December 1989

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.4, December 1989, p.227-236

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Wagner and The Spoils of Poynton

by CHRIS BROWN

Henry James's notebook entry of 24 December 1893 recounting the familial squabble that would elicit The Spoils of Poynton has not dissuaded critics from seeking additional, fictive sources for the novel. These have not included Der Ring des Nibelungen. Yet the Ring saga as fashioned by Wagner bears some likeness to The Spoils of Poynton, which speaks figuratively of a treasure and of antagonistic races brought into ironic resemblance by their lust for it. Mrs. Gereth's progress from ruthless acquisition through anxious, futile defense to defeated resignation parallels that of Wotan, the king of the gods, and the endings of the two works are similar, as both Valhalla and Poynton burn. The New York Preface seems to evoke Wagner's castle when it refers to the Gereth furniture as "the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged round it" (SP xii). Suggestive as well is the comparison of the terrace at Playden, Sussex, where James finished the novel to "my opera-box" (SP xii).

The neglect of this topic may be partly explained by a dearth of encouragement from James's life. The author declined to meet Wagner in Italy in 1880 and seems to have disliked his music, to which James was introduced in Paris, quite early, through his friend Paul Zhukovsky. Writing to his father on 11 November 1876, about three months after the first performance of the entire Ring at Bayreuth, James says that "A young French pianist of great talent played to a small Russian circle a lot of selections from Wagner's Bayreuth operas. I was bored, but the rest were in ecstasy" (HJL 73). No evidence available shows that James attended Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, or Götterdämmerung, although he had his chances, the likeliest of these probably being the six Covent Garden performances of the translated Valkyrie in 1895, the year he began Poynton. By then, however, one needn't have attended The Ring to learn about it. Several translations had been published, as had several exegeses, and there were also reviews in The Times: those of Ford Madox Ford's father, Francis Hueffer, chief music critic prior to his death in 1889, are especially detailed and enthusiastic. Whatever the source, that James did know the story

1. They have included several novels by Balzac, especially Le Curé de Tours (Tintner 277) and Maupassant's "Qui Sait?" "Vieux Objects" (Tintner 225), and "En Famille" (Cargill 218). Roper (188) notes references to the Iliad.

2. Probably the best known early translation is by Henriette and Frederick Corder, dating from the early 1880's; Andrew Porter's "Introduction" provides an informative discussion. Commentaries include

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Wagner contrived is shown by references in *The Ivory Tower*, written years after *Poynton*, and in “The Death of the Lion,” published April 1894, just before James took up the novel. Both inform his use there.

The “truly massive young person” (*IT* 1) of *The Ivory Tower*, Rosanna Gaw, is commended by Davey Bradham thus: “It’s too splendid to hear of amid our greedy wants, our timid ideas and our fishy passions. You ring out like Brünnhilde at the opera” (*IT* 39). Like Brünnhilde electing human love over godly avarice, Rosanna is the only moral force combating the greed of Newport, epitomized by her father. As Abel Gaw lurks about the grounds of his former partner and swindler, awaiting Betterman’s demise and the disposition of the inheritance, he strikes Gray Fielder as “a small waiting and watching, an almost crouching gnome, the neat domestic goblin of some old Germanic, some harmonised, familiarised legend” (*IT* 84), a tolerably clear allusion to the dwarf Alberich, who lurks by the cave of the giant Fafner in the second act of *Siegfried*, hoping to steal the ring when the title character kills the giant. Better Brünnhilde than Alberich, yet Bradham’s compliment is double-edged, for to “ring out” imputes crudity, a want of fine discrimination. So does Rosanna’s size. James refers to her in his notebook as having “no more taste than an elephant” (*NB* 480); when a young “romp” she has borne children on her back (*IT* 32). As Brünnhilde, moreover, Rosanna is a Valkyrie, a woman warrior, and Horton Vint’s gibe that “Rosanna is surely enough of a man to be much more of one than Davey” (*IT* 155) suggests the deformity she represents to others. The novel’s first page emphasizes her tastelessness, as she walks with “a vast pale-green parasol, a portable pavilion from which there fluttered fringes, frills and ribbons that made it resemble the roof of some Burmese palanquin or perhaps even pagoda . . .” (*IT* 1).

If Rosanna is large enough to carry a pavilion, one of Mrs. Wimbush’s guests in “The Death of the Lion,” the Princess, is as big as Valhalla:

The Princess is a massive lady with the organisation of an athlete and the confusion of tongues of a *valet de place*. She contrives to commit herself extraordinarily little in a great many languages, and is entertained and conversed with in detachments and relays, like an institution which goes on from generation to generation or a big building contracted for under a forfeit. She can’t have a personal taste any more than, when her husband succeeds, she can have a personal crown, and her opinion on any matter is rusty and heavy and plain—made, in the night of ages, to last and be transmitted. I feel as if I ought to pay someone a fee for my glimpse of it. She has been told everything in the world and has never perceived anything, and the echoes of her education respond awfully to the rash footfall—I mean the casual remark—in the cold Valhalla of her memory. Mrs. Wimbush delights in her wit and says there is nothing so charming as to hear Mr. Paraday draw it out. He is perpetually detailed for this job, and he tells me it has a peculiarly exhausting effect. (“DL” 50-51)

Massive and intimidating in her athletic bulk, a confusion of gender to accompany her confusion of tongues, the Princess is not Brünnhilde,
however, because Brünnhilde renounces the defense of Valhalla for which Wotan begets the Valkyries. The Princess is like one of the others, or generically Valkyrie, a representative of a despotic and outmoded social hierarchy, hence the reference to Valhalla, the supposedly invulnerable fortress from which Wotan rules. To pay for it, as depicted in Rhinegold, he must either give the giants who built it the treasure and ring or forfeit Freia, the goddess of love, to them. Forfeit in “The Death of the Lion” are the political freedom and social energy that the Princess entails. Although morally opposite and conceived as a weight rather than an impetus, the Princess does resemble Rosanna in her absence of taste—indeed, the Princess is aesthetically destructive, hastening the collapse of the Lion, Paraday.

At the same time these references serve to underscore the nature of the characters, they also parody Wagner. He intends a comely Brünnhilde, as Siegfried’s praise of her demonstrates at the end of Siegfried, and, while Wagner stresses Valhalla’s heroic traits of pomp and strength, it too is beautiful, typically either glistening—“shining bright / in morning light” (RN 23)—or radiant—“let the gods’ new golden splendour / shine upon you” (RN 72). In James’s lampoon, Valkyries are huge and Valhalla either “heavy and plain” or a Newport “smothered in senseless architectural ornament,” like Betterman’s mansion (IT 2). What James satirizes is the assumption that beauty is compatible with heroic force and scope. He suggests that a female warrior would more nearly resemble Rosanna than the Brünnhilde of the libretto, that a castle built by giants would be as grotesque as, though not necessarily more so than, the villas of captains of industry. He also suggests, of course, that Brünnhilde would more nearly resemble the colossal soprano playing her. The relatively wide discrepancy between operatic intent and practice would have reinforced for James the unreality of Wagner’s romantic suppositions. The composer’s very attempts towards a fuller staging of life, however, seemed self-defeating to James: he thought the operas marred by overdoing as well as stridency. For example, in the 1889 essay “After the Play,” which takes the form of a Socratic exchange, “Auberon” argues, “Why not have everything—the face, the voice, the touching intonations, the vivid gestures, the acres of painted canvas, and the army of supernumeraries? Why not use bravely and intelligently every resource of which the stage disposes? What else was Richard Wagner’s great theory, in producing his operas at Bayreuth?” (SA 230). The Jamesian spokesman, “Dorriforth,” retorts that in practice stage machinery lessens the effect of acting and ruins the only “reality worth a farthing, on the stage . . . what the actor gives . . .” (SA 230–31). James, then, found reason for annoyance in both Wagner’s content and his form.

That he also found employment for this annoyance in The Spoils of Poynton is most directly shown by his application of the Valkyrie formula to Mona Brigstock, the Valkyrie as philistine. Fleda’s increasing apprehension over Mona’s control of Owen leads her to picture Mona as “The
massive maiden at Waterbath” whose “thick outline never wavered an inch” (SP 199–200). In reality, “Tall, straight and fair, long-limbed and strangely festooned” (SP 9), Mona is sufficiently Valkyrian, and James grants her the traits of athleticism — she is repeatedly described as “romping” — and a strong will. Although she is sexually attractive, her forcefulness lends her a masculine property, evident, for instance, in the novel’s motif of shoes. Fleda notes Mona’s “patent-leather shoes, which resembled a man’s” (SP 28); later, she expresses her revulsion at waiting for Mona’s surrender of Owen with the words “it’s like waiting for dead men’s shoes!” (SP 190). Mona, however, is adept “at putting down that wonderful patent-leather foot” with Owen (SP 92). Mulish along with masculine, she is also able “to plant her big feet and pull another way” (SP 26), an amusing variation on her equine attachments that more firmly identify her with Wagner’s equestriennes. She is both horse, engaging in “horse-play” (SP 9) with Owen, and rider, the daughter-in-law with which fate is preparing to “saddle” Mrs. Gereth (SP 8). James extends the figure to his Preface: “The will that rides the crisis quite most triumphantly is that of the awful Mona Brigstock, who is all will, without the smallest leak of force into taste or tenderness or vision, into any sense of shades or relations or proportions” (SP xvii). Tasteless, blind to the beauty of Poynton, which she wishes to violate with the “shiny excrescence” (SP 34) of a winter garden, the “festooned” Mona is like Rosanna’s umbrella, her home like Mr. Betterman’s. Waterbath is “smothered . . . with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunchy draperies . . .” (SP 7).

Thus James draws upon the Valkyries in framing his upper-middle-class termagant. Conceivably, Mona owes something to the Rhine Maidens as well, who romp in the first scene of Rhinegold before Alberich steals their treasure. They number three; so do the Brigstock daughters. Mona charms Owen; Fricka, Wotan’s consort, complains of “that watery brood,” for “many a man / they’ve lured by their charms to the Rhine” (RN 32). “The Rhine,” however, is a free rendering of “im Bad,” more literally (as in Newson’s German Opera Texts) “to their bath” (RWR 31–32). Is this passage the source of the redundant “Waterbath,” the name of the novel’s initial setting? If so, James possessed a closer knowledge of The Ring than one would otherwise suppose. At any rate, there is more of Wagner in The Spoils of Poynton than Mona Brigstock, and the parodic impulse — which is not announced by reference — is subordinate to earnest intents, as James devises an unparodic Valhalla in Poynton, with Wagner’s secondary aspect of beauty shifted to the primary. What seems to have occurred to James is that he could turn the aesthetic nature of his disagreement with Wagner to thematic treatment by borrowing Wagner’s own structural idea. Largely through diminishing the gods’ nobility (Newman 465), Wagner achieves an ironic mirroring of antipathetic races, each corrupted by desire for the powerful ring forged from the Rhine Maidens’ hoard. Despite their con-
tary appearances and locales, Alberich, one of the “dusky race / [that] dwells in the earth’s deep caverns” (RN 171), and Wotan, living on “cloud-hidden heights” (RN 172), match one another as power-mad thieves, Wotan stealing from Alberich what Alberich steals from the Maidens. The giants Fafner and Fasolt of “the earth’s broad surface” (RN 172) no sooner obtain the ring in payment for Valhalla than the former slays the latter and changes himself into a dragon to guard it, only to be slain in turn by Siegfried. James adopts this paradigm to the aesthetic enmity of Waterbath and Poynton, which become less distinct than they begin. At Waterbath dwell the “frumps,” one of whom Mrs. Gereth fears her son will marry (SP 4), one hundred of whom attend the wedding (SP 251), and to whom James applies the definite article of scientific classification: “the temperament of the trump” (SP 5). Like a biological species, the Brigstocks possess an instinctive, inherited, inalienable trait, the “principle” (SP 6) of ugliness, the “infallible instinct for gross deviation” (SP 7) that governs the decoration of their home. Though born to taste, Owen is also a frump; as such he is a genetic mistake, showing a “monstrous lack of taste” (SP 8), his gun room constituting “the one monstrosity of Poynton” (SP 59). There live the “wiseheads” (SP 20, 21), Mrs. Gereth and Fleda, and the more exalted order of the Things, repeatedly animate in their descriptions in the novel and Preface. They are “conscious of their race and their danger” (SP 57); they are “too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reducible to anything so narrow” (SP 235) as possession.

The realms of Waterbath and Poynton are so separate as to be mutually “uncanny” (SP 6, 27). Like Valhalla, Poynton is described in terms of light, as a “radiance” (SP 58), as a “shining steady light” (SP 231), and the artistic unity that the setting and furniture comprise is emphasized. Poynton is “an effort toward completeness and perfection” (SP 50); it forms a “complete work of art” (SP 13). Therefore, each piece is necessary—“there wasn’t an object of them all but should be handled with perfect love” (SP 19)—and the offer to Mrs. Gereth of a few select items upon the occupation of her son seems to violate both the spirit with which she maintains the collection and the aesthetic cohesion that Mrs. Brigstock fails to perceive: “anything she looked at was ‘in the style’ of something else. This was to show how much she had seen, but it only showed she had seen nothing; everything at Poynton was in the style of Poynton . . . .” (SP 27). Waterbath, in contrast, is an unintegrated jumble of souvenirs, and we see Mrs. Brigstock’s commemorative tendency in the lady’s magazine she buys as “a trophy of her journey” (SP 27) and which Mrs. Gereth flings at the departing Brigstocks.

Mrs. Brigstock is a “vulgar old woman . . . . [trying] to pass off a gross avidity as a sense of the beautiful” (SP 27). Fleda sees Mrs. Gereth as inspired by a pure love of beauty (SP 46) and as thinking “solely and incorruptibly of what was best for the objects themselves” (SP 214). No one is
stainless in *The Spoils of Poynton*, however, and James devises opposites only to lend their conjunction an ironic force. Dreading the predations of the Brigstocks, Mrs. Gereth engages in the “spoliation” (*SP* 78) of her own masterpiece when she takes some of the furnishings to Ricks. She has asserted the impossibility of comparing her things (*SP* 57) and her equal love of them all (*SP* 50), yet she does choose, terming the leavings “‘rubbish’” (*SP* 73), and stripping the elect of their proper environment. Fleda confronts these matters during her stay at Ricks: “In the watches of the night she saw Poynton dishonoured; she had cherished it as a happy whole, she reasoned, and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs” (*SP* 78). Her bedroom, then, is “loveless” (*SP* 78), without the disinterested love that Gereth has avowed and Fleda mistakenly perceived. Ricks does evince the self-love that lurks within Gereth’s aesthetic sense. The contents of the house, the “trophies of her friend’s struggle” (*SP* 71), bespeak Gereth’s acumen and daring, and her collecting has always served a testamentary function in part: the crisis merely makes the fact plain. In her original assembling of Poynton on a limited budget, she has been “the craftiest stalker, who had ever tracked big game” (*SP* 13), and the trophies thus acquired represent “her old tricks and triumphs” (*SP* 58). The case of Mrs. Gereth intimates the fate of beauty in the world, doomed by the very impulses that have evoked it.

Expressing the attitude of her husband and herself, Mrs. Gereth calls Poynton “‘our religion’” and “‘us’” (*SP* 30–31). The gods, too, in Alberich’s bitter phrase, are “self-worshipping” (*RN* 197), especially Wotan, whose “dreams / of flattering deceit” (*RN* 19) create Valhalla, and Gereth resembles him in several ways. As Wotan plays the treasure hunter, descending with Loge to the underworld of the Nibelung to trick Alberich out of his gold, so Gereth practices the “art of the treasure-hunter” (*SP* 21), following her Maltese cross “through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at last unearthed” (*SP* 74); the essential amorality of the act is underlined by the “almost infernal cunning” (*SP* 13) she displays. Both god and doyenne proceed to anxious defenses of their wealth that ultimately recoil upon them. Wotan fathers Siegmund and Brünnhilde to the ends of defense but must let the former perish and cast off the latter, whose self-sacrifice in *Götterdämmerung* abolishes the rule of the gods. Long before her stand at Ricks, Gereth’s fear of dispossession is a “misery haunting her” (*SP* 15), and her subsequent manipulation of Fleda, seeking to allay that fear, only realizes it. Both characters come to an awareness of their futility and vanity. Brooding over Siegmund, Wotan cries, “Fade from my sight, / honour and fame, / glorious godhead’s / glittering shame! / And fall in ruins, / all I have raised! / I leave all my work; / but one thing I desire: / the ending, that ending!” (*RN* 110–11). At the conclusion of the novel, Mrs. Gereth admits that the loss of the spoils “‘was all my own doing’” (*SP* 222), says that “‘I very nearly don’t care’” about the things, of which she is “‘tired’” (*SP* 232), and terms them “‘accursed
vanities’" (SP 223), reflecting, presumably, her own. Finally, both Wotan and Gereth sense new values in the ascendancy of races newer than theirs, although Wotan is considerably more cheered by the idea, welcoming the reign of humanity as “Free from hate, / joyful and loving” (RN 224). Bewildered by the absence of sexual consummation on the part of Fleda and Owen, Mrs. Gereth remarks, “it’s as if you and Owen were of quite another race and another flesh. You make me feel very old-fashioned and simple and bad’” (SP 222).

Owen just follows orders, but Gereth might well recognize in Fleda’s case the insufficiency of wiseheadom as a racial mark. James notes of Fleda that “Almost as much as Mrs. Gereth’s her taste was her life, though her life was somehow the larger for it” (SP 25). Her life is so because her taste is not merely an exercise in self-affirmation. She is able to see beauty in other people, such as the maiden aunt of Ricks, and her response to the homecoming of the spoils is benignly disinterested: “she thought of them without a question of any personal right. That they might have been, that they might still be hers, that they were perhaps already another’s, were ideas that had too little to say to her. They were nobody’s at all. . . . It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the strange peace that had descended like a charm” (SP 235). Finding “each piece . . . perfect” and “the array of them . . . complete” (SP 235), Fleda values the “toute ensemble” (Richards 311), in contrast to Mrs. Gereth. A Jamesian central intelligence strayed into the brouhaha of the Ring, Fleda also contrasts the novel’s most flagrant Wagnerian, Mona, in that Fleda is “slim, pale and black-haired” (SP 5) and “no good at all’” for action, according to Mrs. Gereth (SP 245). The conclusion of the penultimate chapter sets the two young women in opposition: Mona, active and victorious; Fleda, defeated but “showing how serenely and lucidly she herself could talk” (SP 252).

With its balanced antitheses, this passage has very much the feel of a Jamesian ending, but the novel finishes à la Wagner, not only in its violent melodrama but in its extension of the pattern of ironic likeness to Fleda, who here joins Mrs. Gereth in appetency and aesthetic corruption. She is lured by Owen’s letter offering some remembrance from among the holdings of Poynton. Its emphases are exactly wrong. Owen accentuates art as possession, desiring her to take “‘something of mine,’ ”something of “‘such a sort that you can take immediate possession of’” (SP 258), something she can “‘carry . . . right away with’ ” her (SP 258). This last bears implications of a pillaging raid, which become nearly explicit as Fleda imagines her return to London “with her trophy under her cloak” (SP 261). Owen also presses comparison: Fleda will know “‘what’s best and what isn’t. . . . I mean for judges, and for what they’d bring’ ” (SP 258). Swept away by a “passion that . . . found here an issue that there was nothing whatever to choke” (SP 260), Fleda decides she will choose, spending “her private hours in a luxury of comparison and debate” (SP
261) and will possess: "she should be able to say to herself that, for once at least, her possession was as complete as that of either of the others whom it had filled only with bitterness" (SP 260). While she sees herself journeying to Poynton "as a pilgrim might go to a shrine" (SP 259), most pilgrims do not view such endeavors as confirming their recent behavior (SP 260), nor do they walk off with one of the icons. Seduced to egotism, Fleda stands in her rail carriage at Poynton station, "proudly erect with the thought that all for Fleda Vetch then the house was standing there" (SP 263).

Instead, the house repeats the burning of Valhalla and its proud race against a backdrop of symbolic dusk, invoked by Brünnhilde's "Twilight and darkness / seize all the clan!" (RN 243). The dark in the novel results from the winter storm that fans the flames but also blackens the fields (SP 262), turns the day darker as Fleda nears Poynton (SP 263), and so impresses the stationmaster as to move him to speak of "‘this cruel, cruel night’" (SP 265). His description underscores the oddity of the lighting, and thereby its significance, for temporally it is day. Fleda starts her journey to Poynton before dawn — peering “up and down the dark street” (SP 261) on which her father's house is located — but sees sunrise (SP 262) prior to her rail trip of eighty minutes (SP 262). The fire would also seem to begin before dawn, since the stationmaster's report of his witnessing the fire at six a.m., "‘the very first I heard of it’" (SP 265), places its initiation earlier than six. That it is roughly coterminous with Fleda's expedition suggests the fire's expressionistic purpose, manifesting the ruinous nature of her desire. It also seems reasonable to argue, as does Alan Roper (191), that the storm itself is a collective rendering of the human passions arrayed against Poynton, Fleda's included. If the weather is "spoiling for a storm" (SP 261), she is the last of those engaged in storming Poynton for spoils.

She faces the consequences in the last part of the ending, set on the station platform. Choking on smoke (SP 265), the issue of her unchoked passion (SP 260), she feels dismay, horror, and sickness at Poynton's conflagration, responses seconded by the stationmaster's view that it is "‘quite too dreadful’" (SP 264). From him, of all people, she hears what she should have remembered: the aesthetic worth of Poynton is in its totality. Poynton is as good as gone "‘if it ain't really saved’" (SP 266). The unwitting victim of herself, Fleda is anything but storm-like now. She is depicted rather as the feeble victim of natural power: "limp and weak" (SP 266), showing "her dire helplessness in the face of nature," as Emily Izsak has it (470). Such is Fleda's debility that she never even reaches the scene of the fire. In the analogous conclusion to Twilight of the Gods, Brünnhilde joyfully leaps upon the funeral pyre of Siegfried. Fleda merely will "‘go back’" (SP 266), in the novel's last words. She leaves having experienced "the raw bitterness of a hope that she might never again in life have to give up so much at such short notice" (SP 266) and having joined those she thought to surpass, the others whom "possession ... had filled only
with bitterness” (SP 260). No more than Fleda, who epitomizes them, do the other characters attest human potency or skill here. They are either absent, as are Owen, Mona, and Mrs. Gereth (“‘not a soul of them back,’” reports the station-master), or incompetent, as are the heedless servants who have sparked the fire, and the people who fail to check it: “‘And the want of right help—it maddened me to stand and see ’em muff it. This ain’t a place, like, for anything organized. They don’t come up to a reel emergency’” (SP 265).

The emergency is unusual in respect to James’s novelistic endings (only those of *Roderick Hudson* and *The Princess Casamassima* match the violence of this one), and the book itself seems to dismiss such melodrama. At the beginning of Chapter Six, Fleda imagines the struggle for Poynton to culminate in “a ‘great scene,’ a thing, somehow, of indignity and misery, of wounds inflicted and received, in which . . . Mrs. Gereth’s presence . . . loomed large” (SP 56), but she finds more likely the “pitying vision of Mrs. Gereth with her great scene left in a manner on her hands, Mrs. Gereth missing her effect and having to appear merely hot and injured and in the wrong” (SP 56). The conclusion displays the obverse: the great scene is in place, but no one is up to playing it, to save Poynton or to expire in the attempt. One need not grasp the Wagnerian analogue to appreciate James’s indictment of the human inability to sustain beauty against the forces of greed, egotism, and passion. To do so, however, adds the irony of contrast, for the conclusion of *Götterdammerung* celebrates the ascension of humanity to dominance through Brünnhilde’s sacrifice.

To do so adds the further irony that parody has shifted to the mock heroic: James adduces Wagner in order to show mankind as un-Wagnerian. James’s lampoon of the junction of beauty with force becomes, through Wagner’s paradigm of corruption, a satire on man’s relationship with the aesthetic, which he cannot save from himself. *The Spoils of Poynton* proffers a congregation—if hardly a communion—of frumps.

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**Key to Works by Henry James**


*SP*—*The Spoils of Poynton*. New York: Scribner’s, 1908.
\textbf{Key to Works by Richard Wagner}


\textbf{Other Works Cited}


