9. The Monstrous Male and Myths of Masculinity in Heavy Metal

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The aims of this piece are twofold. Firstly I want to embrace the identity of masculinity in heavy metal music culture as monstrous. Second I wish to rebuff an outdated perspective that may look at heavy metal culture and argue that it is a prime example of masculinity in crisis. I hold that heavy metal culture is well situated to show that masculinity is in a condition state of flux and diverse in its expression, rejecting the trappings of a hegemonic description and offering a spectrum of identities that is multifaceted and constructed, complementing ideas on gender construction from Judith Butler’s feminist theory. In retaining a monstrous dimension, the spectrum of masculinities on display in metal presents a capacity to challenge and subvert idolized versions of what the heavy metal male is taken to be. Descriptions of masculinity in heavy metal as restricted or limited to hegemonic notions or exemplars of masculinity in crisis are poorly observed myths that deserve to be corrected.

Myths and Tall Tales

One of several clichéd and simplistic views of masculinity in heavy metal culture is of a heavy metal fan as white, male, teenage and alienated. He seeks out the music form to find solace in the construction of his identity through the exercise of aggression, through the style and sound of the music, finding refuge amongst other males of a similar ilk. This scene one can imagine as almost free of women and the role models on stage and album covers exemplify figures who excel in musical virtuosity and (hetero)sexual conquest, with a strong hint of misogyny running through it all. Part of this oversimplified and outdated perspective forms the backdrop to Robert Walser’s 1993 presentation of masculinity in heavy metal, where such identities are rooted in myths about masculine identity. These perpetuate the view that masculinity for the metal fan and metal musician alike is both hegemonic and in a state of crisis.

Robert Walser opens his chapter with a reading of the myth of Orpheus, who used his musical virtuosity to bring back his love Eurydice from the dead, out of Hades. He is allowed to do so as long as he does not turn his head around to look back at her as she follows him out from the underworld. But as he leaves Hades he is tempted to look back at her too soon before she has exited, and he is condemned to watch her disappear slowly back down. The use of his musical ability to seduce even the gods to release Eurydice fails. He cannot bring her out of Hades because of his emotional longing leads him to look back at her. Walser claims that it indicates masculine anxiety; that his singing must “demonstrate his rhetorical mastery of the world, yet such elaborate vocal display threatens to undermine Orpheus’ masculine identity” (Walser 1993, 108). This myth sets up a simple conflict between masculine characteristics versus feminine characteristics: power and control set against excess and emotion. Walser holds that heavy metal musicians “must negotiate the same
contradiction" (Walser 1993, 108). He goes on to argue that the image of masculinity on stage in the heavy metal musician in its expression of control and virtuosity is transgressive in its simultaneous presentation of itself as hypermasculine and androgynous. He continues, claiming that heavy metal is shaped by western patriarchy and its audience is male and teenage. Quoting John Fiske, he reasons generally that most males are denied the power on which masculinity relies, and as a result masculinity is always insecure, specifically singling out that the predominantly male metal audience lacks social economic and political power. Walser claims that the male figure in heavy metal is in a state of anxiety that can never be resolved, writing that bound up in this is the desire for “young white male performers and fans to hear and believe in certain stories about the nature of masculinity” (Walser 1993, 110). As these negotiated anxieties are not conclusive, they must be reenacted over and over where ‘imaginary resolutions’ of ‘real anxieties’ are revisited, presumably referring to the fictional solutions provided in song lyrics and the strutting divinity of the rock god role model.

I think there are serious problems and inaccuracies in this reading of masculinity in heavy metal, not restricted to a narrow view of masculinity in the scene and how it articulates and expresses itself, but this also assumes that the mythological foundations of masculine hegemonies can be used to accurately explain gender in the metal scene rather than looking directly to the culture of heavy metal in its entirety. Such an assumption further holds that there are real anxieties in the ‘metal male’. The real anxieties have been predicated from the outset on the acceptance of a mythology (Orpheus) that generates hegemonic views of masculinity and/or dualistic oppositions between the masculine and feminine. Later in his chapter Walser tries to pull back, conceding that despite the overwhelming masculine orientation of heavy metal, audiences are diverse with regard to gender and the above explanations are not adequate for female fans. Yet the image may be familiar to the reader; it conforms to a simplistic ‘Beavis and Butthead’ view of masculinity in heavy metal culture. My concern is not only to reject this view, but also to ground a constructed perspective of masculinity from examples in heavy metal itself, rather than the use of myth and the perpetuation of myth in promoting the idea that masculinity is in a state of anxiety. In the same way that Orpheus is warned against turning his head to look back as he leaves Hades, so too Walser’s perspective of masculinity in metal ought to be left behind.

The Metal Male: Just Blood Guts and Beer?

The new wave of British heavy metal (NWOBHM) band Tank’s album Fifth Hounds of Hades presents us with a song that initially can tempt one into a hegemonic reading of masculinity in heavy metal. The track Blood, Guts and Beer spills and spells it out: a story of distant removed maleness and sexual conquest, followed by a machismo approach to rejection; ‘he don’t look pleased’ after catching ‘some new disease’: “We’ll just have to see how long it takes for his skin to rot. What’s inside me? Blood, Guts and Beer... When he broke down in tears I just couldn’t believe my ears” (Brabbs, Brabbs and Ward 1982). In the very minimal lyrics we have an image of a certain kind of masculinity. The character displays the rejection of any content other than that which has been consumed, the physical and visceral. The spectre of being associated with an early victim of HIV or some other sexually transmitted disease, leads the character in the lyrics to flee from the scenario rather than confront it. Rejecting emotional expression on the one hand, but paradoxically accepting the only content he is composed of: blood, guts and beer. These are also the kinds of things that are not just contained by the skin (which will rot), but also the things that are vomited out, spilled on the floor, the tokens of male violence and the violence of war. In the way the song is delivered one has the image not of a super-fit, muscular masculinity that is offered up through Greek mythology, but
rather a more lazy, laissez faire, petrol head male. There is an equalizing simplicity in the lyrics' expression, maybe a response to the challenge from machismo: "you may be the man with the biggest 'plane' — but you're no different from me, I'm just made of blood guts and beer." There are no hidden,s, no complications, no myths, just pure (male) body. It is worth noting the context of the entirety of this album — it was written, recorded and released around the time of the Falklands war; war and masculine images of violence and war as was being propagated at that time in Britain abound not just in other songs on the album, but also in the name of the band. Who needs love songs? I do! and He fell in Love with a Stormtrooper are some of the other tracks that speak to this social concern. Even the track That's What Dreams are Made Of with the lyric "her love is like dragging your balls across barbed wire" (Brabbs, Brabbs and Ward 1982) complement the monstrous masculine world of 'gruntspeak', articulating the misogynistic humour associated with the male soldier in Robert Hasford's The Short Timers (Zimmerman 1999). Even the band identify themselves and perform with a violent mythological token: they are the Filth Hounds of Hades, the gatekeepers of hell. Elsewhere the lyrical output of heavy metal suggest the alienated, anxiety ridden state of the male figure: Black Sabbath's Iron Man cries out: "Nobody wants him/ he just stares at the world/ planning his vengeance/ that he will soon unfold/ Now the time is here/ for Iron Man to spread fear/ vengeance from the grave/ kills the people he once saved" (Butler 1970).

It is easy to see then where Walser's view can find justification. Is this heavy metal expressing both a hegemonic masculinity but also demonstrating the possibility of its confused state? Maybe the example from Tank is the NWOBHM's early foray into what has now become Viking metal, where someone like Johan Hegg, the lead singer of Amon Amarth presents us with a masculine archetype that shuns the image of beauty and self care: the anti new man, or the warrior paint covered members of Tursias, promoting Battle Metal reinforcing performances of male stereotypes. However, Connel and Messerschmidt (2005) would argue that this opens the possibilities for developing new hegemonies, ones that are better informed and grounded, but it still retains hegemony as a dominant masculinity over other forms of masculinity. Perhaps, but I would question this further with regard to heavy metal as a whole. Can this really be the case when we are confronted with performances where so many different kinds of masculinity are available on the metal stage? How can one hold that one dominates over the other? Consider the brutal monstrous heterosexual masculinity of Gene Simmons contrasted with the highly camp swagger of Paul Stanley of Kiss. Commentators on gender, perhaps in order to maintain a discourse, seem necessitated to treat masculinity as in a state of crisis. Even though Walser was writing in the early 1990's he seemed not to be conversant with the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, nor the undercurrents developing in Birmingham in the scene where the grindcore movement was seeing Napalm Death, Godflesh, and Bolt Thrower generating a post punk angry sound threaded with political activism that was thoroughly disinterested in gender as an issue.

Toby Miller asks the interesting question as to whether "Hegemonic Masculinity (HM) ever allow for a time when men are not being men, when their activities might be understood as discontinuous, conflicted and ordinary, rather than interconnected, functional and dominant — when nothing they do relates to the overall subordination of women or their own self-formation as a group?" (Miller 2009, 188). The key question he goes on to articulate is: is there a time where a man is not constructed in terms of his sexuality. Deena Weinstein would respond by saying that the non-inevitable type of masculinity, cultural masculinity, does not conform to notions of hegemonic masculinity. She describes this kind of masculinity as free floating, and although made up originally from biological and social groups. It has become something else and is universally available for others to participate in. This sits well with Toby Miller's criticism of hegemonic masculinity. So, rather than a masculinity that retreats into a hegemonic shell, it is a masculinity that is simply "out
there” (Miller 2009). Thus he rejects hegemony as emerging from a politics of ‘elsewhere’. So where it (masculine hegemony) does show us how certain movements introducing change to masculinity are resisted, the reasons for those movements are rarely investigated for themselves. There is an opportunity then for heavy metal to provide an investigation into the rejection of certain types of masculinity of the kind that Weinstein identifies in her piece on British Heavy Metal (Weinstein 2009) and further I would argue regarding masculinity in heavy metal in general in the plurality of identities it presents.

It may well be that aspects of Blood, Guts and Beer make such a demand. There is nothing going on here except a story about a guy and someone he knows who lost his girlfriend. Full stop. The lyric carried by a heavy metal sound reinforces this. It presents a male that transcends gender analysis. Masculine hegemony is simply another myth, albeit a useful one for certain critical purposes and can fail to recognize the ‘mereness’ of a situation. These examples above support Judith Butler’s cause asking for a redescription of gender that exposes reifications that are unhelpful and fail to acknowledge the complexity of gender, and in this case the complexity of masculinity readily available in the heavy metal scene. Gender construction in heavy metal and these images and expressions of masculinity are better understood through the metaphorical application notion of the monstrous and in its diversity more akin to the many-headed hydra. Further examples of masculinities that counter hegemonies abound in the heavy metal world, including those that are transgressive and experimental. Butler’s views on gender are helpful here. She writes that where gender is understood as constituted, it can be constituted differently (Butler 1988). Rejecting gender as a stable entity, instead, Butler argues that it is “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519). Let us look at some examples suggestive of a masculinity that is not in a state of crisis but is playful and presents a challenge to fixed notions of gender.

Masculinity at Play

Early footage from 1976 of AC/DC where the band perform the blues classic Baby Please Don’t Go (AC/DC 2005) sees Bonn Scott with Angus Young and two rather different types of masculinity on display. One entertaining and enjoyable, the other entertaining, fun, but somewhat disturbing. Scott, in drag, as an adult male in a girl’s school uniform and Young, a teenage boy in a stage school uniform. The latter seems rather appropriate; Angus Young is... well... young, precocious, fidgeting and annoying as a schoolboy: he makes an excellent spectacle of teenage pubescent energy. OCD rather than ACD(C). His is a masculinity that is exuberant; it exudes pure energy and does so through the vehicle of technology. Spewing out noise, an uncontrolled projection of sound that is earthed with lightning bolt shocks that question whether Angus’ body is being electrocuted or is the source of the electricity. He is a boy who is developmental ejaculations and thrusting come from within, but has not yet discovered its object. There is no woman towards whom this is directed. Like a live wire its motions are dangerous because they are arbitrary, yet safe because this is teenage expression writ large. Bonn Scott is however an entirely different story. Older, tattooed, hairy armed and in drag. He leers at the camera in a manner that communicates what wholesome parents fear: this is not someone you would want your daughter hanging out with. His playfulness is contrasted with his age, a blues singing pied piper, it is as if the members of the band look up to this adult, giving adulation as he poses as a leader. Lighting his cigarette, his masculinity is sexualized, dirty and leering. He gives physical and theatrical expression to the deep innuendo and charged storytelling alive in the blues tradition. Yet at the same time he seems to be fully aware and reflective in his performance. He communicates a knowing sneer that enjoys and revels in the fear which is
performance generates. The two playful representations of boyhood and drag masculinity are performances and as Butler would say, construct an identity that is a ‘performative accomplishment’, where the actors and audience are complicit in constructing a belief about an identity that express itself through stylized, repeated acts. For Butler,

the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988, 520)

Gender play in this extrovert theatrical manner is not uncommon in the broader rock and pop music culture. However, heavy metal provides a challenge precisely because of possible assumptions about it being a world where masculinity is unchallenged and hegemonic. Kirsten Sollee explores the gender play in the glam metal scene, paying close attention to it expressing hysteria, where gender binaries are blurred and complex, deliberately playful and experimental. In her analysis of Mötley Crüe, she points out that the band spans a range of gender identities that are “both objectifying and feminizing” (Sollee 2011) evident on the album cover and content Theatre of Pain. Sollee dissects an image of gender play that is pluralistic under an aspect of lyrical content where

(Vince) Neil forcefully sings about wanting women to do his bidding and thus takes up the position of the heterosexual male while simultaneously being dolled up on display, objectifying himself to an audience of women. Paradoxically, he is also subjecting himself to be viewed in a feminine position, possibly as a receiver of the male gaze as he poses seductively whilst wearing the sexualized sartorial signifiers of ‘the female’. (Sollee 2011)

Sollee lays down a challenge that this glam metal scene is ripe for analysis, especially with regard to what she calls “vocal timbre and intertextual tease”, where “men in glam metal exacerbate the madness of sexual desire that they sing about as they desire the feminine while vocally and aesthetically embodying the feminine, thereby engaging in the fluid subjectivity and shifting sexual positions of the hysterics” (Sollee 2011).

From the bearded, Viking masculine identity expressed in Amon Amarth to the Mediterranean Adonis like aesthetic of Paul Isola, singer of Breed 77, the spectrum of masculinities on display is both monstrous and hydraic; cut off one head and another grows in its place. In the examples given above and throughout this volume, it is possible to see masculinity as transgressive and continually reinventing and reanimating its gender, both through expressions of masculinities, femininities and androgynes. Heavy metal culture contorts any attempt to fix the metal male, functioning like the zombie as a cultural barometer (Dendle 2007), complementing the feminist challenge laid out by Judith Butler. As a monster, the heavy metal figure retains enough human qualities of masculinity femininity and androgyny to stand as a sign. It is monstrous because it demonstrates, pointing with two horns towards the configurations and possibilities that can open up where traditional hegemonies are abandoned. Masculinity in the metal scene as monstrous is furthermore edgy, yet comfortable with its ongoing reconstruction. This is no more evident than in Mikael Sarelin’s exploration of protest and queer masculinity in the Finnish black metal scene, where he identifies three male identities at play: heteronormative masculinity, protest masculinity and queer
masculinity (Sarelin 2012). The latter identity plays most strongly on the opportunity to challenge conventions where the queering of heavy metal shakes up traditional notions of maleness, avoiding gender identity stagnation.

Correcting myths

In addition to Walser’s use of the Orpheus myth to set up a vision of the hegemonic male figure in heavy metal, hegemonic masculinity arguably has its roots in other mythologies about gender. Elizabeth Badinter (1995) argues that the myth of Oedipus pinpoints the need for masculinity to separate itself from femininity. The oedipal myth is used here for its apparent explanatory power in showing the male resentment of women. Such a view generates a form of hegemonic masculinity as misogynistic, violent and in a state of anxiety over its identity. Deena Weinstein makes the claim that British heavy metal generates a masculinity that is neither machismo nor misogynistic (Weinstein, 2009). However, the lyrics above provide a counter example to this if it is read through a hegemonic lens. Can we take the masculinity out of the song Blood, Guts and Beer? Probably not, but we can go as far as characterizing hegemonic masculinities, maybe even controversially, hegemonies in gender typing in general, as being mythical rather than experienced in the heavy metal scene for itself. Hegemonic masculinity, in part, can be related back to the key psychoanalytic interpretation of the Oedipus myth, where we have a male figure perverted into a life of hatred of the male other and the adoration and hatred of the female other in its maternal status, but also the male myth of the frontier figure, warrior hero generated through empire expansion and colonialism. So although we may find the representation of (and collaboration with) mythic figures and myth on stage and in theatrical play, it would be a mistake to think that these represent a dominant vision of masculinity; rather it represents the spectrum of masculinity that is found in and outside the heavy metal community. That is, real men. Connell points out the damage that is done by hegemonic masculinity in that: “Hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond to the lives of any actual real men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838). The models presented (perhaps in the play and performance) do, they state, “express widespread ideals, fantasies and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838). Connell and Messerschmidt’s main point is that gender relations develop along relational lines; they are dialogical and in constant flux, never conforming to the fixed parameters of hegemony. However, such hegemonies in their idealization and fantasy can be beneficial in advancing gender dialogue itself. So we ought not to do away with masculine (for that matter feminine hegemonies), but rather use them for the opportunities they afford us. They refer to the way in which the perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre, in identifying them as monsters, left no room for a scrutiny of masculinity and gave their identities over to assumptions about masculinity and of course the simplistic role of heavy metal and game culture in the construction of teenage masculine identity. This abuse of hegemony, perpetuating a myth about masculinity avoids the complexity and difficulty of the real men’s actions in question. This use of myth in the context of evil has further been argued as destructive to moral progress in the maintenance of ‘evil’ as having explanatory force when it does not at all (Cole 2006).

The mistake that myth has such force at all, as above in Walser and in the psychoanalytic use of the Oedipal narrative, is that it reifies and essentializes masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt hold:
Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals, masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836)

This mistake of reification that Butler alludes to is encountered in the narratives and arguments that see masculinity in crisis or in a state of anxiety. This is a mistake that follows simplistic pop-psychology and media narratives and that because of the visual experience of some of the staged personae in heavy metal, these masculinities are reflective of the audience and community as a whole. As with the use of myth to read narratives into human relations, the error made is to promote the ideal rather than the actual. Deleuze (2004) in his attempt to fix his commitment to realism held that desire produces a product when it recognizes a lack. What it produces is real. Masculine hegemony does the same, the problem being that its desire is for evidence based on myth, but its product too is myth. Turning the mythical into the real in the same way that the psychoanalytic tradition turned the oedipal and orphic account of masculinity, applied to heavy metal culture into a real phenomenon, fails to recognize the myth for what it is as myth. Deleuze's aim is to remove the transcendent and instead support the construction of reality. For Deleuze desire and its object are one and the same thing. In this manner, Angus Young exudes pure energy; there is no object, just pure expression and thus does not show a lack. An attempt to bring his masculinity under a gender studies gaze requires the generation of a myth about teenage masculinity and having desire directed out to the unpresent object (woman). However, there is no such object, just Angus and energy. In Angus' apparent lack of object (woman) in the presentation of masculinity, Bon Scott provides the counter story, where his gaze holds on to the imagined object of desire. It is not one he desires, rather, it is a performance that generates beliefs about masculinity that are discursive and temporal. Fear is generated within, by those onlookers who believe the myths of his directed leer to be real, rather than performative.

A key problem though with this pursuit of desire in relation to the construction of masculinity and any other discourse for that matter, especially in a music genre such as heavy metal, is that it is tightly married to the capitalist market in the generation of objects of desire that are brought into existence. In other words creating objects to desire that did not previously exist. Not only is there a motivation to allow space to open where new and creative conceptions of masculinity can unfold, warding off reification and hegemonization of masculinities, but also a challenge to stave off objectification of the body as a mere product of consumption, limiting the space in which it can genuinely be free to express itself in new performances. “The commodified body requires constant self surveillance and renewal if it is to remain competitive and hence marketable to sponsors” (Miller 2009). It would be preferable that the reason for the changing dynamic in masculinity is based on relationality between humans pursuing an ethical goal; of becoming better humans rather than the commodified body, but this takes us out into new argument.

To conclude, I have tried to argue that the heavy metal culture, encompassing both audience and performer, presents a challenge to a realization of a myth of masculinity that is not borne out in the heavy metal scene itself. I have provided a few examples to illustrate this claim. Because it keeps its masculinity and other gender expressions that are performed on the stage, they are continually reconstructed and slip away from reification. This issue is read from an understudied community that could do with empirical evidence gained for this view. However, I hold that the relational gender identity that Connell is searching for in his critique of masculine hegemony can be found in the diversity of the heavy metal world and that the diversity of masculinities present in the heavy
metal world complement Judith Butler's vision of constructed gender identities where gender and in
this case heavy metal's masculinity, is a "shifting and contextual phenomenon" denoting a "relative
point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler 2006, 14).
The heavy metal world, I propose is one where myths of gender ought to complement a narrative
that emerges from the culture itself rather than uncritically imposed on it.

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