

ROCKING THE CANON: HEAVY METAL AND CLASSICAL LITERATURE

By

Heather L. Lusty
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

While metalheads around the world embrace the engaging storylines of their favorite songs, the influence of canonical literature on heavy metal musicians does not appear to have garnered much interest from the academic world. This essay considers a wide swath of canonical literature from the Bible through the Science Fiction/Fantasy trend of the 1960s and 70s and presents examples of ways in which musicians adapt historical events, myths, religious themes, and epics into their own contemporary art. I have constructed artificial categories under which to place various songs and albums, but many fit into (and may appear in) multiple categories. A few bands who heavily indulge in literary sources, like Rush and Styx, don't quite make my own "heavy metal" category. Some bands that sit

on the edge of rock/metal, like Scorpions and Buckcherry, do. Other examples, like Megadeth's "Of Mice and Men," Metallica's "For Whom the Bell Tolls," and Cradle of Filth's "Nymphetamine" won't feature at all, as the thematic inspiration is clear, but the textual connections tenuous.¹

The categories constructed here are necessarily wide, but they allow for flexibility with the variety of approaches to literature and form. A segment devoted to the Bible as a source text has many pockets of variation not considered here (country music, Christian rock, Christian metal). A lyrical poetry category explores songs and albums that adapt poetry and embellish or reinterpret cultural myths, from the Greco-Roman era to the Romantics. A section looks at adaptations of heroic epics and then its more modern form, the novel. And the Science Fiction/Fantasy genre has its own category to show its influence on early metal and its offshoots. The examples here are chosen to show both diversity in adaptation and the relevance and continuity of the themes of canonical literature that still ring true to contemporary audiences.

Popular music has always been marketed as a "counterculture" that opposes the normal, functional, boring culture dominating mainstream society—it provides a "real" and "progressive" worldview that, arguably,

¹ Megadeth's song lyrics loosely mirror the self-exploratory adventure in Steinbeck's novel of the same name; Metallica claims Hemingway's 1940 novel as inspiration for their song; Cradle of Filth's "Nymphetamine" plays upon the attractions explored in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

emphasizes moral correctness (Anus 1). This marketing process mirrors the pattern of impressionable adolescents in the *Bildungsroman*, who first "reject the world of their parents, then once independent re-assess their own values, and finally, rejoin society on the terms of these recreated values. This determines "reality" as they will act to create it, based upon their values system" (1). The development of heavy metal is closely aligned to this arc. Rising after the age of the superpower, in which Western civilization was highly developmental, metal musicians considered themselves highly evolved in a "humanistic state of liberal democracy which benefitted the individual more than any system previously on record" (3). In contrast to the "peace" movement of the post-war era that embraced pacifism and egalitarian individualism (its own counterculture movement), metal music emphasized morbidity and glorified ancient civilizations as well as heroic struggles,

merging the gothic attitudes of art rock with the broad scope of progressive rock [...] remind[ing] us that we are mortal and ultimately not able to control our lifespan or the inherent abilities we have. This clashed drastically with both the pacifistic hippie movement and the religious and industrial sentiments of the broader society surrounding it" (4).

Heavy metal's primary distinguishing characteristic is that it embraces a literary structure more than most popular music; "while rock is notorious for its verse-chorus-verse structure and jazz emphasizes a looser version of the same allowing unfettered improvisation, metal emphasizes a motivic, melodic narrative structure in the same way that

classical and baroque music do. Each piece may utilize other techniques, but what holds it together is a melodic progression between ideas that do not fit into simple verse-chorus descriptors" (6). Metal music is essentially a portrait of the post-Humanist mindset, for it is concerned about natural reality more than social symbolism, addressing experience rather than moral conclusion, and orienting itself towards subjective experience rather than an "objectivity" derived from shared societal concepts (7).

There is quite a bit of scholarship on the various aspects of "Heavy Metal Subculture" (see the "Further Readings" section of my bibliography, below). Sociological studies enumerate the shared culture distinct from mainstream society, the overarching critique of social conformity, and the use of symbolism and jargon (Larsson 96). Yet Robert Walser notes that to date, "[h]istorians and critics of popular music have so far failed to take seriously the musical accomplishments of heavy metal musicians" (103). The "dark" side of metal, often misattributed to Satanic or Pagan emphases, obfuscates the very real, contemporaneous concerns of the modern world, like war, greed, patriarchy, surveillance, and control (Walser 163). This essay seeks to help establish heavy metal as a legitimate object of academic attention. My method is simply to outline in broad the way heavy metal is currently connected to literary material we already deem worthy of this attention.

The Bible.

The Bible is frequently cited as the most influential work of

literature in the Western canon—and certainly it has shaped the morality of the English-speaking world. In the Judeo-Christian theology, death and suffering are natural enemies to God's creations, banished with "good" behavior in the hopes of earthly and heavenly reward (Anus 5). These themes are endemic to popular music and the human experience, daily life is a struggle between temptation and morality, right and wrong. Biblical themes abound in metal music, from band names to song themes and historical topoi. Band names from the Bible are too numerous to cover with any thoroughness, but a few notable acts (spanning 25+ years of metal) who drew their names directly or indirectly from material in the Old Testament include Stryper, Testament, Sepultura, Armored Saint, Lamb of God, and Avenged Sevenfold. Certainly stories from the Old and New Testaments inspire individual songs from metal bands. The threat of divine retribution is a constant in monotheistic societies. While many heavy metal bands are frequently miscategorized as devil worshipers, in fact the prevalence of Biblical themes is quite strong. For example, Metallica's "Creeping Death" recounts one of the ten plagues of Egypt, which God sent to demonstrate his power and displeasure at the treatment of his people:

Hebrews born to serve the pharaoh
Heed
To his every word, live in fear
Faith
Of the unknown one, the deliverer
Wait
Something must be done, four hundred years

So let it be written
Let it be done
I'm sent here by the chosen one
So let it be written
So let it be done
To kill the first-born pharaoh son
I'm creeping death.

("Creeping Death")

The song takes the point of view of the plague sent by God to avenge the Hebrews enslaved and abused by the Egyptians; the "lesson" of the song is that no one can escape accountability—God sees all and punishes all.

Avenged Sevenfold, who took their name from Genesis, do not consider themselves a religious band, but their lyrical content frequently reflects distinctly Biblical themes. As a single example among many, their song "Chapter IV" recounts the story of Cain and Able:

Raise your head and taste the courage (the one of
light)
Fall from grace, unholy night
I've come here to kill you,
Won't leave until you've died
Murder born of vengeance,
I closed my brother's eyes tonight...

("Chapter IV")

While the motive for murder is left vague, the plight of man, once blood is spilt, is to suffer eternal sorrow and punishment. The song moves through the plot, murder, and Cain's exile from Eden: "Far away in this land I must go, / out of the sight of the One. / A punishment sent from His

hand / a hardship that no one should know / Now go out of the sight of the One, / away in this land you must go" ("Chapter IV"). The fall of man to "Murder, liar, vengeance, deceit" is one that haunts him forevermore, and taints the race of man, which should have been peaceful and content.

A 2013 release by Buckcherry, a concept album (categorized here for its topical focus) titled *Confessions*, illustrates the influence of Judeo-Christian morality on the contemporary man. The album cover depicts a cross topped with a crown of thorns; the alternate cover portrays a medieval leather-bound manuscript with metal clasps. The track list focuses on the seven deadly sins, interspersed with other elemental and emotional titles. The songs titled for the seven deadly sins follow the sins themselves from a contemporary perspective, temptations everyone faces on a daily basis. Lyrics from "Gluttony," the debut release, include:

I get it started and then I get brokenhearted
Because I can't get a hold of the beast
It's like I'm blind, I'm running out of time
Everything I crave is out of reach
You say I drink too much
You say I fuck too much
So what the hell am I supposed to do
I wanna die and kill my dirty mind,
I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it
I need it, I need it, I need it, I need it, I need it
I love it, I love it, I love it, I love it
Gluttony on me has started.

("Gluttony")

The video, shot in a church with a cast of fans, highlights the everyday indulgences that tempt the average youth: sex, drugs, drink, feasting, peer pressure. A Jesus figure wanders amongst the "congregation" both pouring libations and taunting the young Latino man surrounded by temptation, while the singer performs from the pulpit. When the young man has drink and drugs forced on him, he is sick and then has an "awakening" that suggests some sort of danger in self-indulgence. The singer, Josh Todd, describes the concept of the video as excess and crass consumption. Xavier Muriel, the drummer, describes the song as the "concept of having everything and still not being satisfied, and still wanting more. To some people that's a good thing; to others, it's an absolute curse" ("Making of Gluttony"). Despite the typical misconception of rockers preferring to live in states of excess, the lyrics and video demonstrate the daily struggle to find balance amongst everyday temptations.

The song "Greed" presents the realistic struggles to get ahead, or protect what one has, in daily life. It is informed by the consumerism that dominates our physical existence.

I've lost my place and I don't wanna cause trouble,
But I'm here to get mine.

So if you could, would you kindly move?

I'll only ask you one time, cause I'm gonna get
through.

I don't need anybody else,

I'm not afraid to take a risk, I don't practice good

health.

I don't pray and I don't rely
On a long make-out shallony, watch the crime.

[CHORUS]

I don't care who I have to tremble,
I don't care, cause I want it bad.
The consequences ain't no fucking matter,
Greed is the answer, everyone's going mad.
Taking everything you can,
Stealing right from your hand,
When are you going to make a stand?
Cause we will not tell you.

("Greed")

One is tempted to read these lyrics as an anti-capitalist diatribe, but even the more modest contemporary consumers suffer from competitive acquisition and the socially acceptable practice of aggressively getting ahead at others' expense. The caution is against social complacency and the increasing insularity of professional advancement.

Obviously the Bible has influenced countless musicians in all genres; contrary to commonplace generalizations about heavy metal being "satanic" or otherwise irreligious, these examples are a microcosm of the positive moral influence the Old Testament has in contemporary music.

Lyric poetry.

My second category, lyrical poetry, seems a natural fit with music. Indeed, many musicians begin as poets. The focus here is canonical poetry adapted to music; the examples are

primarily from the Romantic era, reflecting the popularity of the poets and themes as well as their translatability to the twentieth century. Heinrich Heine's poem "Lorelei," adapted by the Scorpions in a song of the same title, is one example of a cultural myth being adapted to song. The Lorelei, a 120-meter-long rock that marks the narrowest part of the Rhine between Switzerland and the North Sea, is a famous area of the Rhine Gorge.² The area is notorious for boat accidents, having a rocky waterline and very strong current. Lorelei is also the name of a water spirit (similar to a mermaid, siren, or Rhine maiden) associated with this rock in popular folklore and in works of music, art and literature. Heine, a German Romantic poet, took popular folklore as thematic focus. In his poem, "The Lorelei," the narrator is haunted by the alluring song of the temptress:

The fairest of maidens is sitting
Unwittingly wondrous up there,
Her golden jewels are shining,
She's combing her golden hair.
The comb she holds is golden,
She sings a song as well
Whose melody binds an enthralling
And overpowering spell.
In his little boat, the boatman
Is seized with a savage woe,
He'd rather look up at the mountain
Than down at the rocks below.

² The 65 km section of the Rhine between Koblenz and Bingen was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in June 2002.

I think that the waves will devour
The boatman and boat as one;
And this by her song's sheer power
Fair Lorelei has done.

(Heine ll 9-24)

The Scorpions' adaptation of "The Lorelei" draws both from the legend and from Heine's poem. The song is in first person, and laments the betrayal of Lorelei:

Lorelei
My ship has passed you by
And though you promised to show me the way
You led me astray
You were my Lorelei
What kind of fool was I
Cause I believed in every word you said
And now I wonder why
Lorelei

("Lorelei").

The "femme fatale" of the Scorpions' version leads the narrator astray and breaks his heart—a more modern version of the temptress myth. The mermaid is present in most cultures in some form, and often she is far removed from the sirens of Homer, who use their songs to lure men to their deaths. In Germany, the Lorelei is a cultural symbol of the Romantic era and a representative of the allure of home.

My next examples come from Iron Maiden, a metal band which could write a book on its own on literary adaptations. Founding member Steve Harris related in an interview that he took the band's name from Alexander

Dumas' novel *The Man in the Iron Mask* (Wall 28). They have engaged in numerous fairly faithful "adaptations" of canonical literature. Walser notes that they are one of the most mystical and philosophical of heavy-metal bands, taking inspiration from the Bible, Romantic poetry, and various other mythologies (151).³ In poetic adaptation, the first example is "Flight of Icarus." As the title suggests, the content of the song is loosely based on the Greek myth of Icarus, who, imprisoned with his father Daedalus in the palace of Knossos on Crete, manufactured a pair of wax and feather wings to affect escape. Icarus, who does not pay close heed to his father's advice, flies too close to the sun. The wax holding the wings together melts and he falls to his death in the sea. Vocalist Bruce Dickenson adapted the lyrics to reflect teenage rebellion:

Now the crowd breaks
And a young boy appears
Looks the old man in the eye
As he spreads his wings
And shouts at the crowd
"In the name of God, my Father, I fly"
His eyes seem so glazed
As he flies on
The wings of a dream
Now he knows his Father betrayed

³ Literary themed songs and albums by Iron Maiden not addressed in this article include *Brave New World*, "Isle of Avalon," "Lord of the Flies," "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "Phantom of the Opera," "Prodigal Son," "Revelations," "Stranger in a Strange Land," "The Ides of March," "The Wicker Man," and "Twilight Zone."

Now his wings turn to ashes
To ashes his grave.
Fly on your way like an eagle
Fly as high as the sun
On your wings like an eagle
Fly, touch the sun.

(“The Flight of Icarus”)

In this rendering, the young Icarus is determined to fly, to prove to his father that he can—an excellent metaphor for youthful rebellion and the insistence on one’s maturity. He defies parental instruction/warning and strikes out on his own. The song ends a bit more optimistically than the legend of Icarus itself. The refrain “Fly on your way like an eagle / Fly as high as the sun / On your wings like an eagle / Fly, touch the sun” (“The Flight of Icarus”) is repeated several times to close the song, while the melting of the wings and reference to Icarus’ death are in the middle of the song. It emphasizes the dreams and ambitions of youth, and downplays the perilous consequences of inexperience.

From the album *Piece of Mind*, Iron Maiden’s “The Trooper” is based on the poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The poem, a rather infamous immortalization of a catastrophic British humiliation at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War (1853-56), recounts the bravery of the English troops under an inept commander. Tennyson’s verses are some of the most recognizable in the modern age, and this particular poem strikingly modern in its condemnation of inept leadership, wasted resources, and the folly of war. The song is told in first person, from the perspective of a member of

the Light Brigade:

You'll take my life but I'll take yours too
You'll fire your musket but I'll run you through
So when you're waiting for the next attack
You'd better stand, there's no turning back

The bugle sounds the charge begins
But on this battlefield no one wins
The smell of acrid smoke and horses breath
As I plunge on into certain death.

("The Trooper")

The song's lyrics follow the narrative of Tennyson's poem fairly closely; while the focus is on the individual (not to the group of 600), it does include reference to the Russian guns, the fear of the horses, and the screams of the fallen. The narrator describes his own death: "And as I lay there gazing at the sky / My body's numb and my throat is dry / And as I lay forgotten and alone / Without a tear I draw my parting groan." This end maintains the solemnity and waste of life in Tennyson's poem—each individual loss is blurred, seemingly senseless, and forgotten in the larger scope of the battle.

The oft-adapted Coleridge poem, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is another of Iron Maiden's Romantic era adaptations. The ballad form lends itself well to musical adaptation. Iron Maiden's song of the same name, written by the band's bassist Steve Harris and included in the album *Powerslave*, is a 13-minute-42 second metal ballad.

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The lyrics primarily summarize the events of the poem and the mariner's tale, and occasionally borrow directly from the stanzas of Coleridge's poem. The below excerpt includes the band's summary of events and includes a direct quote from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" relating his tale:

The albatross begins with its vengeance
A terrible curse a thirst has begun
His shipmates blame bad luck on the Mariner
About his neck, the dead bird is hung.

And the curse goes on and on and on at sea
And the thirst goes on and on for them and me

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck nor breath nor motion
As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean

Water, water everywhere and
All the boards did shrink
Water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink.

The mariner's tale is one of man against nature, and the musical arrangement (not the focus here) presents several distinct moods to mirror the mariner's lurid wedding speech. By putting the poem to music, Iron Maiden faithfully presents the tale in a classic oratory form, and manages to capture the ageless struggle of man against the power of nature that inspired Coleridge.

No poetry category would be complete without Edgar

Allen Poe. His entire corpus features prominently in heavy metal, with stories, themes, and lines from his poems frequently appearing in various bands' lyrics. Two examples will suffice here; the first is the American band Conducting from the Grave, whose song "Nevermore" is a creative rewriting of Poe's canonical poem, "The Raven." The opening lines of the song recreate the mood and setting of "The Raven":

Lowly do I sit, the night lay dormant as I muse the
thoughts
Of lives passed, and reason with forgotten lore
Remembering within these halls, the curves around
your face
Beauty lost; apparition haunting me, dancing in the
pale moonlight
Such silence profound in the night
Until a raven's cry shatters repose.
(“Nevermore”)

The perspective of the narrator is similar; so too is the solitary and morose mood, the illumination of the room, and the language. The raven in the song also cries “Nevermore.” In the main, the adaptation of Poe's poem is clear and well done.

Another example is the song “From Childhood's Hour” by Norwegian metal band Circus Maximus. The song closely adapts the lyrics of Poe's poem “Alone.” In fact, the first half of the song's lyrics closely match the opening “Alone;” the perspective is changed from first-person narration (in Poe's poem) to third-person, but the sentiment and descriptive language is strikingly similar. For example,

Poe's poem opens, "From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were—I have not seen / As others saw—I could not bring / My passions from a common spring—" (Poe, "Alone," lines 1-4). Circus Maximus' song opens almost identically: "From childhood's hour he's been his only friend / Endless solitude till the end / As others saw he could not bring / His passions from a common spring" ("From Childhood's Hour"). The title of the song, taken from the poem's first line, reflects the overall focus of the poem: solitude, loneliness, and longing to fit in, but recognizing a fundamental difference in perspective that increases the narrator's isolation.⁴

Overall, the logical connection between lyric poetry and musicians of all genres is evident. The wide swath of poetic inspiration, particularly from the Romantic era, which appeals to heavy-metal musicians echoes the same types of alienation and search for identity that the poets explored. In many ways, the development of the self is timeless; every young person must understand and accept (or reject) their role in society as they advance into adulthood. The theme is perhaps as universal as love, loss, and other typically eulogized emotions.

⁴ These brief examples from Poe's poetry in no way do justice to the popularity of his work, both stories and poems, in heavy metal. In fact, Poe's work is enormously popular across musical genres; Stevie Nicks recorded "Annabel Lee" on the album *In Your Dreams* (2011). Nox Arcana, an American techno duo, put out an album in 2007 titled *Shadow of the Raven*, which largely pays tribute to Poe's various works.

The epic (novel).

My third category is the epic. Traditionally a poetic journey of heroism and adventure, the epic, forerunner to the post-Enlightenment *Bildungsroman*, lends itself admirably to the narrative arc that is frequently employed by heavy metal musicians. The epic in literature is perhaps the most standard format for canonical works: the question/quest, the journey, the experiences, tests and knowledge gained along the adventure. There are many epics that define the western experience, and stand in for the individual's struggle against social conformity and control. The few examples provided here are chosen for their diversity in adaptation and content.

The oldest western epic is of course Homer's *The Odyssey*, a tale of homesickness, longing, trials of patience and devotion, and, of course, revenge. Homer's tale has influenced more than 2,000 years of literature, and Odysseus' journey is one almost any adventure or self-reflective journey can use as allegory. Progressive metal band Symphony X released its sixth studio album in 2002, titled *The Odyssey*. Tracks like "Inferno (Unleash the Fire)" are in the spirit of the text, but the title track is of real interest—a 24-minute musical interpretation of Homer's epic. The song is divided into seven parts, including "Odysseus' Theme," "Journey to Ithaca," "Circe," "Sirens," "Scylla and Charybdis," and "The Fate of the Suitors." The tracks highlight the variety of obstacles and temptations Odysseus faces on his return home, but are easily translatable to the struggle of any person trying to regain his or her home and happiness.

Dante's 12th-century classic *Divine Comedy* shaped the modern world's view of the Christian afterlife. *Dante XXI* is the tenth studio album by the Brazilian metal band Sepultura, released in 2006 through SPV Records. It is a concept album based on the three sections of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*. The track list shows the inspiration from the canonical work, thematically fitted to the narrative of Dante through the underworld. They include "Lost (Intro)," "Dark Wood of Error," "City of Dis," "Limbo (Intro)," and "Crown and Miter." These track titles give a sense of the movement through the Inferno into Purgatory and on to Paradise. The lyrics, too, reflect a contemporaneous commentary about current political institutions (Teutsch 153). Instead of the text being literally transposed, the band presents a thematic exploration of contemporary justice, governmental corruption, religious organizations, and personal salvation (160).

Some of Dante's symbols are appropriated for political commentary; the "Dark Wood of Error" portrays the three beasts as modern political entities: the United States, the United Kingdom, and United Nations. Songwriter Andreas Kisser connects Dante's leopard, lion and she-wolf to political identities rather than particular sins (161). The song "Buried Words" addresses the Catholic Church's struggle with sexual abuse scandals (162). Band member Derrick Green noted in an interview,

Dante's dissatisfaction with the corruption and abuse of power from politics is something we could all relate to in our own century now. The fact that a

person like George W. Bush has managed to rob the elections of the biggest empire today, the USA, and to be able to manipulate other countries was something the Roman Empire was notorious for.

(Qtd. in Teutsch, 178).

Overall, the album is a strikingly poignant illustration of the similarities between political and religious corruption in Dante's time and ours.

Of course the oldest Anglophonic epic is *Beowulf*. Arguably one of the most canonical works of the western world, *Beowulf* has enjoyed adaptation in a variety of forms, including cinema, stage, graphic novels, computer games, and so forth. Interestingly enough, its only musical treatment to date has been in opera.⁵ Although it does not appear as if *Beowulf*'s adventures have provided material for any major metal acts, in fact, the mythology of *Beowulf* and the Viking era has spawned an entire genre of music. Viking Metal, originating in late 1980s Scandinavia, was pioneered by Swedish Death Metal band *Bathory*, and further developed by Norway's *Enslaved*, who combined Viking topics with a "Northern" sound (Von Helden 1). This genre is closely linked with another metal subgenre, Pagan Metal, which deals with Pagan religions and encompasses not only Old Norse myth, but Celtic myths and other folklore (1). Viking Metal bands adopt and

⁵ *The Lament for Beowulf*: (1925), op. 25, by American composer Howard Hanson (1896–1981); *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial* (2009), by composer Ezequiel Viñao; *Beowulf: A Suite for Ancient Instruments* (2000) by American composer John Craton (b. 1953).

reinterpret saga themes, stories and characters (primarily from the *Eddas*), incorporating the heroic or Romantic imagery that influences metal bands generally, but including geographically specific imagery like chain mail and northern landscapes, which dominate cover art in the genre (1). Lyrics are often written in Nordic languages including Norwegian, Old Norse, and Swedish (with examples in Finish and Faroese) (3).⁶

Though Enslaved began as a prototypical Norwegian black metal band in 1991, by 1993 they were incorporating song structures unusual for the genre; several of their earlier songs reach the ten-minute mark. The 1997 release *Eld* marks the band's shift toward Progressive Viking Metal, which was fully matured with the album *Mardraum* (2000). That album contained several multi-part epics such as "Større enn tid—Tyngre enn natt" and "Entrance—Escape." Recording mainly English lyrics since *Monumension*, their earlier songs were primarily recorded in Norwegian, and included three songs in Icelandic on their first full-length album. The 1994 track *Heimdallr* integrated an Old Norse excerpt from *Gylfaginning* by Snorri Sturluson. Most of the band's lyrics relate to Norse mythology. The short lyrics from their song "Fires of Midgard" illustrate the connection between the ancient

⁶ Von Helden notes that there are two kinds of approaches to the motif in Viking Metal: the first is mainly concerned with the cultivation of imagery projecting strength and barbarism, which "romanticizes the subject and displays an escapist touch;" the second emphasizes historical accuracy and takes as the sole focus of their lyrics and identity Old Norse myth (2).

myths and the contemporary identity of Viking metal:

The call of the Gjallarhorn

Return to the ring of our forefathers' gods

The flames of Midgard's fires and ancient
mysticism still are

[sg}rdsreien rides with terror above the village

Mjolner is swung, thunder and lightening!

The landmarks of the Vikings

Wolves and ravens guards the throne.

(“Fires of Midgard”)

Viking Metal group Týr, a self-described folk metal band from the Faroe Islands, writes lyrics revolving almost entirely around Viking lore, mythology, and history; their name comes from the Norse god of law and justice. They began making music which was heavily inspired by Norse mythology, Faroese traditional music, and heavy metal music in general. Frontman Heri Joensen notes: “Lyrically I draw on local ancient legend, but make no mistake, I still write about very contemporary matters” (“Týr—Unite Metal!”). The band also adapts old Faroese ballads and famous folk melodies from their area—an important preservation of cultural heritage. Lyrics are written in both Faroese and English; consequently, the band has a large following in Europe (Von Helden 4).⁷ Their track titles reflect the band’s consistent thematic focus: “How Far to

⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the origins of Viking Metal, see Imge Von Helden’s article, “Barbarians and Literature – Viking Metal and its Links to Old Norse Mythology.” Inter-Disciplinary-Net. <<http://www.interdisciplinary.net/ci/mmp/mmp1/von%20helden%20paper.pdf>>.

Asgaard" (2002), "Eric the Red" (2003), "Ragnarok" (2006), "Valkyrja" (2013). It's not a coincidence that most of the Viking Metal genre bands come from Scandinavia. Their shared cultural heritage, translated through epic poetry and foundation myths, is one that creates a strong, regionally-specific identity.

Overall, epic literature provides a wealth of characters, themes, and imagery that appeal to heavy metal bands. Many incorporate costumes and set designs that recreate epic battles or scenery as well, and album artwork also reproduces allegorical imagery to emphasize the timelessness of the struggles of man against nature, man against monster, and man against himself. The scale of epic literature is expansive, but topics can be excised in a variety of ways to focus on experiences or parts of tales that appeal to the artists.

Its modern counterpart, the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of experience, also inspires musicians. The 19th century novel of experience then presented its (fairly) newly literate audience with a new medium that mirrored the oratory form of the epic. Although the form itself shifted and elements of the epic dimmed (repetition, catalogue of heroes, fate of the people depends on the hero's success, and so forth), in principle the novel—shifting from an epic hero to an everyman of common origins and struggles—presents the same challenges, failures, and human introspection and alienation that mark its forerunner. A few brief examples of "modern epics," as I style them, follow.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is enjoying an afterlife in music. Considered a classic work of American

Romanticism, Melville's whale tale is one of race, revenge, good and evil, and obsession. The epic adventure has been adapted numerous times. In the rock and metal genres, there are two noteworthy examples. Led Zeppelin's song titled "Moby Dick," appearing on *Led Zeppelin 2*, is famously recognizable as a quasi-instrumental. Yet the few lyrics are clearly echoing a naturalist/Romantic sentiment: "And if you feel that you can't go on. And your will's sinkin' low / Just believe and you can't go wrong. / In the light you will find the road" (lines 1-3). Named after the whale, it was also known by the alternate titles "Pat's Delight" (early 1968-1969 version with completely different guitar riff) and "Over the Top" (with "Out on the Tiles" intro section and original closing reprise) during various points of the band's career. It was released as a single titled "Moby Dick" in 1969. This is a superficial and perhaps even jocular reference to the big white whale. The band Mastodon has used the epic more seriously in its second release (and their first concept album) *Leviathan*, which is heavily imbued in Melville's novel. Singles released included "Iron Tusk," "Blood and Thunder," "I am Ahab," and "Seabeast." The album cover shows the detail of a whale upsetting an 18th century galley ship; the Tour Edition shows the complete artwork, a fabulous depiction of the whale rising from the depths, breaking the surface (the ship noticeably absent).

Iron Maiden's "The Edge of Darkness" (in the album *X-Factor*) put out while front man Bruce Dickenson was on hiatus from the band, is an outstanding track on an otherwise forgettable album. Taking its narrative from

Joseph Conrad's classic critique of European imperialism, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the song explores the novel's themes from the perspective of the book's narrator, Marlow. Sent to assassinate a rogue army officer in Vietnam, Marlow must face and process the reality of humanity in all its horrific brutality. The novel is a spiritual exploration of the cruelty of man, and the horrifying depths which he is capable of reaching. The song begins:

I've looked into the heart of darkness
Where the blood red journey ends
When you've faced the heart of darkness
Even your soul begins to bend
For a week I have been waiting
Still I am only in Saigon
The walls move in a little closer
I feel the jungle call me on.

("The Edge of Darkness").

The narrative thread of the song mimics the novel's plot, with Marlow killing Kurtz, having "[his] blood on my hands," doing what he must for God and country because Kurtz has eschewed the rules of government and Christian society (gone native, essentially, and abused his power by setting himself up as a deity). In many ways, the struggle of empire has shifted from one of geography to one of market economy—the perils of ignoring social morality by exploiting third-world countries is as relevant today as it was in 1899 when Conrad published his exposé.

It is particularly interesting to note that epic tales lend themselves well to concept albums, which enable artists to tell a story from multiple perspectives or over a series of

events over time much as the actions of a novel unfold. One could write a monograph on concept albums: thematic foci, narrative art, cover art, packaging. As a brief example, consider Marilyn Manson's engagement in elaborate structure similar to the narrative arc of an epic/novel. Manson's rock-opera concept album *Antichrist Superstar* is the first installment in a trilogy which includes *Mechanical Animals* and *Holy Wood*.⁸ These albums each tell a freestanding story engaged in the structural arc of the novel. They also engage with each other to form a larger narrative, just as Homer's two epics both center around the apex of Greek glory. Although there is much religiously themed content in these albums (the central figure a reworking of Christ in the twentieth century), they also present contemporaneous social criticisms of American popular cultures of celebrity and violence, arguably more important to academic critiques. Concept albums are popular with heavy metal acts for the very reason that they allow for a fuller, more epic telling of the focal struggles. Songs become chapters in the overarching focus of the narrative, characters interact in various venues, and so forth.

Most traditional epics look back on glorified eras, highlighting the achievements of man and the successes (or failures, as Dante saw them) of empires. The modern novel

⁸ After the release of *Holy Wood*, Manson said that the overarching story within the trilogy is presented in reverse chronological order; *Antichrist Superstar*, therefore, is the finale despite being the first to be chronologically released trilogy.

is undeniably more morose and pessimistic about man's journey; it also pays a particular attention to its own time, conflicts, and artistic movements and styles. My final category looks forward—to the journeys and struggles that may await mankind as he reaches to the stars.

Sci-fi & fantasy.

The Science Fiction/Fantasy category deserves its own treatment, as it is a widely read genre that enjoys massive worldwide fanfare in accompanying mediums including graphic novels, fan fiction, gaming, film and television. Perhaps the earliest "canonical" fantasy work is Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Itself based on the texts Tolkien taught (he was an Anglo-Saxon linguist and professor of medieval English literature at Oxford), the series reimagines the epic quest of the noble-hearted underling, struggling to do what is right amongst the corrupt and power hungry elite. Tolkien's work has inspired numerous metal adaptations.⁹ Black Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler noted that their 1970 hit "The Wizard" was based on his reading *Lord of the Rings* at the time of the record (Chaplinsky 2). Led Zeppelin's "Ramble On" (1969) bears Tolkien's influence as well, with lyrics including: "'Twas in the darkest depths of Mordor / I met a girl so fair / But Gollum, and the evil one crept up / And slipped away with her." Other Middle Earth inspired Zeppelin tracks include

⁹ For a list of rock/metal acts who took their names from *Lord of the Rings*, see Chaplinsky (6) <<http://litreactor.com/columns/lord-of-the-strings-the-influence-of-tolkien-on-heavy-metal-music>>.

"The Battle of Evermore" and "Misty Mountain Hop" (Chaplinsky 2).

Many other heavy metal acts have been influenced by Tolkien. Battlelore, a Finnish heavy metal band founded in 1999 by guitarist Jyri Vahvanen and bassist Miika Kokkola, derives its focus and concert spectacles from Tolkien's Middle-earth sagas. Their stage costumes and live shows are largely inspired by the characters and themes of fantasy literature (Bowar 1). Blind Guardian has written many songs relating to Middle-earth, including a full concept album entitled *Nightfall in Middle Earth*. Summoning, an Austrian black metal band, takes most of its inspiration from Tolkien's work. The Finnish metal band Nightwish and the Norwegian metal band Tristania incorporate many Tolkien references into their music as well. While not exclusively inspiring to Northern European rock/metal acts, the connection between Tolkien's trilogy is certainly prolific and reveals the popular imprint of his literary saga on contemporary culture.

Again Iron Maiden is uniquely prolific in literary-inspired adaptations. In the Sci-Fi/Fantasy category, several canonical works have influenced songs and albums by the British band. "To Tame a Land" is based on the *Dune* series by Frank Herbert. The song is primarily plot summarization, but a rather good rendering of the epic struggle between houses for control of a barren but profitable slave colony: "It is a land that's rich in spice / The sandriders and the 'mice' / That they all the Muad'Dib / He is the Kwisatz Haderach. / He is born of Caladan / And

will take the Gom Jabbar".¹⁰ The album *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (1988), a concept album based on Orson Scott Card's series *Seventh Son*, takes the struggles of the work's young hero (against temptation and torment) as its focus. While the album strips the book down to its most basic elements, it emphasizes the experiences and struggles that societies have dealt with (and will deal with again, in futuristic texts): concepts of good, evil, prophesy, and temptation (Striker 1).

Another example is the song "Out of the Silent Planet" (from Iron Maiden's *Brave New World*, 2000), based on *The Cosmic Trilogy* (1938, 1943, 1945) by C.S. Lewis. Leaving aside the obviously embedded theological premise of fall and redemption, the early "space" themed story does lay out the problematic goals of imperialism and the flawed view that man is the highest evolutionary species and therefore worth preserving. The song adaptation takes broad strokes from the entire series:

Withered hands, withered bodies begging for
salvation
Deserted by the hand of gods of their own creation
Nations cry underneath decaying skies above
You are guilty, the punishment is death for all who

¹⁰ Steven Harris, bassist and songwriter for Iron Maiden, recounts the band's attempt to get Herbert's permission to name the song "Dune". The refusal letter from the writer's agent said: "No. Because Frank Herbert doesn't like rock bands, particularly heavy rock bands, and especially rock bands like Iron Maiden" (Wall). Iron Maiden was disappointed that Herbert didn't view the tribute as a good promotion for the book.

live

The punishment is death for all who live
Out of the silent planet, dreams of decimation,
Out of the silent planet, Come the demons of
creation.

("Out of the Silent Planet")

The fall of man (as Earth, the "Silent Planet," has become a planet of exile and been abandoned by higher beings) — coupled with its theological significance provides contemporaneously material to later writers. The debut album by late '80s metal band King's X, titled *Out of the Silent Planet*, is also a direct reference to the work of C.S. Lewis, whom founding band members Ty Rabor and Jerry Gaskill claimed as a favorite writer.

Iron Maiden's album *Brave New World* (2000) draws from several other literary sources, including the dystopian Huxley novel from which its title stems. The eponymous song emphasizes the artificiality of "civilized" life, engineered but unreal, and contrasts it with the wilderness of the "real" world:

Dying swans, twisted wings, beauty not needed here
Lost my love, lost my life, in this garden of fear
I have seen many things, in a lifetime alone
Mother love is no more, bring this savage back
home

Wilderness house of pain, makes no sense of it all
Close this mind dull this brain, Messiah before his
fall

What you see is not real, those who know will not
tell

All is lost, sold your souls to this brave new world.
(“Brave New World”)

The treatment of Huxley’s dystopian classic is not limited to the titular song. The track “The Wicker Man” which echoes the self-awakening of the protagonist of the novel, proclaims: “Nothing you can contemplate / Will ever be the same / Every second is a new spark / Sets the universe aflame” (“The Wicker Man”). These lines suggest that Bernard’s experience of the “Savage Reservation” on holiday makes it impossible for him to submit to the regulatory and mechanized society in which he lives.

Finally, Sepultura’s *A-Lex* (2009), their eleventh studio album and second concept album, is based on the 1962 book *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. The novel is a classic dystopian adventure of misguided youth, and the horror that society imposes to normalize (admittedly) deviant behavior. Andreas Kisser noted that the inspiration for the album was based on the classic novel: “We will write our soundtrack for this story and Burgess’ life will be an inspiration also to write the music, lyrics and for the artwork” (Blabbermouth). Its title is a pun on the main character from the novel, Alex, and the Latin for “without law,” presumably referring to how Alex and his companions behaved. Song titles include “The Treatment,” “Conform,” “Enough Said,” and “Ludwig Van.” The lyrics reflect the angst of youth and the struggle for independence, rebelliousness of youth against authority, and so forth. Most heavy-metal music engages in adolescent fantasy and patriarchal criticism—a natural response to rules and authority (Cope 78). It is this aspect

of emotional development and social awareness that so succinctly links literary tales of rebellion and strife to contemporary music.

Conclusion.

While the categories and selections in this brief essay have been subjectively constructed and are certainly not detailed or wide-ranging enough to be considered a thorough study, the links between literature and heavy-metal musicians is compelling. Certainly the genre of heavy metal, as a whole, does not usually inspire thoughts of literary engagement — but it should.

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