

What is the Ring?

The Genesis of the Cycle

In around 1848, Wagner first had the idea of writing an opera based on old Germanic myth; he took his ideas from Norse epics and from the *Nibelungenlied*, a medieval German poem about the death of the hero Siegfried. He began by doing just that—sketching out a libretto then called *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfried's Death). But he soon realized that this would require another opera to provide the back-story, and so started work on a lighter companion piece, *Der Junge Siegfried* (Young Siegfried). Soon again he saw that this too would require a prequel, and that the whole trilogy would itself need a preliminary evening, so the whole project became a tetralogy. Somewhere along the line, Wagner's emphasis changed from an exclusive focus on Siegfried (though he is still protagonist of the last two operas) to include the original sin that started it all (the theft of the Rhinegold and forging of the Ring) and Wotan's arrogance in trying to exploit and control it. The four titles thus became: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (The Twilight of the Gods).

Even at such a point of turmoil in this life (he had been branded as a political revolutionary and expelled from his post as conductor of the Dresden opera), Wagner finished the four libretti in only four years (1848–52) and proceeded equally fast with the composition. By 1857, he had completed the scores of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* and was two-thirds of the way through *Siegfried*. But then he stopped. He was finding it difficult to get any of his works produced, and these made special demands. He turned his attention instead to what he saw as simpler, lighter works (ha!), *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and waited. It was only after his audience with his greatest fan, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, in 1864 that the log-jam broke spectacularly. Ludwig, who was clearly besotted with the composer, arranged the premieres of *Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, *Rheingold*, and *Walküre* in Munich over an astonishing six-year span (1865–70) before building the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, where the complete *Ring* was premiered in 1876.

Brief Outline

***Das Rheingold*.** The Nibelung Alberich steals the gold and forges the Ring. To pay for the new castle, Valhalla, built for him by the Giants Fafner and Fasolt, the god Wotan goes down to Nibelheim and steals the gold and the Ring, which Alberich curses. But he is forced to give it up. The Gods enter Valhalla with the knowledge that an uncontrolled source of evil power has been let loose upon the world.

***Die Walküre*.** In his attempt to win back the Ring, Wotan has sired two twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, and planted a sword in a tree. The twins were separated as children, and Sieglinde was captured as wife by the barbarian chieftain Hunding. Siegmund takes shelter at Hunding's house, draws the sword from the tree, recognizes his long-lost sister, couples with her, and flees with her into the night. But Wotan's wife Fricka tells her husband that he cannot condone the destruction of a marriage, so when Siegmund

battles Hunding, he fixes it so that the sword breaks and Siegmund is killed. Brünnhilde, his favorite daughter, breaks her father's command by spirited Sieglinde away, telling her that she is pregnant with a new hero, Siegfried. As punishment, Wotan strips her of her godhood and puts her to sleep on a mountain top surrounded by a ring of fire.

Siegfried. After Sieglinde has died in childbirth, Siegfried has been brought up by Mime, a Nibelung smith. He tries, but fails, to remake the sword. Siegfried, however, now a young man, succeeds in doing so. He kills Fafner, who has turned himself into a dragon, takes the Ring, then kills Mime too when the latter tries to poison him. Led on by the voice of a wood bird, he ascends the mountain (pushing aside his grandfather Wotan, who tries to stop him), and wakens Brünnhilde with a kiss.

Götterdämmerung. Siegfried leaves Brünnhilde on her mountaintop and goes off in search of adventure. He comes to the court of Gunther, whose councilor Hagen is Alberich's son. By means of a magic potion, Hagen gets Siegfried to return to the mountain in disguise and abduct Brünnhilde as Gunther's bride. When she realizes she has been tricked, she joins with Hagen and Gunther in vowing Siegfried's death. And indeed, Hagen kills Siegfried while they are out hunting. But Brünnhilde, who now realizes all that has happened, calls for a great funeral pyre, and leaps into it to her death. The flames spread and engulf Valhalla. The Ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens.

Das Rheingold

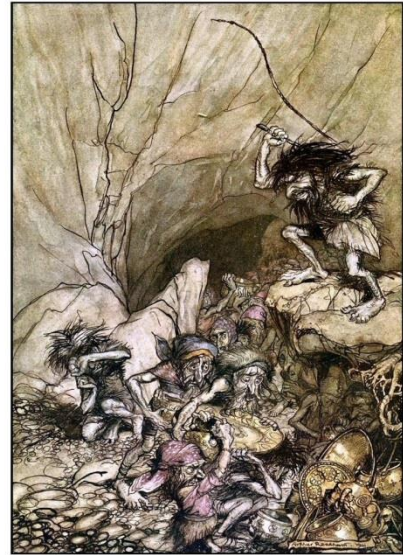
Scene 1 opens in or by the river Rhine. The ugly and dwarfish Nibelung Alberich tries to capture the three Rhinemaidens, Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde; they tease him but always evade him. A light in the water indicates the awakening of the Rhinegold, the treasure they are pledged to protect. They tell Alberich that the man who can forge it into a ring will have power over all the world, but this can only be done by one who has forsworn love. Having failed with the Rhinemaidens, Alberich swears the oath of renunciation, and steals the gold.

Scene 2 is set on a mountaintop where the giants Fasolt and Fafner have built the god Wotan a magnificent castle in the clouds called Valhalla. When he demurs about payment, the giants abduct Freia, the goddess of youth, without whose golden apples the gods will grow old and die. Loge enters; he is the god of fire, but a free spirit, devious and crafty. He tells Wotan of Alberich's theft of the gold and suggests that the best way to get the money for the giants is simply to steal it.

Scene 3 is set in the underground caverns of Nibelheim, where Alberich, with the power of the Ring, has enslaved his people and set them to amass an enormous treasure. He has forced his brother Mime, a skilled smith, to make him the Tarnhelm, a helmet that will turn him into anything he likes, such as a dragon. Loge and Wotan appear to be suitably terrified, then ask if he can manage a mouse. When he obliges, they capture the tiny animal (and thus Alberich himself), and take him back to the upper world.

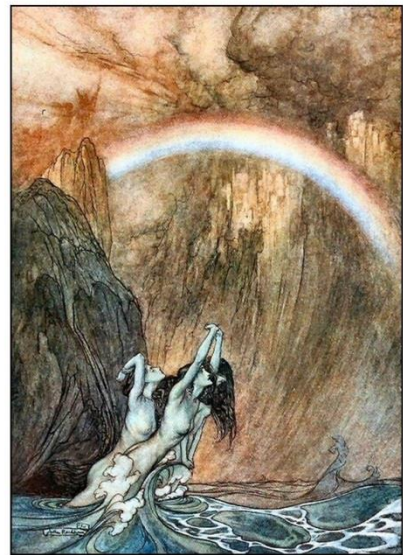
In **Scene 4**, Wotan and Loge force Alberich to summon his minions to bring up the entire treasure, including the Tarnhelm and Ring. Before departing, Alberich places a curse upon it. The giants return, but the treasure is not quite enough to hide the figure of Freia standing behind it. They demand the

Tarnhelm, which Wotan reluctantly concedes. But when they ask for the Ring as well, Wotan refuses, until the Earth Mother, Erda, ascends from below and warns him of the end of the gods if he keeps it. He hands it over, thus redeeming Freia. Immediately the two giants fight over the Ring and Fafner kills Fasolt; the curse has claimed its first victim. Donner, the god of thunder, disperses the gloomy clouds and his brother Froh creates a rainbow bridge, up which the gods ascend to their new home. Hearing the Rhinemaidens, Loge tells them that their lament is useless. But he also says that the gods are hurrying to their doom, and declines to go with them.



Das Rheingold

Illustrations by Arthur Rackham



(Alberich and the Rhinemaidens, Fafner and Fasolt abduct Freia, Alberich enslaves the Nibelungs
Fafner kills Fasolt, Loge replies to the Rhinemaidens, the rainbow bridge)

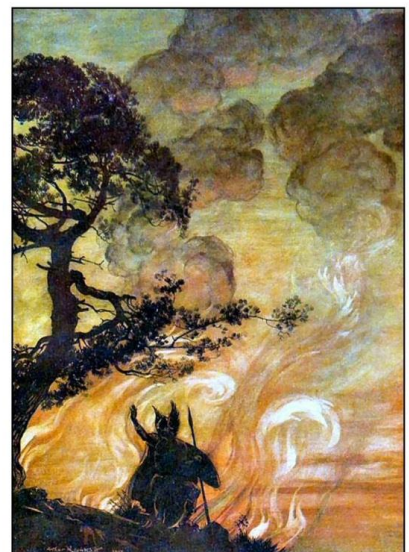
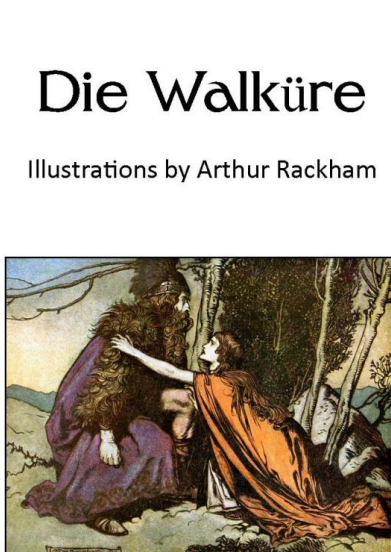
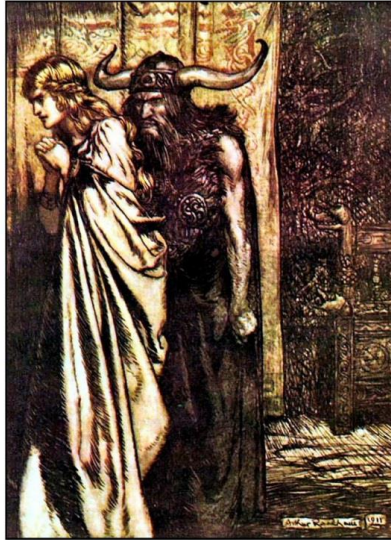
Die Walküre

Act One begins with a furious storm. The setting is a crude house built around a giant tree. Siegmund, wounded and deprived of his weapons, seeks shelter from the storm. Finding this stranger at her hearth, Sieglinde revives him with a healing drink, tells him that she is married to the warrior chieftain Hunding, and asks him about himself. Siegmund tells her of his woes, losing his father Wälse and his twin sister. Clearly a strong attraction springs up between them. Hunding arrives and honors the duty to give shelter to a guest, but when Siegmund reveals that he has come from fighting the men of his own tribe, he challenges him to a duel in the morning, knowing full well that Siegmund is unarmed. Sieglinde puts a sleeping draught in Hunding's drink, then returns to tell Siegmund about a mysterious old man who had thrust a sword into their tree trunk at their wedding, ready for the greatest of heroes to claim. A door flies open, and spring moonlight floods into the house. Under its influence, the two recognize each other as brother and sister, the children of Wälse (Wotan, as we shall learn). Siegmund pulls out the sword, which he calls Nothung (needful), then embraces Sieglinde before flying with her into the night.

In **Act Two**, Wotan is visited by his wife Fricka, in a chariot drawn by rams. As the protector of the sanctity of marriage, she demands that Wotan repudiate the adultery and incest his own illegitimate children, Siegmund and Sieglinde, have just committed. Sick at heart, he calls his favorite daughter Brünnhilde and demands that she intervene in the upcoming battle between Siegmund and Hunding on the latter's side. [This is one of several occasions in the later operas where one of the characters, most often Wotan, summarizes the plot to date; here, he explains to Brünnhilde the basic action of *Das Rheingold*.] Brünnhilde is one of the Valkyries, horsewomen who scour the battlefields retrieving the bodies of dead heroes, which they bring to Valhalla. As such, it is also her duty to forewarn Siegmund of his death. She does so, but is so moved by his concern for Sieglinde that she disobeys her father and lets Siegmund live. However, Wotan himself arrives and shatters Siegmund's sword, so that he is killed by Hunding. Wotan then kills Hunding in turn, before setting out in pursuit of Brünnhilde, who has fled with Sieglinde and the fragments of the sword.

Act Three, set on a mountain top, begins with the "Ride of the Valkyries," who assemble with the bodies of the heroes they have collected. Brünnhilde enters with Sieglinde, and begs her sisters to grant them protection from Wotan, but none of them dares defy their father's wrath. She tells Sieglinde that she is pregnant with an even greater hero (Siegfried), and gives her the broken sword. Staying behind to delay Wotan while Sieglinde escapes, she learns her punishment: to be deprived of her godhood and left in the open for the first man who comes along to claim her. But she begs her father to surround her with a ring of fire, so that only the greatest hero may reach her. Moved by her plea, and still loving her dearly, Wotan kisses her to sleep then summons Loge to surround her with fire. The orchestra blares out the theme associated with Siegfried, hinting at who her eventual rescuer will be.

(Next page: Siegmund and Sieglinde, Sieglinde and Hunding, Siegmund claims the sword,
Fricka in her ram-drawn chariot, Brünnhilde, Wotan chases after Brünnhilde,
the ride of the Valkyries, Brünnhilde pleads before Wotan, Wotan leaves Brünnhilde amid the fire)



Die Walküre

Illustrations by Arthur Rackham

Siegfried

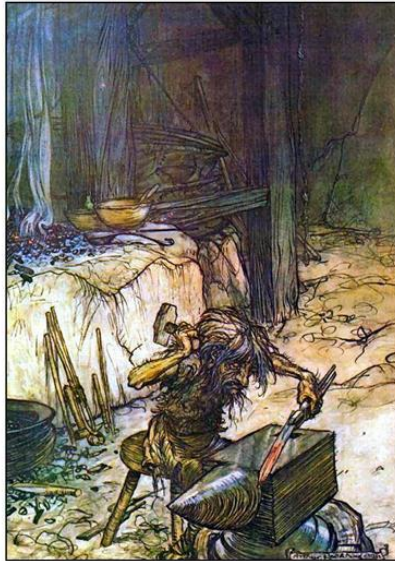
Many years have passed. As we shall soon learn, Sieglinde has died in childbirth, but her son Siegfried was taken in by the Niebelung Mime, Alberich's brother. The giant Fafner, meanwhile, has used the Tarnhelm to change himself into a dragon to guard the treasure (including the Ring), which he keeps in a cave in the midst of the woods. Mime has brought Siegfried up, knowing that he represents his only chance to kill Fafner and obtain the Ring for himself.

Act One is set in Mime's workshop, forever slaving away to forge a sword that is strong enough for Siegfried to use, but the boy breaks all his efforts. Siegfried asks Mime about his parentage, and hears for the first time about his mother, and the shattered sword, Nothung. Siegfried tells Mime to reforge this sword, which he senses will be the key to his adulthood, then goes out, leaving Mime in despair. An old man comes in—Wotan in his disguise as “the Wanderer.” He engages in a guessing game with Mime—answer three riddles, or lose his head. [This is another of Wagner's story-so-far expositions.] He answers Mime's questions with ease. Now it is Mime's turn. He succeeds with the first two, but fails on the third: to name the person who will reforge the sword. The Wanderer tells him that only someone who has not learned fear will succeed, and leaves. When Siegfried returns, Mime determines to take him to Fafner's cave to see if he is the fearless one the old man means. He brews a poisonous soup to kill him once he has managed to recover the Ring. Siegfried, meanwhile, grinds down the pieces of Nothung and uses them to forge a new sword, with which he cleaves the anvil in two as the curtain falls.

Act Two takes place in the forest, outside Fafner's cave. The Wanderer and Alberich are both watching. The Wanderer wakes Fafner to tell him that a hero is on his way to kill him, but the dragon merely goes back to sleep. Now Mime comes in with Siegfried, leaving him alone in the forest. He is intrigued by the songs of the birds, and cuts a reed pipe to try to imitate them. Failing at that, he uses his horn instead, which awakens the dragon, whom he immediately kills. Putting a finger covered with the dragon's blood into his mouth, he discovers that he can now understand the Forest Bird, who tells him to go into the cave to take the Tarnhelm and the Ring. Immediately Mime and Alberich reemerge and quarrel over the treasure. Alberich hides when Siegfried reappears, but Mime attempts to ingratiate himself with an offer of the poisoned soup. The dragon's blood also enables Siegfried to read Mime's true thoughts, and he eventually kills him. Finally, the Forest Bird tells him of Brünnhilde on her flame-encircled rock, and Siegfried goes off eagerly to find her.

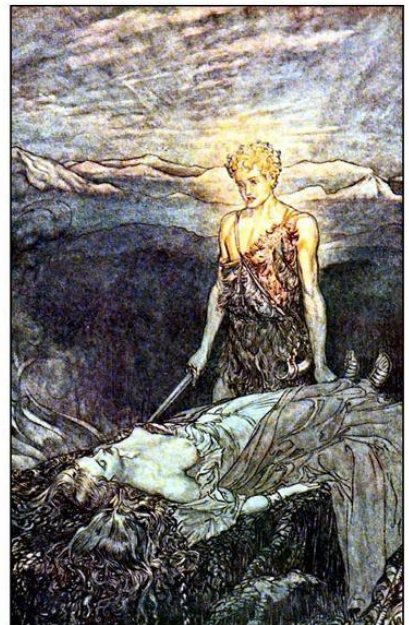
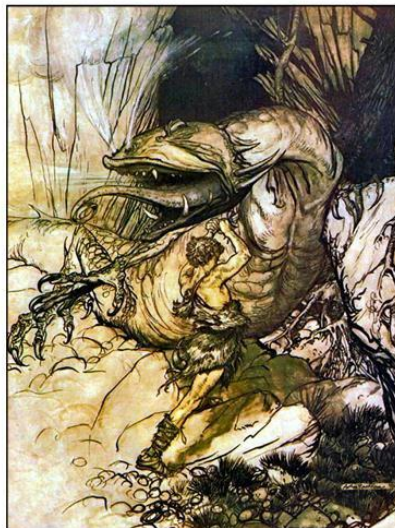
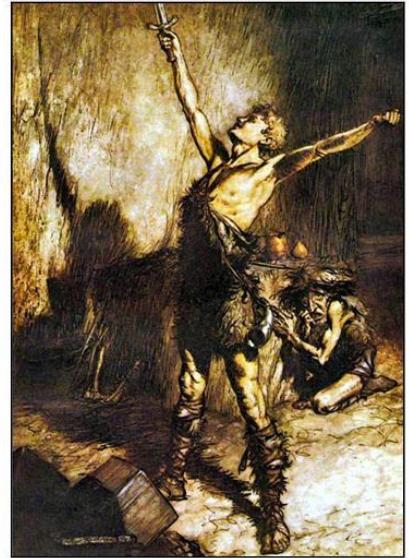
Act Three begins at the base of Brünnhilde's rock. The Wanderer once more summons Erda, telling her that he no longer fears the death of the gods. Instead, his heritage will be passed to Siegfried, who will make the new order that he himself has failed. When Siegfried himself appears, the Wanderer blocks his way and challenges him, but the youth eventually beaks the old man's spear with a blow from his sword, and continues his ascent. The scene changes to the mountain top. Siegfried passes through the ring of fire and sees the sleeping Brünnhilde. Removing her breastplate, he is amazed to see a woman for the first time. He awakens her with a kiss and declares his ardor. The scene ends in a radiant duet of love.

(Next page: Mime trying to forge the sword, Wotan as the Wanderer, Siegfried exulting with Nothung, Siegfried kills the dragon Fafner, Alberich and Mime argue, Siegfried and the sleeping Brünnhilde)



Siegfried

Illustrations by Arthur Rackham



Götterdämmerung

The **Prologue**, set at Brünnhilde's rock, shows the three Norns, spirits who wind the rope of destiny. One tells the story of the past and another of the present [yet another of Wagner's story-so-far moments]. But the Norn telling of the future foretells the doom of the gods. The rope breaks and the Norns disperse. As dawn breaks, Siegfried and Brünnhilde emerge from the cave where they have spent the night. She sends him off to new adventures. He gives her the Ring as pledge and sets off. The orchestral interlude which follows, Siegfried's Rhine Journey, follows his progress and leads directly to the first act.

Act One, scene 1 takes place at the Gibichung castle, overlooking the Rhine. We see the Gibichung king Gunther, his sister Gutrune, and his councilor Hagen, who is Alberich's son. Hagen urges Gunther and Gutrune to marry, and says that the hero Siegfried, who is about to arrive, might provide a husband for her and win Gunther a wife worthy of his fame. When Siegfried does arrive, they greet him courteously, and Gutrune gives him a drink of forgetfulness. Under its influence, Siegfried forgets Brünnhilde, becomes attracted to Gutrune, and readily agrees to perform the task for Gunther. The two men swear blood brotherhood and Siegfried sets off. As night falls, Hagen remains on watch, anticipating that he will soon be master of the Ring.

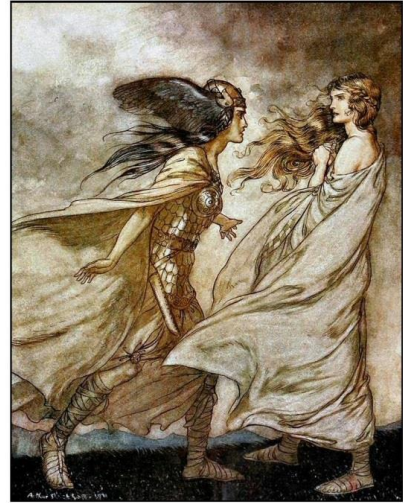
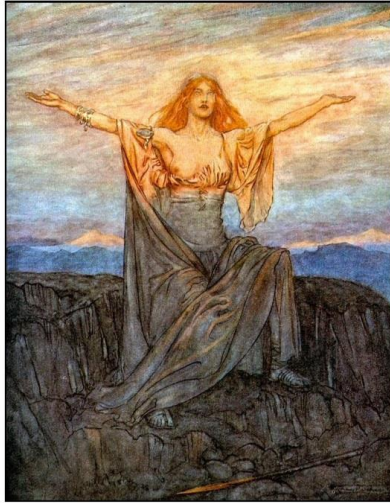
Act One, scene 2 returns us to Brünnhilde's rock. Her sister Waltraute comes to visit her, telling her that Wotan and the gods sit huddled in Valhalla, surrounded by logs like a great funeral pyre, awaiting their inevitable end. She urges Brünnhilde to return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, but she refuses and Waltraute leaves. Now a figure is seen passing through the magic fire. Brünnhilde thinks it will be Siegfried, and is alarmed to see a stranger—for Siegfried has used the Tarnhelm to change himself into the likeness of Gunther. Despite her furious protest, he abducts the former Valkyrie, snatches the Ring off her finger, and sets off with her back down the Rhine.

Act Two is back in the Gibichung court. Still in his wakeful sleep, Hagen is visited by Alberich, who urges him to kill Siegfried and obtain the Ring. As Alberich leaves, Hagen blows his cow horn to summon the vassals, whom he bids to a pagan celebration of the marriage of Gunther and Brünnhilde. To a ironically graceful wedding march, Gunther enters with Brünnhilde, still resisting. When she sees Siegfried, she accuses him in front of all the vassals. Siegfried denies ever having met Brünnhilde before, and goes in with Gutrune. Left alone, Brünnhilde, Gunther, and Hagen swear an oath of vengeance on Hagen's spear, which concludes just as the wedding party of Siegfried and Gutrune reenter the stage.

Act Three, scene 1 takes place by the Rhine. Siegfried, out hunting with the rest of the court, has become separated from his companions. The Rhinemaidens appear and try to coax him into returning their Ring. He is courteous, but refuses. Hagen returns with Gunther and the vassals, resting from the hunt. He gives Siegfried another potion which restores his memory, so that he reenacts much of the action of *Siegfried*; [this is another story-so-far moment, but now in an exalted lyrical aria, one of the highlights of the score]. When Siegfried reaches the moment of his union with Brünnhilde, a pair of ravens fly overhead; Siegfried looks up, and Hagen stabs him in the back with his spear. To a reprise of the music of their love duet, Siegfried dies, and Gunther orders his vassals to bear the body home. The interlude that follows is generally known as Siegfried's Funeral Music, a summary of the themes associated with his brief life and the fated love of his parents, the Wälsungs.

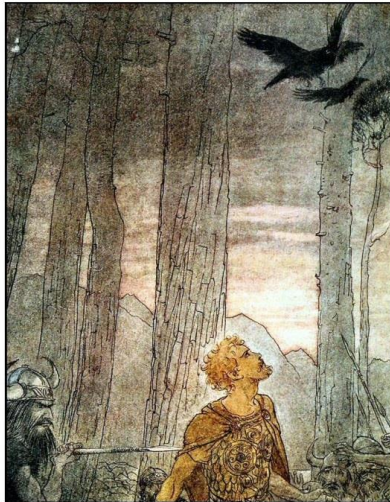
Act Three, scene 2 is back in the Gibichung hall. Gutrune enters, anxious and unable to sleep. Siegfried's body is brought in. Gunther blames Hagen for his death, but he justifies himself and moreover claims the Ring as his reward. When Gunther objects, Hagen kills him, but recoils from Siegfried's body when its arm raises of its own accord. Brünnhilde enters, now understanding everything. She orders the vassals to build a funeral pyre around Siegfried. Taking the Ring from his finger, she tells the Rhinemaidens to claim it once it has been purified by fire. She calls for her horse Grane, lights the pyre, and rides into the midst of the conflagration. The flames rise and set fire to Valhalla, which is seen

burning in the distance, until the waters of the Rhine rise to engulf it. Hagen leaps into the flood to recover the Ring, but the Rhinemaidens drown him. Alberich's curse has run its course; the Ring has been purified and returned to its rightful owners; the old gods are no more; a new day dawns.



Götterdämmerung

Illustrations by Arthur Rackham



(The Norns, Brünnhilde greets the dawn, Waltraute visits Brünnhilde, Siegfried and the Rhinemaidens. Hagen stabs Siegfried, Brünnhilde rides into the flames)

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