

Femininity, Transgression and the Gothic: the Witches of Cradle of Filth

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Abstract: While the aesthetic of the British extreme metal band Cradle of Filth strikes the onlooker with its Baroque flamboyance, its Gothic macabre and underground kitsch, its music – both classically melodious and expressively extreme – immerses the listener into a poetry of Romanticist pastiche spiced with unexpected word-plays, heavy symbolism and cultural references, taboo themes and transgressions of social norms at every level. The weave of apparent contradictions which tailors Cradle of Filth’s distinctive style in contemporary music is also reflected in one of the central themes of the band’s imaginary: the norm-defiant femininity embodied in the image of the witch. This study examines the varied typologies of the female characters of Cradle of Filth’s fiction, their traits as both heroes and transgressors in the context of the Gothic genre and extreme music. My analysis seeks to help fill some gaps in the analysis and understanding of the often misinterpreted music genre of extreme metal, and underline fundamental traits of a representative presence in this field, Cradle of Filth, not in terms of musical or aesthetic theory but of its lyrical value in the context of postmodern literature.

Keywords: extreme music, rock, Gothic fiction, witch, femininity, transgression.

Introduction

Judith Halberstam theorizes that the Gothic is a genre that pushes the boundaries of good and evil, of normality and perversity, in a newly-developed metaphorization of subjectivity based on oppositions like interior-exterior,

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mind-body, male-female, aristocrat-proletary, and through this lens it processes the entire literary tradition of its century.¹ Fred Botting defines the Gothic as a transgression against social norms and progress by representations of threats against humanist values, such as the supernatural, hallucinations and mental disorder, excess and perversity and other moral and social evils.² Hence, since its inception, the Gothic was considered a threat to social conventions through instigations to vice, unbridled sexuality, anti-social and revolutionary political attitudes, and violence.³ From this point of view, extreme music in its entirety, both thematically and functionally, is descended from the Gothic tradition and *Cradle of Filth*, one of its oldest and noteworthy representatives, is openly tributary to the rich heritage of English Gothic fiction.

In *Sound, Symbol, Sociality*, Matthew Unger theorizes that “extreme music in the West have reflected generally the nihilistic tendency of the rationalization of social and intellectual discourses”, representative of counter-culture lifestyles and constituted as “affronts to normative social frameworks” both in their anti-mainstream, often dissonant and aggressive sound and in their bold themes.⁴ While mainstream music is generally a form of entertainment, approaching pleasant, relatable and mundane themes like love or enjoyment, metal music veers towards social critique (derived from beat-generation rock and later punk), religion and spirituality (starting with Black Sabbath and branched into pagan, satanic, occult and anti-Christian themes), folklore, fantasy fiction (especially in the Power Metal subgenre), consuming love and sexuality in their more aggressive aspects inspired from Gothic fictions.

Paul Ricoeur, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, explains defilement as fundamental to any experience of the sacred or the good whether modernity has repressed, forgotten or flattened these conceptions. Defilement in music and artistic performance is a means to criticize rigour by outrage,⁵ as is the use of profanity in lyrics, of blasphemous religious imagery specific to black metal, graphic

¹ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 1-2.

² Fred Botting, *Gothic (The New Critical Idiom)* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

³ Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 3.

⁴ Matthew Unger, *Sound, Symbol, Sociality. The Aesthetic Experience of Extreme Metal Music* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 3-4.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, Harper & Row, 1969). For an application to extreme metal, see Matthew Unger, *Sound, Symbol, Sociality*, 6-9.

descriptions of violence and gore (like *Cannibal Corpse*), or engaging during live performances in animal ritual sacrifice (like *Gorgoroth*) or sexual acts (like *Umbra et Imago*), acts which may be seen as cathartic for musicians and audience through the expression of relief from social pressure and by providing a space of acceptance and communion.

Cradle of Filth's representations of the feminine in album arts and in some music videos are often oversexualized, to an untrained eye seemingly in the vein of the machist stereotype of the heavy metal genre – where the male represents power and the female only another accessory proving his supremacy – by indulging the voyeurism of a “male gaze”, to employ the feminist theory term of Laura Mulvey based on Jean-Paul Sartre's *le regard* and the psychoanalyst tools of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. But beneath this image, at the conceptual level mirrored in the lyrics, lies a female entity who is a subject in her own right, whose overt sexuality is nothing but empowering; she is an captivating being not only for its “to-be-looked-at-ness” (to further use Mulvey's terminology) for the “male gaze” but because she is an archetype, a representative of archaic female power and authority, embodied in the character of, what we will generically call here, the witch.

The witch, for Cradle of Filth, is the representative of counterculture, a bold challenger of social norms and ethical limits. In this protagonist's historicist portrayals with emphasis on sexuality and social power, Cradle of Filth's characterization aligns with that of Silvia Federici's in *Caliban and the Witch*: she is the woman robbed of power under medieval Inquisition, marginalized under patriarchal rule and religiously demonized as a factor of corruption and chaos that is to be feared and hence, controlled.⁶ She is an initiate in occult knowledge (songs like *To Eve the Art of Witchcraft* enunciate womankind's penchant towards this domain); she is beautiful (often described in terms of the Gothic aesthetic ideal: “a Queen of Snow [...] milky-white skin, my porcelain Yin, a graceful Angel of Sin”, “lips attuned to symmetry, [...] dark liquored eyes, an Arabian nightmare”, *Her Ghost in the Fog*), arresting and addictive (“her wicked spell cast over me, addicted to her utterly, despite the horrors that gestate beneath the beautiful”), loving but dominant, her

⁶ Silvia Federici. *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

love combining pleasure and pain (“her rose was sweet, but her thorns were barbarous”), stirring obsession in her lover who is utterly hypnotized by her (“I’m to think beyond the pale, beyond heart-stopping eyes and sopping thighs, I’m wont to fail”, *Forgive Me Father (I Have Sinned)*), or “Sick and weak from my condition, this lust, this vampiric addiction, to her alone in full submission”, *Nymphetamine*).

It is thus little wonder that emblematic female figures of Cradle of Filth’s songs are frightfully powerful figures of world mythology, such as Eve – the instigator of the fall of man; Lilith – the mother of demons; the pagan goddesses – Hecate, Astarte, Bastet, Isis, Artemis-Diana, Morgan le Fay or the Lady of the Lake – as a representative of a hypothetical ancient matriarchy who seeks to draw man back to an unruly and demoniac heathenism;⁷ the tyrannical ruler – such as the legendary serial killer Elizabeth Báthory; or, at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of social authority but akin in terms of autonomy and influence, the whore – as the objectifiable-but-incontrollable breaker of rules and morality. In other words, the aspects of femininity deemed negative in the fiction of the historical West are glorified in Cradle of Filth’s witch precisely through her force, through her potential of wresting back, often vengefully, a mythical power lost to societal gender norms and subjugating man to her rule.

Thus, a typology of the female characters of Cradle of Filth’s includes the goddess, the temptress, the psychopath, the innocent, all of them displaying the magical inclinations of the witch. Further on, I will undergo short analyses of each of these types by examining the literary corpus of Cradle of Filth’s music.

a. The Goddess

The Black Goddess Rises summarizes the embodiments of this typology by taking the listener through Babylonian, Greek and Judeo-Christian mythologies and selecting central female figures thereof, suggesting that the Black Goddess is not a single figure but all female gods revolted against authority. “Thee

⁷ For a thorough analysis of the myths of ancient matriarchy, see Cynthia Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons. The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

I invoke, bornless one,/ all woman, pure predator,[...]/ Thee I worship! Thou art darkest Gabrielle,/ Lilith who rode the steed,/ thou art pale Hecate rising from Thessaly", "Ishtar, my queen", a "sweet, sinful Eve", a Mary with vampiric inclinations evoking a Pietà-like scene: "Seductive evil, drink thy fill of the bleeding Christ in thy arms". Gabrielle is the female Archangel Gabriel, canonically a masculinized (instead of a genderless or feminine) angel, Lilith is an archetype of the insubordinate wife, Eve is the catalyst of mankind's fall, Mary is vampiric instead of motherly and protective, Hecate is the goddess of magic, and Ishtar is the rival in authority of "the Nazarene" whom she demands slain. Here, the male character usually plays the role of her crusader, her warring retainer.

Pre-Christian figures of English soil are also represented through the retelling of the Arthurian myth, *Haunted Shores*, from the perspective of an Arthur become king with the aid of pagan female divinity through "the glorious battles won my dark goddess provided"; when he reaches the end of his life, in the song of the banshees upon the "haunted shores of Avalon", he cries out: "Morganna, art thou me? Languid I wend my path to grave,/ I cast my sword to the sulphid grasp of the naiad 'neath the silver lake", in references to Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake.

Under Huntress Moon describes a rite of libation and soul-offering and the "With every twist I cannot resist her/ fertile female mind control/ This wanton witch, white-rapids sister/ To whom I pour my wine and soul", ending in the repeated incantation "You mesmerize my soul, Diana, you mesmerize my soul." In *The Forest Whispers My Name*, Artemis-Diana is the goddess who bestows occult knowledge on womankind: "When the moon is full, we shall assemble to adore the potent spirit of your Queen and my mother, the great Diana. She who fain would learn all sorcery yet has not won its deepest secrets, my mother will teach her, in truth, the mysteries of all things as yet unknown." *To Eve the Art of Witchcraft* illustrates aspects of worship, the humility of the adept's prayer, "Make me as a flower that grows forever in your throne,/ that I might pollinate the world with darkness as your own,/ Embrace me with spellbinding eyes,/ the fire of life that never dies" – and the reward – "She will greet me as serpent in her dark, secret Eden" – which implies the gift of knowledge. "I will make my puppets dance, the men will bow down before me to take my flesh as lucid thoughts of dark unbridled lust."

b. The Temptress

An avatar or priestess of the goddess, the female figure functions as a temptress for the male lyrical I, a dominatrix who manipulates him to her bidding (to the goal of achieving power, knowledge or the ascent of the deity she worships). She is a *Belle dame sans merci* in the vein of Keats in terms of her supernatural charm, akin to *Dracula's* vampire bride in terms of destructiveness and seductiveness, but one who keeps the protagonist emotionally enslaved with an obsessive love, another Gothic trope found in fictions like Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Forgive Me Father tells the story of a priest whose secret fantasies center on a worshipper whom he imagines in erotic postures, tempting him like a succubus. He begins to stalk her and imagine interactions, which brings his downfall by madness through guilt and overlaps of reality and fantasy and potential excommunication. Even *Dracula* in *Lovesick for Mina* declares in anguish "One might see in Mina my disease, but it is she who has infected me for all eternity"; the Gothic roles of the supernatural male antihero and innocent mortal female appear here reversed in terms of power relations and effect upon one another.

A Gothic Romance furthers the Gothic setting through tropes like the castle, the masquerade ball, the graveyard and the stormy night. The "evening menuetto" turns into an erotic tryst and then descends into nightmare and death: the male protagonist is captivated by a "seductress in black" with "jade woodland eyes that ushered the impurest erotic-laden fantasies", they leave the castle together and after their affair she disappears without trace; he runs out in search of her, obsessively "like a blind acolyte" and, taking refuge from the storm in a cemetery and falling asleep inside a tomb, he hallucinates a now monstrous female being draining his life ("my veins spill forth their waters, rent by lips I cherish most") but allowing the final realization "For I must know, art though not Death? [...] Did not the Queen of Heaven come as Devil to me?". The temptress is here, again, an avatar of the goddess, this time not empowering the male character but leading him to ruin, in the Gothic key that the title of the song indicates. In this image we may see not male fear that demonizes a temptress as corruptor of but fascination for her power.

Given that the temptress-character is described in relation to the male narrator, the sexual component is perhaps the most blatant as her weapon for manipulation, making her a more self-willed but equally empowered by her own sexuality – *Dracula's* Lucy Westenra. Synonyms such as “libertine”, “seductress” and the apparently negative term “whore” are used devoid of censoring moral judgment to denote a self-willed woman in charge of her sexuality. The whore is likened to the biblical Jezebel (a comparison Cradle of Filth employs), a symbol in Christian lore for female authority, promiscuity and manipulation, a pagan queen challenging the dominant culture; furthermore, the whore is what society vilifies (or “jezebels”, to employ Cradle of Filth’s verbing, one of their examples of word-formation by conversion) – the term is appropriated and the figure glorified as a transgressor of a corrupt and ignorant society fearful of female influence. In the jarring image “The virgin raped shall seek to whore, She-wolf, bare your snarling jaw!” from *The Black Goddess Rises*, the whore is portrayed as an innocent marginalized and wronged because of it, then marginalized again out of fear, but now capable to strike back, to rebel against the unfairness, an instance of revenge shaped by an erring power-structure.

c. The Victim

Conversely, female figures also appear in the hypostasis of an innocent victim of a superstitious and unjust (most often Christian) society, whose inclinations – true or perceived – towards mysticism trigger the fear and hate of townsfolk and authority, leading to her execution and often to her punishment through trial, social banishment, rape or murder. The witch of this category is less the men-devourer of the previous sections, and more the superstitious woman of rural areas where Christianisation permeated less thoroughly that suffered under 15-17th century persecutions, as Foucault describes the process in a 1975 course.⁸

Her memory arouses not the male narrator’s passion but his despair, still fed by an obsessive love, revolt against society, authority and divinity, and a desire for revenge most often violently acted upon.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *February 26th 1975, “Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France”, 1974-1975* (New York, London: Verso, 2003), 201-230.

Her Ghost in the Fog is the Gothic tragedy of a village mystic who, while gathering magical supplies (“picking rue by the light of the moon”) at night, is captured, raped and left for dead by “five men of God”. Her lover finds her “beneath the cedar’s stare,/ her silk dress torn, her raven hair/ flown to gown her beauty bare/ starred with frost. I knew her lost,/ I wept till tears crept back to prayer”. Praying in his grief, the man finds that God himself gives him a sign, empowering his revenge: in the snow he “[espies] a gleam trodden to earth – the church bell tower key” with which he reaches the church and “[blows] their chapel ablaze, and all locked in to a pain/, best reserved for judgment that their Bible construed”. In *Blackest Magick in Practice*, the lover’s grievingly suicidal thoughts (“I should have followed my innamorata to the grave”) are converted into a necromantic ritual, where dead are risen as demons to torture her “deflowerers” (“Rape is returned a thousandfold in the garden of unearthly delights, only when their minds lie in ruin will I hand them the knife”), rape appearing again as a crime of the highest order. An inquisitional image appears as executioner of the female character in *Malice Through the Looking Glass* and *Of Mist and Midnight Skies*, one of their few explicit but dramatically satanic songs where the protagonist’s antichristian sentiments are explained in a short soliloquy: “That night they came and took her away from me, I lost the woman I loved and I learned how to curse and to spit in the face of their Jesus fucking Christ”. Similarly, in *Nocturnal Supremacy* revenge is exacted upon the earthly body of Christ, the church;⁹ come from beyond the grave, Rorasa orders the burning of “his temple” which the lover carries out while musing not of regret, fear or anger, but of love and delight at having done her bidding: “I am enamoured and imparadised/ To watch the fires dance profanely in her eyes”.

The same trope of the male lover pushed to vengeance by his innocent beloved’s death appears in *The Death of Love* where 15th century confessed serial killer Gilles de Rais – the protagonist of the thematic album *Godspeed on the Devil’s Thunder* – begins his murders maddened by grief of Jean d’Arc’s execution, his platonic love. Her role as transgressor lies here not in her over sexuality or witchcraft, but in the virginal and pious Jean’s intimidating strength and determination (“Visions and ambition never listened to submission/

⁹1 Corinthians 12:27.

As she was on a mission from the highest above") which fascinates Gilles "without desire" ("Gilles adored [...] her suit of pure white armour/ blazed against the English in a torrent of light"). The image of the dying Jean – wounded, racked and incinerated – is turned into an icon of righteous war in Gilles's eyes: "framed amidst the thick of fire, aflame, a valkyrie". Jean's words in their imaginary dialogue underline her persecution and martyrdom at the hands of an ignorant and fearfully violent society: "Where will you be when Babel builds my fire?/ Will you not flee and label me pariah?/ Where will you be, my darling,/ Where will you be when they light my pyre?", to which Gilles, in response, "swore to score the crimes jackdaws poured on his love, crimes derived from minds of the blind" as a token of loyalty to her cause and person.

d. The Psychopath

An underrepresented typology in fiction, the violent female psychopath is another expression of a dominant female character which stands out amid the previous types as thoroughly negative but personalized and psychologised. The type is represented by the Countess Elizabeth Báthory of the 1998 concept album *Cruelty and the Beast*. The album is structured as a series of chronological fictionalized episodes from her life, from the dark thoughts of her childhood through her loving marriage with Count Ferenc Nádasdy and her series of murders, to her arrest and lonely death imprisoned in a tower. Her portrayal is mythical in its surrealism, believable in its keen insight into female mind, not glorifying her deeds but painting her portrait akin to Milton's portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, as a poignant influence in Gothic context. To employ a politicized reading of the totalising and monstrous aristocrat in Gothic fiction in the vein of Franco Moretti,¹⁰ Báthory can also be likened to Bram Stoker's Dracula and De Sade's libertines.

Elizabeth is a high-class woman, emotionless, vain, possessed of delusions of grandeur, a self-entitled rebel against any authority other than her own, a bisexual whose repression of lesbian tendencies morphs into violence, insecure enough of her aging image to kill and engage into pseudo-medical treatments and occult rituals to regain her youthful beauty. A powerful image of Cradle of Filth's defiling femininity shows a thirteen-year old Elizabeth

¹⁰ Franco Moretti, „The Dialectic of Fear“, *New Left Review*, 136 (1982), 2.

in church given to erotic fantasies elicited by a statue of the crucified Christ (“I must avert my eyes to hymns/ for His gaze brings dogmas to my skin,/ He knows that I dreamt of carnal rites/ with Him undead for three long nights”). Confessing her impure thoughts to her priest, he gives the penance of “re-baptism” as her only chance at redemption, but the end of the song finds her replacing the priest with an occult mystic and the baptism with witchcraft apprenticeship. The imagery here is blatantly feminine: menstruating presumably for the first time (“stigmata still wept between her legs”, idea reinforced by “the menstrual sky” describing sunset), the teenage Elizabeth “fled the castle in secret [...] to the forest’s vulva where the witch scholearned her in even darker themes”.

The legendary episode of Elizabeth slapping a maid and observing how blood rejuvenates her skin, the onslaught of her murderous obsession, takes place in *Beneath the Howling Stars* before the ball where she meets her future husband, Ferenc “the Black Count” Nádasdy; glowing after the murder and “descending to the ball with painted blood upon her lips”, Elizabeth fascinates her guests, eliciting gossips of witchcraft among envious court maidens (“Elizabeth bewitches, see how even now the whore casts her spells upon the Black Count, whom her reddened lips holds fast”) and starting a passionate love affair with the count. Retreating from the ball to be alone, the couple walks through the town and come upon “a hunched belldame” whom Elizabeth mocks and who curses her in return: “this girl who chides will soon be as plagued with age as I”; this sparks Elizabeth’s fearful obsession and she has the Count murder her as a wedding gift. Her slaughters represent, apart from frustrated sexual desires, the struggle to escape the decay of old age, aided by the occult means of a Faustian pact. In a ritual of summoning replete with occult imagery of female sexuality (“onyx idols”, “circle”, “signs and seals”, “in pendants, natal trophies from the bellies of desanctified nuns”, ritual masturbation), the subversive Countess offers the sorceress to the demon “if thou wouldst draw a veil for me o’er the lengthening scars of age and grief” making with him a binding pact, and is cursed by her with the death of her husband in war and her own lonely insanity at old age; the curse is fulfilled in *Báthory Aria*, the concluding song of the album chronicling the Countess’s final years.

The origins of the myth are manifold, the Countess being the subject of numerous stories from the 18th century to the present day, works of fiction,

legends, chronicles, letters, diaries and other historical documents (like the 1774 László Turóczi's *Ungaria suis cum regibus compendio data* or Bél Mátyás's *Notitia Hungariae novae historico-geographica divisa in partes quatuor*) and studies of modern historians (like Raymond T. McNally or Radu Florescu). As Tony Thorne points out after having followed the ramifications of the Elizabeth Báthory myth in literature, history and folklore, "the blood-fetishist, the insatiable lesbian dominatrix and the serial murderess are constructs of our time, anachronisms",¹¹ not proven by history and not invented by Cradle of Filth. And nor is Cradle of Filth the only musical project inspired by the legendary Countess, metal bands like Báthory, Kamelot, Venom or Slayer devoting songs to her. But Cradle of Filth's is a retelling of the myth from her perspective where she is more than the sum of her legends but a protagonist in her own right with an individuality and a well-developed arc that spans the ten songs of the album creating a ten-chapter novella. In *Cruelty and the Beast*, her story thus becomes a 19th century Gothic pastiche personalised with specifics that writers of the time might have imagined but would not dare publish,¹² all set in that contemporary format so indebted to Gothic fiction – extreme music – by a band that consistently acknowledges the traditional basis of this genre with every reference and deconstruction.

Conclusion

In all these aspects, we can discern Cradle of Filth's acknowledgement, tribute and continuation of Gothic fiction into the postmodern: the oppositions, the social disintegration, moral transgression, religious defilement, the terror and horror, awe-provoking settings like haunted castles, graveyards and stormy nights, a nostalgia for the past (the occult medieval and the pre-Christian), the obsessive love, as well as referencing these themes in literature from the Bible through Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Lewis, Shelley, Byron, Goethe, Wilde, and 20th century Gothic. All these find their way in Cradle of Filth's

¹¹ Tony Thorne, "Countess Dracula": *The Life and Times of Elisabeth Báthory, the Blood Countess* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1997), 267.

¹² "One hundred years ago for a writer like Stoker, the idea of choosing as a heroine a blood-obsessed lesbian mass-murderess would have been a short cut to literary obscurity," estimates Thorne in *Countess Dracula*, 17.

imagery and literary corpus, while the intertextuality, pastiche and metafiction, irony and wordplays, add elements of Postmodern fiction into their style. Additionally, the typology of female characters in *Cradle of Filth's* imaginary is varied in terms of character psychology, but united under these Gothic tropes, doubled with expressions of feminine identity including biological functions, puberty, sexuality or pregnancy, and gender violence, an imaginary singular in metal music. Through the aspects it has examined, this study offers a glimpse into the themes and lyrical expression in extreme metal and into the image of the occult – namely the representations of the witch – which is, for *Cradle of Filth*, beyond a surface illustration of defilement, not as much a personal ideology or theology of the artist, but rather a consistent postmodern fiction of Gothic inspiration integrated into music.

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