**Morality**. Historians often adopt a tone of prurient hypocrisy with figures of whom they disapprove. The Russian Empress, Catherine the Great, long endured persistent references to her “scandalous” love life: that is, she was a successful female ruler with the temerity to take lovers. It has become the practice for moral custodians, Frickas *de nos jours*, to berate Wagner for his easy way with other men’s money and women. Understanding both as property is instructive, betokening a narrow conception of “morality,” typical of the public opinion and commercial Press by which Wagner not unreasonably considered himself hounded. Wagner believed consistently that private property distorted every relationship between man and man, likewise man and woman. Shortly before his death, he lauded Wilhelm Heinse for having depicted in his novel, *Ardinghello* (1787), a society in which institution of property had never been permitted (CWD, 30 Sep 1882).

French socialism, directly and through intermediaries such as Heinrich Laube, August Röckel, and Mikhail Bakunin, was a pervading influence. As early as *Das Liebesverbot*, Wagner tells us, “all I cared about was to uncover the sinfulness of hypocrisy and the artificiality of the judicial attitude toward morality” (ML/E 83). Friedrich, prudishly shocked by popular licentiousness, employs state power to enforce an unnatural moral code, whilst transgressing it himself. Röckel, during their Dresden discussions provided theoretical ballast: “On the basis of the socialist theories of Proudhon and others … he constructed a whole new moral order of things to which … he little by little converted me … I began to rebuild upon it my hopes for the realization of my artistic ideals.” Wagner questioned Röckel about his desire “to do away completely with the institution of marriage as we knew it,” and was “particularly struck” by the claim that, only after eradication of coercion by money, rank, and family prejudice, would sexual morality be possible (ML/E 373-4). He returned in his final essay “Über das Weibliche” to the subject. Marriage – to Cosima, at least? – raised man and his moral faculties far above the animal world, yet he was dragged far beneath it by “conventional marriage” (*Konventionsheiraten*), an “abuse” (*Mißbrauch*)founded upon property (SSD 12:343-4).

Self-justification? Perhaps, for instance when Wagner tells us that Minna “became increasingly perplexed at my seemingly incomprehensible conception of art and its relative importance,” and at his “higher delicacy in regard to moral questions,” being “unable to understand and approve my freedom of thought in such matters” (ML/E 130-1). Only up to a point, though, for the contrast between Minna’s need for financial stability and the moral purpose Wagner sought in art is real enough. That they were ultimately unsuited need not send one scurrying for blame. There is, moreover, no mistaking Wagner’s moral outrage at his perception of modern art as “industry, its moral purpose the acquisition of money, its aesthetic purpose the entertainment of the bored” (SSD 3: 18).

Under the influence of Young German and Young Hegelian ideas, most likely including Max Stirner’s anarchistic manifesto, *The Ego and its Own* (1844), Wagner created in the *Ring* an artwork that dramatizes alternative moral possibilities. Fricka, Wagner writes, represents custom (*Sitte*), (Wagner to Uhlig, 12 Nov. 1851).Her marriage to Wotan is fruitless; his children are sired outside wedlock. One of them, Sieglinde, experiences both brutal treatment as chattel by her husband Hunding, and passionate convention-flouting fulfillment with her twin brother, Siegmund. Fricka is outraged: “My heart trembles, my mind reels: bridal embrace between brother and sister! When was it ever heard of that siblings were lovers?” (*Walküre*, II/i). As the gods’ – religion’s – hold on society falters, moral prohibitions dependent upon their power are insisted upon ever more stridently. The gods would go to ruin, Fricka insists, were her moral law not to be obeyed; they already have. Wagner echoes Stirner and prefigures Nietzsche, providing a crucial link in the inversion of Hegel’s elevation of customary over individual morality: “Note how a ‘moral man’ behaves, who today often thinks he is through with God .… a customary-moral shudder will come over him at the conception of one’s being allowed to touch his sister also as a woman.… Because he *believes* in those moral commandments” (Stirner 45); and “They have rid themselves of the Christian God, and thus believe that they must cling all the more firmly to Christian morality … one must, in response to the smallest emancipation from theology, reassert one’s position in awe-inspiring fashion as a moral fanatic” (Nietzsche 80).

What, then, of the pre-eminent “affair,” with Mathilde Wesendonck? One can deplore Wagner’s ingratitude towards her husband, Otto, who had offered considerable financial support, only to find himself cuckolded – at least metaphysically. Wagner opposed marriage as legal setting in stone or ring. Moreover, Wagner’s insistence that the world owed him a living – why should someone be favored because he dealt in silks instead of composing the *Ring*? – is borne out even in capitalist terms by the industry he created for and bequeathed that world. It has done incalculably better from him than *vice versa*.

One might also consider it significant that, when Wagner condensed the action of *Tristan und Isolde* into a few words for Mathilde Wesendonck, he did not even mention King Marke’s forgiveness. Were the sacrifices of men such as Wesendonck and Hans von Bülow as naught to such a monstrous ego? Yet Wagner sees the “custom of the time” leading to the sin of marriage for politics’ sake. The action of *Tristan* is not, moreover, really of this phenomenal world at all, but metaphysical. By now (1859), Wagner had partially converted to a morality founded upon Schopenhauer’s teaching. Though immediately taken by Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, “the moral principles” of *The World as Will and Representation* had been more difficult initially to accept, “for here the annihilation of the Will and complete self-abnegation are represented as the only true means of redemption from the constricting bonds of individuality in its dealings with the world” (ML/E 509). Either way – in practice, both – Wagner rejected the dictates of bourgeois morality.

MARK BERRY

See also: Love;

Mark Berry, “The Positive Influence of Wagner upon Nietzsche,” *The Wagner Journal*, 2.2 (2008): 11-28.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale, with an introduction by Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, tr. Steven Byington, ed. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).