

Winter and Spring Imagery in *Die Walküre* and *Die Meistersinger*

By Peter Bassett

*At the quiet hearth in winter time,
when castle and courtyard were snowed up,
I often read in an old book
left to me by my ancestor
how once Spring so sweetly laughed,
and how it then soon awoke anew.
Walther von der Vogelweide
he was my master.*

Walther von Stolzing in *Die Meistersinger*

Winter and Spring as armed combatants

In the first Acts of both *Die Walküre* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Wagner depicts Winter and Spring as armed warriors locked in combat, with Spring defeating his frosty adversary before succumbing to the higher power of Love.

Siegmond in his rhapsodic '*Wintersturme wichen dem Wonnemond*' describes an armed Spring conquering the world and breaching Winter's defences. Walther von Stolzing in his trial song '*So rief der Lenz in den Wald*' describes Winter 'grimly armed' sheltering in a thorn-hedge and planning his tactics to defeat Spring. Both images echo the lyric poetry of the twelfth century Minnesinger Walther von der Vogelweide, whom Walther von Stolzing acknowledges as his master. He seems to have been Wagner's 'master' too.

Walther von der Vogelweide's poetry often uses 'May' as a synonym for 'Spring', and the following lines are to be found in two of his poems:

WINTER

Uns hat der Winter überall Schaden
zugefügt.
Heide und Wald, wo manch Stimme gar
süß erklang, sind beide nun fahl.
Könnte ich den Winter nur verschlafen!
Solange ich wach bleibe, grolle ich ihm,
dass seine Macht so groß und so weit ist.
Wahrlich, einmal muss auch er dem Maien
weichen.
Dann pflücke ich dort Blumen, wo jetzt
Reif liegt.¹

WINTER

Winter has wrought us harm everywhere:
Forest and field are dreary and bare
Where sweet voices of summer once
were....
Ah, could I slumber the winter away!
Awaken at last, in anger at him
Whom far and wide all must obey;
Yet truly in time he'll be vanquished by
May.
Then I'll pluck flowers where frost lies
today.

FRÜHLING UND FRAUEN

Nun wohl, wollt ihr die Wahrheit
schauen,
Geh'n wir zu des Maien Jubelfeste,
Der jetzt ins Land mit allen Kräften kam!

SPRINGTIME AND WOMEN

Then come, if you would want to test the
truth,
To May's high festival let us go forth,
Who into the field is come with all his
forces!

Thus Winter is depicted as a tyrant laying waste to the countryside before being challenged and vanquished by Spring. The second poem reinforces the imagery of the seasons as adversaries engaged in medieval trial by combat. As one writer has observed: 'The month of May, which we have been accustomed to picture to ourselves as a maiden, robed in gossamer and garlanded with flowers, we are surprised to find represented as a man, with something even martial in his aspect, coming, as he does, to his high festival as to a tournament, with all his forces and wearing his floral splendours somewhat after the manner of heraldic blazon.'²

Siegmund's words offer similarly martial sentiments:

SIEGMUND

Mit zarter Waffen Zier
bezwingt er die Welt;
Winter und Sturm wichen
der starken Wehr:
wohl musste den tapfern Streichen
die strenge Türe auch weichen,
die trotzig und starr
uns trennte von ihm.

SIEGMUND

Armed with fragile weapons
he [Spring] conquers the world.
Winter and storms yield
their stout defence.
At these valiant blows
the sturdy doors yield too,
for defiant and firm
they kept us from him.

In *Die Meistersinger*, Walther von Stolzing describes a jealous and fully armed Winter taking refuge in a thorn-hedge, his last stronghold of fading frost and melting snow, planning ways to resist the joyous Spring.

WALTHER VON STOLZING

In einer Dornenhecken,
von Neid und Gram verzehrt,
musst' er sich da verstecken,
der Winter, grimmbewehrt:
von dürrem Laub umrauscht,
er lauert da und lauscht
wie er das frohe Singen
zu Schaden könnte bringen.

WALTHER VON STOLZING

In a thorn-hedge,
consumed with jealousy and grief,
winter, grimly armed,
had to hide himself away:
with dry leaves rustling about him
he lies in wait and plans
how he might harm
this joyful singing.

Pre-dating even Walther von der Vogelweide, the symbolic connection between Winter and an armed figure can be traced to legends associated with Wotan/Woden/Odin. A wind god and a war god, Wotan displayed his wrath in the tempest – 'the storm is approaching' warns Waltraute in Act III of *Die Walküre* before an angry Wotan bursts onto the scene searching for Brünnhilde. He led the Furious Host or Wild Hunt, a cavalcade of huntsmen and warriors who raged across the skies before the coming of Easter and spring.

The Jew in the Thornbush

The often-repeated claim that Wagner's image of winter grimly-armed and hiding in a thorn hedge was inspired by an anti-Semitic folk tale published by the brothers Grimm: *Der Jude im Dorn* (The Jew in the Thornbush) is without foundation and has been rebutted by a number of scholars.³ Nowhere in Wagner's writings or recorded remarks is there even the briefest reference to this tale, whose primary theme is the righting of an injustice through the power of music. The association of that injustice with a negative stereotype – in this case an acquisitive Jew but in other versions of the story a stony-hearted friar or greedy monk, a wicked step-mother, a thieving farmer, a heartless employer and even a jealous wolf – was intended to heighten the reader's sympathy for the victim but is of secondary importance. It is the use of the fiddle or other musical instrument by a vulnerable person (usually a boy or humble farm worker) to clear his name that lies at the heart of the tale in its various forms. Such a theme has no place in *Die Meistersinger*. A brief review of the many versions of the tale confirms this constant element.

The story that appears in Volume II of *Children's and Household Tales*, published by the brothers Grimm in 1814,⁴ may be summarized as follows. A naïve but honest servant who understands little about the value of money, is tricked by his employer into accepting a paltry payment for years of service. Heading out into the world with his presumed wealth, the servant encounters a dwarf who pleads poverty and asks for help. The servant gives the dwarf all his earnings and, in return, is accorded three wishes: a blowpipe that would hit any target, a fiddle that would compel those hearing it to dance, and the granting of any favour asked by him. Soon afterwards the servant meets a Jew who expresses a desire to possess a bird that is singing beautifully in a tree. At once the servant shoots the bird with his blowpipe and it falls into a thornbush. The servant tells the Jew that if he covets the bird so much he should retrieve it himself. When the Jew crawls into the thornbush to get the bird, the servant begins to play his fiddle, with the result that the Jew begins to thrash about and, in the process is scratched by the thorns which also tear his clothes. The servant continues to play unrelentingly until the Jew offers to give him his purse of gold if only he would stop. Once freed from this torment, the Jew runs to a judge and accuses the servant of having robbed and beaten him. The servant is arrested but claims that the purse had been given freely to him to put an end to his fiddling, an explanation that the Jew denies and the judge doesn't believe. The servant is sentenced to be hanged. As he is led to the gallows he asks permission to play his fiddle, a request that is granted over the Jew's objections. When he begins to play, everyone starts to dance: the judge, the Jew, the old and young, fat and thin, even the dogs in the market place. At last, exhausted, the judge grants the servant his freedom, and the fiddle playing ends. The servant confronts the Jew and threatens to start again unless he explains where the gold in his purse had come from. The Jew confesses that he had stolen it and that the servant had honestly earned it, whereupon he is led to the gallows and hanged as a thief.

The Grimms' story drew on various sources including a comedy by Albrecht Dietrich called *Historia von einem Bawrenknecht und München, welcher in der Dornhecke hat müssen tanzen* (History of a Farmhand and a Monk Who Was Forced to Dance in the Thorn-hedge) of 1618, itself drawn from an earlier play of 1599, and a play of 1620 by the Nuremberg dramatist and anglophile Jakob Ayrer.⁵ These stories belong to a category of international folk tales listed under the heading of 'The Dance among Thorns'. The oldest known version of this type of tale is an early fifteenth century English poem called 'Jack and his Stepdame'⁶ with its subsidiary part 'The Frere and the Boye' (The Friar and the Boy) in which a cowherd called Jack is treated badly by his stepmother. He shares food with an old beggar who grants

him three magic wishes: a bow and arrows that never miss their mark, a pipe that compels all who hear it to dance, and a spell that forces his stepmother to break wind explosively whenever she looks angrily at him! The boy uses these gifts to spite his stepmother and Friar Tobias, whom she has recruited to deal harshly with him. The friar is asked by Jack to fetch from the brambles a bird he has shot, and is then forced by Jack's playing to dance wildly. He emerges all scratched and bloody, and Jack is accused by both the friar and the stepmother of witchcraft. At his trial, Jack's music-making causes everyone to dance until, exhausted, the bishop's inquisitor lets Jack go unpunished. A French adaptation of this story is known as *Les trois dons*.

Another version of the tale was dramatized in the German play of 1599 referred to above⁷, in which a servant boy uses a crossbow that never misses its target, and a fiddle that makes everyone dance. The boy is jeered at by a monk and, to prove his skill, shoots a raven on an island in the middle of a lake. The monk, who had promised to swim across the lake and retrieve the bird if the boy had been able to hit it, does so, but before he can return he is compelled by the fiddle playing to dance around naked. The monk promises the boy money stolen from the monastery if he is allowed to return for his clothes, but treacherously, once he returns, the monk lodges a complaint against the boy who is then condemned to be hanged. The boy is granted his wish to play his fiddle, and only when everyone is exhausted from dancing does the monk confess to his crimes and is hanged instead. The substitution of a Jew for the friar or monk appears to have occurred first in a Czech variation of the story in 1604.⁸

Still more variations include 'The Boy Fiddler of Sicily' in which the villain is a farmer who claims a pheasant shot by the boy Pero, denounces Pero as a thief and is then forced to dance to near exhaustion by the boy's playing; 'The Demonic Fiddler of Dartmoor'⁹ in which the villain is a greedy monk who takes a fat purse of money as the price of saving the boy's soul. The Devil, with whom the boy had unwittingly made his pact to acquire his amazing skills as a fiddler, refers to the monk as 'the blackbird behind the hedgerow', and 'Cecilio, the Servant of Emilio' a Filipino tale¹⁰ probably of Spanish origin, in which the villain is the boy's master, who shoots a bird atop a bamboo thicket. Instead of a fiddle, the boy plays a guitar. The theme has even made its way to South Africa in the form of 'The Monkey's Fiddle'¹¹ in which a monkey who has fallen on hard times kills a deer with his magic bow and arrow at the behest of a wolf. The jealous wolf steals the bow and arrow and gives false testimony against the monkey. It is only when the latter plays his fiddle and makes everyone dance to exhaustion that the judge (a lion) agrees to drop the charge and the wolf admits to his own crime.

It is clear from the above that, unlike the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide, 'The Jew in the Thornbush' and the family of tales to which it belongs have neither thematic nor descriptive relevance to *Die Meistersinger*.

The attributes of Spring

Walther von der Vogelweide describes the entrancing attributes of spring in the following terms:

FRÜHLING UND FRAUEN

Wenn die Blumen aus dem Grase dringen,
Gleich als lachten sie zur hellen Sonne,
Des Morgens früh an einem Maientag,
Wenn die kleinen Vöglein munter singen,
Ihre schönsten Weisen, welche Wonne
An solche Lust dann wohl noch reichen
mag?

SPRINGTIME AND WOMEN

When flowers through the grass begin to
spring, as though to greet with smiles the
sun's bright rays, on some May morning,
and in joyous measure, small song-birds
make the dewy forest ring with a shrill
chorus of sweet roundelays, Hath life in all
its store a purer pleasure?

These sentiments are echoed in Walther von Stolzing's *'Am stillen Herd'* and his Trial Song:

WALTHER VON STOLZING

Wann dann die Flur vom Frost befreit
und wiederkehrt die Sommerszeit;
was einst in langer Winternacht
das alte Buch mir kundgemacht,
das schallte laut in Waldes Pracht,
das hört' ich hell erklingen:
im Wald dort auf der Vogelweid'
da lernt' ich auch das Singen.

WALTHER VON STOLZING

When the meadow was free from frost
and summertime returned,
what previously in long winter nights
the old book had told me
now resounded loudly in the forests'
splendour, I heard it ring out brightly:
in the forest at Vogelweide
I also learnt how to sing.

So rief der Lenz in den Wald,
dass laut es ihn durchhallt: ...
Es schwillt und schallt,
es tönt der Wald
von holder Stimmen Gemenge;

Thus spring cried to the forest
so that it re-echoed loudly: ...
it swells and resounds,
the forest rings
with the host of lovely voices.

But its most effusive expression belongs to Siegmund:

SIEGMUND

Winterstürme wichen
dem Wonnemond,
in mildem Lichte
leuchtet der Lenz;
auf linden Lüften
leicht und lieblich,
Wunder webend
er sich wiegt;
durch Wald und Auen
weht sein Atem,
weit geöffnet
lacht sein Aug':
aus sel'ger Vöglein Sange
süss er tönt,
holde Düfte
haucht er aus;
seinem warmen Blut entblühen
wonnige Blumen,
Keim und Spross
entspringt seiner Kraft.

SIEGMUND

Wintry storms have vanished
before the month of May;
in a gentle light
springtime shines out.
On balmy breezes
light and lovely
it weaves
miracles as it wafts.
Through woods and meadows
its breath blows,
wide open
its eyes are smiling.
Lovely birdsong
sweetly proclaims it.
Blissful scents
exhale its presence.
Marvellous flowers
sprout from its hot blood,
buds and shoots
grow from its strength.

Spring gives way to Love

In Walther von der Vogelweide's poems we also find references to the overriding power of Love:

FRÜHLING UND FRAUEN

Halb gleicht's wohl schon dem
Himmelreiche;
Soll ich nennen aber, was ihm gleiche,
So weiß ich, was mein Auge je
Noch mehr entzückt hat und auch stets
entzücken wird, wenn ich es seh'.
Wo ein edles Fräulein, hold zu schauen,
Wohl gekleidet und das Haar
geschmücket,
Sich unter Leuten heitern Sinns ergeht,
Sittsam froh, vereint mit andern Frauen,
Nur zuweilen etwas um sich blicket
Und wie die Sonne über Sternen steht:

SPRINGTIME AND WOMEN

'Tis half a paradise on earth!
Yet, ask me what I hold of equal worth.
And I will tell what better still
Oft-times before hath pleased mine eyes.
And, while I see it, ever will!
When a noble maiden, fair and pure,
With raiment rich, and tresses deftly
braided, mingles, for pleasure's sake, in
company,
High-bred, with eyes that, laughingly
demure, glance round at times, and make
all else seem faded,
As, when the sun shines, all the stars must
die:

Walther von Stolzing is about to proceed to similar praise of feminine beauty but is prevented from doing so by Beckmesser's announcement that the trial is lost. Walther is left to protest:

WALTHER VON STOLZING

Hört doch, zu meiner Frauen Preis
gelang' ich jetzt erst mit der Weis'.

WALTHER VON STOLZING

But listen! My lady's praises
I am just coming to with my melody.

Siegmund on the other hand, describes Love decoying Spring. Sieglinde recognizes this to be true, proclaiming that Siegmund is 'the Spring' and now also her Love.

SIEGMUND

Zu seiner Schwester
schwang er sich her;
die Liebe lockte den Lenz:
in unsrem Busen
barg sie sich tief;
nun lacht sie selig dem Licht.
Die bräutliche Schwester
befreite der Bruder;
zertrümmert liegt,
was je sie getrennt:
jauchzend grüsst sich
das junge Paar:
vereint sind Liebe und Lenz!

SIEGMUND

To its sister here
it flew.
Love decoyed the spring.
In our hearts
it was hidden deep;
now it smiles joyfully at the light.
The sister as bride
is freed by her brother.
In ruins lies
all that kept them apart.
Joyfully the young couple
greet one another.
Love and Spring are united.

SIEGLINDE

Du bist der Lenz,
nach dem ich verlangte
in frostigen Winters Frist.

...

was im Busen ich barg,
was ich bin,
hell wie der Tag
taucht' es mir auf,
wie tönender Schall
schlug's an mein Ohr,
als in frostig öder Fremde
zuerst ich den Freund ersah.

SIEGLINDE

You are the spring
for which I longed
in the frosty winter time.

...

What I hid in my heart,
what I am,
bright as day
it came to me,
like a resounding echo
it fell upon my ear,
when in frosty lonely strangeness
I saw my friend.

Other parallels between Walther and Wagner

The links between Walther von der Vogelweide's poetry and Wagner's text are not confined to the symbolism of Winter and Spring, as we can see from a comparison of further excerpts from Walther's poems and passages from *Die Meistersinger*:

UNMANNERED CHATTERS

Sensible talk always
Should meet with honest praise:
But when a donkey brays –
Enough! I'll say no more!

SACHS

You do right to remind me;
but is it fitting, Masters, tell me,
that, if I make a little verse
for even the donkey-driver's soles,
I should write nothing on those
of our highly learned town clerk?

A DREAM'S INTERPRETATION

Gladly had I slumbered on,
When the crows, with a curse
Woke me from my dreaming
With their cursed screaming.

WALTHER VON STOLZING

From a dark thorn-hedge
the owl sped forth,
awoke all around with its screeching
the hoarse chorus of ravens.

UNMANNERED CHATTERS

We're troubled by a certain set:
If these but forth were cast.
A man of worth and honest grit
At court might raise his head.
He ne'er had chance to speak as yet.
They wag their jaws so fast
That, were he blest with finest wit.
'Twould serve him not a shred:

In vast nocturnal horde
how they all begin to croak
with their hollow voices
Magpies, crows and jackdaws!

.....

upwards then climbs
though Master-Crows are unfriendly to it
the proud love-song.
Farewell, you Masters here below!

The most celebrated of Walther von der Vogelweide's lyric poems is *Unter der Linden* (Under the Linden Tree), a love poem in which a 'noble lady' recalls the delights of meeting her lover on a bed of flowers under a linden tree, and of their liaison witnessed only by a little bird on whose discretion they can rely. The connection with the young Siegfried's experience lying under his linden tree and listening to the forest bird may be slight in terms of the kind of

love expressed, but it is not entirely coincidental. Neither is a reference in yet another of Walther's poems, which might equally apply to Siegfried on the threshold of manhood, his awakening to the true nature of his life and his momentous discovery of fear – and love:

'Has my life been just a dream, or is it real? And all those things I used to think stood for something. Did they really stand for anything? It seems as though I have been asleep without knowing it. Now I have woken up....'¹²

¹ Walther's medieval German is incomprehensible to most readers today and is here rendered into modern German.

² Walter Alison Phillips in *Selected Poems of Walther von der Vogelweide, the Minnesinger*, London, Smith, Elder & Co, 1896. The English translations are chiefly those by Phillips, with some modernizing of archaic words and expressions.

³ See for example Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*. Trans. Daphne Ellis. Princeton University Press. 2003, pp. 203-208.

⁴ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Selected Tales*, Trans. Joyce Crick. Oxford World's Classics.

⁵ D L Ashliman ed. and trans., *Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts*, University of Pittsburgh, 1996-2010.

⁶ *Jack and his Stepdame* is summarized in Ashliman, op.cit. Also see *The Tale of the Basyn and the Frere and the Boy: Two Early Tales of Magic Printed From Manuscripts Preserved in the Public Library of the University of Cambridge*. University of Michigan Library, 2009, and M Furrow, *Middle English Fabliaux and Modern Myth*, *English Literary History*, Johns Hopkins University, Vol. 56, No. 1, 1989.

⁷ Ashliman, op.cit.

⁸ Quoted in Dean Spouill Fansler, *Filipino Popular Tales*, American Folklore Society, 1921.

⁹ Quoted at www.legendarydartmoor.co.uk/dem_fiddler.htm.

¹⁰ Fansler, op.cit.

¹¹ James A Honey, *South African Folk Tales*, 1910. Kessinger Publishing 2008.

¹² Trans. Leonard Forster.