, precisely because she had no will: "Wagner, the greatest man since Christ's time, understood the full significance of that act: until woman ceases to exist as woman for man she cannot cease to be a woman. Kundry could only be released from Klingsor's curse by the help of a sinless, immaculate man—Parsifal" (2003:344). Wagner's own ideas about women, although in some ways more progressive, were a crucial influence on Weininger. The essence of woman was a "surrendering love" in which her own will would be subsumed in that of the man (Wagner 1966:11). Despite her pagan roots, the figure of Kundry therefore represents most clearly some of the decadent themes associated with *Parsifal's* religiosity. Hysteria, a lack of all willpower, morbid eroticism, and a longing for death—all of her "symptoms" are fixations of the work as a whole.

Such was the role of the will in ideas of masculinity in this understanding of the self that Parsifal's apparent lack of willpower also put his sexuality into question. Several critics implied that Parsifal's deficient vigor suggested homosexuality. Oskar Panizza argued that the Schopenhauerian Pessimism of the piece was itself tantamount to homosexuality. He wrote that "exactly this pity, this sentimental world view, this nobility, this admiration at a distance, is a characteristic trait of the invert, of this psycho-erotic race" (1894:91).<sup>37</sup> A comparison with the ultra-masculine Siegfried—the embodiment of "natural" instinct—was often brought up. John Runciman described *Parsifal* as an "immoral work . . . the mood of the exhausted and the effete," and its message as "immoral and vicious" as *Siegfried's* was "entirely moral, healthful and sane" (1919:211). Words such as "morbid," "effete," and "moral" had obvious implications in a society that was used to talking about homosexuality in euphemisms. Hanns Fuchs in his book on Wagner and homosexuality also brought up the subject of Pessimism, arguing that, "The will to life finds its highest expression in the love of a man for a woman" (1903:85).<sup>38</sup> The reader is left to infer that a Schopenhauerian inversion of the will to life is analogous to the sexual inversion of homosexuality.

This kind of homophobic anti-Wagnerism did not end in the twentieth century. The biographer Robert Gutman writes, "an air of homosexuality hangs heavy over Montsalvat" (1968:435). But maybe the most startling comment in Gutman's biography of Wagner implies that the Grail Knights



are a kind of gay Nazi society, a vision straight out of Luchino Visconti's 1969 film, *The Damned*. He wrote of the similarity between "the monastic homosexuality of *Parsifal*, centered around the intuitively inspired youth, and the not dissimilar fellowship of Ernst Röhm's troopers" (1968:300). Ernst Röhm was, of course, the homosexual leader of the Nazi SA paramilitary group, who died on the so-called Night of the Long Knives.

Gutman's allusion to the concept of the "gay Nazi" was not original. It was commonplace for many years, and can be found in the work of many writers who combined a Marxist and a Freudian critique of Nazism, notably Theodor Adorno. Based on the known homosexuality of Ernst Röhm, many writers of the 1940s argued that homosexuality and Nazism were intimately connected. This association between homosexuality and Nazism was sharply criticized at the time by others, notably Klaus Mann (K. Mann [1934] 1990), Thomas Mann's homosexual son and an important writer in his own right. More recently it has been analyzed by Andrew Hewitt in his book, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism and the Modernist Imaginary* (1996), in which he takes to task those who would seek to tar homosexuality with the same brush as those who murdered so many homosexuals. The pathologizing of homosexuality is one element of the discourse of degeneration that survived well into the twentieth century, and any attempt to discuss the homosexual elements in *Parsifal* should be careful not to fall into this trap. Responses to Wagner and his racist politics have often included dangerous elements themselves: anti-Semitic anti-Wagnerism has been matched by homophobic anti-Wagnerism. His enemies were not always any more appealing politically than the Meister himself.<sup>39</sup>

### *Parsifal*, the Occult, and the Feminine

Wagner is the Cagliostro of modernity.

—Friedrich Nietzsche (1888:98)

Not all of the debate on *Parsifal* and religion happened in the mainstream press. Between the 1880s and the 1920s Wagner was the composer that attracted by far the most attention amongst occultists, and *Parsifal* was, it seems, their favorite opera. A whole discourse on the (non-Christian) occult character of the opera developed. The supposedly occult themes in Wagner's works were "revealed" in books such as Frater Achad's *The Chalice of Ecstasy, being the Inmost Secret of Parzival by a Companion of the Holy Spirit* (1923), which explained the mysteries of the opera in terms of the kabbalah and Theosophy. Other books of this kind include Otto Julius Hartmann's *Die Esoterik im Werk Richard Wagners* (1960), Adolph Zippel's *Lohengrin: Richard*

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*Wagners Oper von philosophischen-esoterischen Standpunkt aus betrachtet* (1913), and Kurt Siegfried Uhlig's *Richard Wagners Ring des Nibelungen in seiner esoterischen Bedeutung*, which suggested that the *Ring* had been written from "esoteric sources" (1909:47).<sup>40</sup>

These are only examples from a list that goes on and on: mostly of works from the 1880s to the 1920s, but continuing occasionally until today. In 1948, for instance, Corinne Heline published her *Esoteric Music: Based on the Musical Seership of Richard Wagner* (1948). And Robert P. Leichman M.D.'s unintentionally hilarious *Wagner Returns* of 1983 is an account of a conversation between the spirit of Wagner and the author, a medium.<sup>41</sup> Innumerable articles about Wagner appeared in occult magazines throughout the period. In a 1919 edition of the German magazine *Psychische Studien*, Max Seiling described Wagner's occult powers, as recorded by eyewitnesses:

After the final production of *Parsifal* Wagner had gathered his friends and colleagues to him one more time in order to say a few words of farewell to them. As he stood on the podium and spoke to those present, suddenly a strange change came over him. His body, although it kept its shape, became illuminated and transparent so that the objects behind him were quite clearly visible. (544)<sup>42</sup>

Later in the same article Seiling recounted another report that described Wagner levitating (544).<sup>43</sup> Such unorthodox Wagnerism has been a rarity since the Second World War, but in the decades between the 1880s and the 1940s it was a significant part of Wagner reception. It has been almost entirely neglected by Wagner scholars,<sup>44</sup> but as the occult revival is taken increasingly seriously by historians as a historical and cultural phenomenon, it is time that occult Wagnerism received due attention.

Wagner's own life offers a few insights into his own attitude to the occult. He was certainly influenced by his brother-in-law, Friedrich Brockhaus, from whom he received many works on Eastern religion. Wagner apparently believed that Cosima had clairvoyant abilities and faith healing powers (Gutman 1968:333). And in 1865, a soothsayer, Frau Dangl, told Wagner that his destiny was to protect his patron King Ludwig II from evil counselors (Gutman 1968:242). Communicating with the dead and seeing into the future also cropped up in Wagner's circle. After the very Wagnerian death of her husband, the first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, the first Isolde, Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld, communed spiritually with the deceased through her pupil and medium Isidore von Reutter. Schnorr's spirit apparently asked Wagner to write less strenuous vocal parts and announced that Malvina was to marry Wagner and Ludwig II was destined to marry Isidore (Mackintosh 1982:100–101). Malvina spent her last years in a mental asylum (Horowitz 1994:107).

Although Wagner did not write on the occult per se, there was also much in his voluminous prose to encourage this kind of reading. Buddhism, vegetarianism, and anti-vivisection were also favorite subjects for many occultists. Furthermore, Astrid Kury has suggested a set of common features in the occult revival into which Wagner's ideas fit remarkably easily. The supposed inner unity of art, religion and science, and the notion that the aim of humanity is enlightenment (or redemption), for instance, are two themes that much of Wagnerism and occult movements shared. Wagner's self-conscious "depth," his mythical subjects, and his quasi-religious tone surely marked him out for the attention of such unusual admirers.

Much of the occult Wagnerism can be found among Theosophists. The Theosophical Society was founded by Madame Blavatsky in 1875 in New York, but later moved to London. When the Society laid the foundation stone for its new headquarters in Bloomsbury in London, the society's general secretary played musical highlights from *Parsifal* on the organ to accompany the ceremony (Dixon 2001:1). The British Wagnerian and translator of Wagner's collected works, William Ashton Ellis, was Blavatsky's private doctor for a time and a committed Theosophist. His first article on Wagner appeared in the *Transactions of the London Lodge* of the Theosophical Society under the title "Theosophy in the Works of Richard Wagner." In a paper given in 1887 and later published, Ashton Ellis wrote that "we may observe notable indications of a belief in psychic powers and manifestations" in Wagner's operas (Ellis 1887:27). In 1888 Evelyn Pyne wrote an article called "Wagner's Gospel" for the Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* (1888:224–34). In the struggles over control over Theosophy after the death of Madame Blavatsky, Wagner's name was used by the opponents of Annie Besant, the controversial successor to Blavatsky. Alice Leighton Cleather and Basil Crump hoped that Wagner-as-Parsifal would be victorious over Besant-as-Klingsor, writing that:

Richard Wagner . . . had considerable knowledge of magic . . . The whole [of *Parsifal*] may be taken as a drama of the Theosophical Society, which may now be said to be under the domain of Klingsor, and still awaiting the coming of its Parsifal who can shatter the vast fabric of psychic illusion. (Cormack 1993:10)

The leading German Theosophist, educational reformer and later founder of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner, also showed considerable interest in Wagner. He gave a series of lectures on Wagner's link to the occult in 1905 with the title *Die Okkulten Wahrheiten alter Mythen und Sagen*, which explained Wagner's connection to Atlantis and claimed that the names "Wotan" and "Buddha" had the same Aryan root (1999:148).<sup>45</sup>

Occult Wagnerism was not limited to the English-speaking world and Germany. The French *décadents* were often interested in the occult, few more than the “Rosicrucian” and Wagnerian Joséphin Peladan, to whom Nordau devotes several pages. Occult Wagnerism, especially on the theme of *Parsifal* crops up in several of his novels. In *La Vice Supreme*, for example, the magician Mérodack (an alter ego of the author in his “Order of the Rosy Cross”) attends a Wagnerian style opera on a Lesbian theme (another favorite theme of *décadents* and Peladan [1979] in particular). Mario Praz, in his classic *The Romantic Agony* described the finale of another Peladan novel, *Le Vertu Supreme*, with the following words:

The crowning moment of the novel is a replica of *Parsifal*. Mérodack journeys on a pilgrimage to the abbey of Montségur, which is dedicated to the cult of the Rosicrucians—a copy of Montsalvat with aesthetic refinements, Flemish tapestries, Renaissance seats . . . Inside the temple the organ gives the notes of *Parsifal*. (1970:341)

Along with Catholicism and Schopenhauer, all of this esoteric interest in *Parsifal* gave it another set of associations with degeneration. Psychiatry was generally very hostile to the occult, as a particularly irrational form of mysticism, unredeemed by the traditional morality of conventional denominations. Alongside chapters on Wagner, the Pre-Raphaelites, Tolstoy and the French Symbolists, Max Nordau devotes a chapter of his mysticism section in *Degeneration* to occult groups. His attitude is not surprising: “The hysterical and the deranged receive spiritual inspirations, and begin to preach and prophesy” (1993:214). Even more than “mystical” Christianity, the occult appeared to be a reactionary, superstitious phenomenon that challenged all of anti-degeneration campaigners’ rationalist assumptions.

Like Catholicism and Schopenhauerianism, the occult also had dangerous associations with homosexuality. The English right-wing demagogue Horatio Bottomley, in his periodical *John Bull*, argued that the occult Theosophical Society “is gathering into its ranks an army of morbid moral degenerates, whose teachings are calculated to undermine the character and sap the manhood of our race” (Dixon 2001:107). Magnus Hirschfeld’s journal on homosexual themes, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, dealt with occult subjects on a regular basis.<sup>46</sup> This association between the occult and unmanly degeneration received a boost during the so-called Leadbeater case, in which the leading occultist of British Theosophy was accused of the sexual abuse of boys (including the proclaimed Messiah), lending a damaging hint of decadent homosexuality to the occult (Dixon 2001).

This association with homosexuality was also one effect of the power and influence of women in the occult. The role of women in Spiritualism, and of Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant in Theosophy, would scarcely have been possible within mainstream religion. There is a striking similarity between

the female dominance of many occult groups and the way Bayreuth was run. Although the power and influence of Cosima and Winifred Wagner derived from their husbands, it is hard to imagine anything similar in orthodox religious circles, or among the rationalist critics who were so often hostile to the occult and to Bayreuth. This female element was noted by others, for instance by Friedrich Lienhard, who took a mystic pro-female line, suggesting that *Parsifal* was a call to “find the woman in yourself.” (Heindel 1918:1). The feminine/effeminate associations of the occult and of *Parsifal* linked the opera to the trope of the hysterical ecstatic female saint and marked it as the opposite of masculine, rational autonomy. In particular, the figure of Kundry attracted their attention. One of the oddest characters in opera, she is, it seems, a cousin of the hysterical saints portrayed by Charcot. Her hysteria and lack of willpower represented precisely the elements of “feminine nature” that anti-degeneration writers were keen to keep within bounds.

Throughout discourse on *Parsifal* and its mysticism this hostility to the feminine is a constant, whether its rhetoric is medical, Protestant, or Nietzschean. Like the “feminine” mass culture that Andreas Huyssen pointed to as the Other of Modernism, feminine religiosity was also marked as sensual and passive (1994:188–207). Of course, it is not only Modernism that has seen itself as masculine and anti-sensual, since Kant hostility to the senses had been a cornerstone of aesthetics (Eagleton 1990). The (implicitly masculine) disinterested appreciation of form left little room for (implicitly feminine) sensual religion (Heindel 1918). It is clear that *Parsifal*'s religiosity is a peculiar form of sensuality, a strangely sexual rejection of sexuality. Its disavowal of sex in the language of religion and sickness makes *Parsifal* fit with much “decadent culture,” and paradoxically makes sex central to the piece—just as Klingsor's self-castration only emphasizes his sexuality. Kundry's question, “Are you chaste? [*Bist du keusch?*]” is bitterly sarcastic. Parsifal gains grace at the moment of his sexual awakening—his “purity” is not innocence, but overcoming of sex. George Moore, in *Evelyn Innes*, has one character muse aloud on Wagner's eventual rejection of his Jesus and Buddha projects in favor of *Parsifal*: “In neither Christ nor Buddha did the question of sex arise, and that was the reason that Wagner eventually rejected both. He was as full of sex—mysterious, subconscious sex—as Rossetti himself” (1898:171). This sexualized, sensual, ritualistic religiosity was an obvious target for the emerging medical-moral discourse on both culture and religion that took secular masculinity as its measure of health.

The relationship between masculinity, nationalism, and sexuality in *Parsifal* reception continued to be problematic into the twentieth century. A view of Wagner that suited the Nazis—Spartan, manly, martial, and ultra-German—came to dominate discussions of the composer. For both for supporters and critics of the composer, the composer's masculine and German character became axiomatic. On the other hand, unlike *Siegfried*

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or *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Parsifal* was not always easy to fit into this understanding of Wagner. The piece's pacifist overtones, its lack of manly martial virtue, meant that the Nazis in effect banned it during the Second World War (Gibson 1999:78–87). After the war, debate on the subject reflected the political atmosphere of the Cold War and the rapid social changes of the period, which took most of the heat out of sectarian religiosity in Germany. Shorn of Protestant eastern provinces, the foundation of the rump West German state in 1949 meant that Catholics dominated the principal German state for the first time in one hundred years. The *Kulturkampf* was definitely over in an increasingly secular country run by the Christlich Demokratische Union, the ideological descendent of the Catholic Zentrum party founded in the 1870s. At the same time, Wieland Wagner's influential New Bayreuth production of 1951 for the most part dropped the signs of both Teutonic heroism and Catholic pomp. These developments, combined with the discrediting of cultural pathology after 1945, led to the current situation in which *Parsifal*'s links to National Socialism are the main concern, and in which the religious character of the debate before the mid-twentieth century has receded from view. It remains to be seen how the twenty-first-century revival of religion in politics will affect the opera's reception in the future.

### Notes

1. See Croft-Cooke (1967). Its special status was underlined by the fact that performances were almost entirely restricted to Bayreuth until 1913. As the copyright deadline approached for *Parsifal* in 1913, Cosima Wagner appealed to the Reichstag for a "Lex Parsifal," reserving the work to Bayreuth *in perpetua*, an appeal backed up by some 18,000 signatures. The religious nature of the debate around the opera was reflected in a cartoon in *The New York Times* from December 27, 1903, which included signs saying, "Sermon Morning and Evening Denouncing Parsifal as Sacreligious," "Lecture Denouncing Parsifal by I M Pastor" and "Signor Parsifal Mind Reader and Fortune Teller" (Storck [1910] 1998:421).

2. See for example Gross (2004) and Smith (1995).

3. "Skandal ... noch besteht." "Pest der Welt."

4. "Iosgelöst von aller Konfession."

5. "Was wollen wir Kinder der Reformation, die Bibel in die Hand, mit dem Gral angefangen?"

6. "Ein gewisser Katholizismus des Gefühls."

7. Ist das noch deutsch?

Aus deutschem Herzen kam dies schwüle Kreischen?

Und deutschen Leibs ist dies Sich-selbst—Zerfleischen?

Deutsch ist dies Priester-Hände-Spreizen,

Dies wehrauchdüftelnde Sinne-Reizen?

Und deutsch dies Stürzen, Stocken, Taumelden,

Dies zucker süße Bimbambaumeln?

Dies Nonnen-Äugeln, Ave-Glockenbimmeln,  
Dies ganze falsch verzückte Himmel-Überhimmeln? . . .  
Ist das noch deutsch?  
Erwägt! Noch steht ihr an der Pforte . . .  
Denn was ihr hört, ist Rom—Roms Glaube ohne Worte!  
Nietzsche ([1888] 1969:140).

8. "Ich bewundere, anbei gesagt, die Bescheidenheit der Christen, die nach Bayreuth gehn. Ich selbst wurde gewisse Worte nicht aus dem Munde eines Wagner aushalten. Es gibt Begriffe, die nicht in Bayreuth gehören . . . Das Bedürfnis nach *Erlösung* . . . ist die ehrlichste Ausdrucksform der *Décadence* . . ." (italics in original). This suspicion is supported by a comment of Wagner's recorded by Nietzsche's sister: "the Germans do not want to hear about pagan gods and heroes now, they want to hear something Christian [*Die Deutschen wollen jetzt nichts von heidnischen Göttern und Helden hören, die wollen was Christliches hören*]." Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, quoted in Hildebrandt (1924:291). However, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche hardly counts as a reliable witness. Her manipulation of her brother's work after his mental collapse is notorious.

9. "Man könnte sagen, daß da, wo die Religion künstlich wird, der Kunst es vorbehalten sei, den Kern der Religion zu retten, indem sie die mythischen Symbole . . . ihrem sinnbildlichen Werte nach erfaßt . . ."

10. "Erschient auch die Feier im Gralstempel als Verherrlichung der katholischen Abendmahlsfeier, so ist der Preis der Seligkeit allein aus Gnaden durch dem Glauben an den Einen, den Erlöser, Kern und Stern des Protestantismus."

11. "Ein hoher französischer Geistlicher nannte im letzten Sommer den Parsifal in Bayreuth als sein grösstes religiöses Erlebnis, und der bedeutendste evangelische Prediger Deutschlands, Stöcker, hat die schönsten Worte über das Bühnenweihfestspiel geschrieben."

12. "Narkose . . . der gesunder Menschenverstand wird unter Weihrauchqualm zu Grabe getragen."

13. "Es ist ein raffiniertes Pseudo-Christenthum, welches die heiligen Gestalten und Handlungen zu einer Maskerade verwendet und mit allem Sinnenpomp und berauscher Mystik eine Religiosität darbietet, deren Taumelwirkungen etwa auf hysterische Damen und blasierte Weltmänner berechnet sind . . . Wir haben hier eine Kunst, die der Jesuitenkunst der Barockzeit innerlich wahlverwandt ist; denn auch dort werden die sinnlichsten Reizmittel eines gesteigerte Naturalismus dazu verwendet trunkene weltvergessene Askese, hysterische gesteigerte Ekstasen in sinnbetäubenden Effecten zu verherrlichen."

14. "Das Wunder von Lourdes wurde verkündet auf das Wort eines unter Halluzination leidenden Kindes hin, das seither im Ursulinenkloster von Nevers eingesperrt ist." The most notable example of this positivist approach to the Lourdes phenomenon can be found in Emile Zola's novel, *Lourdes*, which like so much of his work, draws heavily on degeneration theory, blaming Bernadette's "hereditary nervousness" for her experiences (Zola [1894] 2000:477).

15. "Die großen Erfolge des Oberammergau Passionsspiels mögen den klugen Mann, der das Begehren seiner Zeit so gut versteht, auf diesen Weg hingedrängt haben . . . moderne katholischirende Mystik sich mit üppiger Sinnlichkeit."

16. "vielfach ist der excessive, religiöse Drang bereits ein Symptom einer krankhaften originären Charakteranlage oder wirklicher Krankheit und nicht selten verbirgt sich unter dem züchtigen Gewand religiöser Schwärmerei eine Krankhaft gesteigerte Sinnlichkeit und geschlechtliche Erregung . . ."

17. Although the idea of degeneration becomes almost synonymous with that of decadence in the nineteenth century it has a very different history. As David Weir has pointed out, decadence refines corruption and degeneration is the corruption of refinement. It comes from the Latin “degenere,” (de- from, and genus- race), and means to become unlike one’s kind, to be a poor specimen of the race, i.e., a degenerate. This came to have a biological sense in the eighteenth century, of a decline between generations of a species. At the same time evolutionary thinking and moral and political anxieties created the bogeyman of the “degenerate,” whose atavistic nature was demonstrated in alcoholism, crime, revolution, or art. It is this last definition that becomes synonymous with decadence, as a “scientific” element added to the moral and political idea of decadence. In the discourse on Wagner’s decadence or degeneration the two words are used more or less interchangeably (Weir 1995:ix).

18. William James attacked the “fashion, quite common nowadays, of criticizing religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life . . . We wish that all this medical materialism could be made to hold its tongue” (1960:33).

19. Discussion of homosexuality in the nineteenth century and my own research are greatly indebted to the work of Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. See Foucault (1976–84) and Sedgwick (1990, 1992).

20. See also Reed (1989).

21. “der Ehelosigkeit der Priester, daß man diese . . . Scheusäligkeiten hineintrieb, die sie zu einer neuen, psychopathischen, homosexuellen Rasse machten, so daß man später aus hygienischen Gründen froh gewesen wäre, wenn die Herrn in Lila oder Gott in Purpur ein Weib angerührt hätten.”

22. “homosexulle Oper.”

23. “Daß *Parsifal* eine geistige Kost für Päderasten sei.”

24. “Im *Parsifal* wird der Verkehr mit dem Weib als ‘Sünde,’ als ‘Vergehen,’ als Frevel gegen den—Männer-Orden des Grals konstuiert. [*Parsifal*] ist nolens volens homosexuell.”

25. “Erinnert *Parsifal* in dieser Szene nicht an einen jener Homosexuellen, die sich sehr gern in der Gesellschaft von Frauen bewegen, gern mit den Frauen scherzen und lachen, ja vor tändelnden Küssen nicht zurückschrecken und erst fliehen, wenn—mehr von ihnen verlangt wird?”

26. “Die geistige Homosexualität des alten Wagners beweist der *Parsifal* unzweifelhaft.”

27. “Wie? ein Christentum, zugerechnet für Wagnerianerinnen, vielleicht von Wagnerianerinnen—denn Wagner was in alten Tagen durchaus *feminini generis*—?”

28. “Dabei ist freilich jene andre Frage nicht zu umgehen, was ihn eigentlich jene männliche (ach, so unmännliche) ‘Einfalt vom Lande’ anging, jener arme Teufel und Naturbursch *Parsifal*, der von ihm mit so verfänglichen Mitteln schließlich katholisch gemacht wird . . .”

29. “Die Predigt der Keuschheit bleibt eine Aufreizung zur Widernatur: ich veracte jedermann, der den *Parsifal* nicht als Attentat auf die Sittlichkeit empfindet.”

30. Bizarrely, as Wagner recorded in *Mein Leben*, he was introduced to Feuerbach’s works by a revolutionary Catholic priest (Wagner [1870–80] 1963:494).

31. “das Ding an sich, der innere Gehalt, das Wesentliche der Welt.”

32. “Sie ist musikalische Mystik. Sie ist die Form, in welcher die Unfähigkeit zur Aufmerksamkeit sich in der Musik äußert.”

33. “Er schmeichelt jedem nihilistischen (buddhistischen) Instinkte und verkleidet ihn in Musik, er schmeichelt jeder Christlichkeit, jeder religiösen Ausdrucksform der *décadence*.”



34. But a brief examination of the history of the relationship between the two men leads one to be skeptical about Nietzsche's denunciations of Wagner's "sudden" life-negating Christian position. Nietzsche, whose critique of *Parsifal* was based largely on the libretto of the opera from which he had heard the composer read out the text as early as 1865, at the peak of Nietzsche's Wagner enthusiasm. He only knew the music to the overture well, and liked it. And one could also point to the fact that Wagner had been toying with themes of renunciation from the Catholic Middle Ages as far back as *Tannhäuser*, which had been written in the 1840s, when Nietzsche was only a child.

35. "Selbstlosigkeit' das *décadence* Prinzip, der Wille zum Ende in der Kunst sowohl wie in der Moral."

36. "Schließe die Wunde, daß heilig ich sterbe, rein dir gesunde!"

37. "Eben dieses Mitleid, diese sentimentale Weltanschauung, dieses Edeltum, dieses Bewundern *par distance* ist gerade einer der charakterischen Züge des Urning, der psychoerotischen Rasse."

38. "Der Wille zum Leben findet seinen höchsten Ausdruck in der Liebe des Mannes zum Weibe."

39. Paradoxical as it may seem, anti-Semitic anti-Wagnerism was also commonplace. In the innumerable caricatures of Wagner, there is a pronounced anti-Semitic element accompanying the references to Wagner's physical idiosyncrasies. Wagner is shown with a huge hooked nose and other clichés of anti-Semitic iconography. James Gibbons Huneker wrote that Wagner's music was Jewishly nervous and "certainly unlike any music made by a German, with its vibratile rhythms, its dramatic characterization and magnificent decorative frame" (1922:167). And German author and anti-Semite Gustav Freytag argued that Wagner's music was "typically Jewish" (Stefan 1914:21).

40. *Esotericism in the Work of Richard Wagner, Lohengrin: Richard Wagner's Opera Viewed from the Philosophical-Esoteric Standpoint*, and *Richard Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen in its Esoteric Meaning*.

41. In it Wagner tells us that country and western music "deals with real people and real problems," but that disco is "rather artificial," and expresses interest in the potential of the moog synthesizer.

42. "Wagner habe 1882 nach der letzten *Parsifal*-Aufführung seine Freunde and Getreuen noch einmal um sich versammelt, um einige Abschiedsworte an sie zu richten. Während er, auf einem Podium etwas erhöht stehend, zu den Anwesenden Sprach, sie plötzlich eine seltsame Veränderung mit ihm vorgegangen. Sein Körper sei, obwohl die Gestalt als solcher blieb, wie sie war, hell und durchsichtig geworden, sodaß hinter ihm befindlichen Gegenstände ganz klar und deutlich zu sehen waren."

43. Similarly, the story of the six-year-old Italian boy called Ferero who had conducted the Prelude to Wagner's *Meistersinger* did the rounds in occult magazines. The *Zentralblatt für Okkultismus* wrote the following: "Perhaps Richard Wagner was re-embodied in Ferero. We all know that Wagner had a *great* love of Italy, and one can assume that Richard Wagner had by no means exhausted his artistic life-force [*Vielleicht hat sich Richard Wagner selbst in Ferero wiederverkörpert. Wir wissen doch alle, daß Richard Wagner eine große Vorliebe für Italien besaß, und es ist anzunehmen, daß Richard Wagner sich künstlerisch noch lange nicht ausgelebt hatte*]" (1913:164).

44. David Cormack's fascinating article "Faithful, All too Faithful: William Ashton Ellis and the Englishing of Wagner" is an exception (1993).

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45. Another occultist, not a member of the Theosophist Society, but influenced by it, was a man who went by the name "Parsifal Braun." (The name is spelled in Wagner's novel way, not "Parzival" or "Percival.") Parsifal Braun was a German-American occultist and the author of many books on esoteric themes in the years before the First World War. At the back of one of his books I was surprised to see an advertisement for his "secret brotherhood" (what kind of "secret brotherhood" advertises for members?)—the "brotherhood of the Grail," which it seems aimed to combine the teachings of Spiritualism, Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, Christianity, and various branches of paganism.

46. See for example Freimark (1906) and Sadger (1908).

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