

Classical Myth and History in Heavy Metal: Power, Escapism and Masculinity

With the possible exception of opera, heavy metal makes greater use of Classical material than any other genre of contemporary music. This paper will suggest some of the reasons for the connection between Classics and heavy metal, and discuss what these reasons can add to our understanding of the modern reception of the ancient world.

A brief overview of the history of heavy metal and its subgenres will show the extent to which Greco-Roman myth and history are an established part of the music from its beginnings. Because metal is in some ways a conservative genre, with an established canon of artists (Weinstein), the use of Classical material by these canonical bands sanctions the continued use of such material by subsequent bands. From its very beginnings, metal shows an interest in fantastic material from other times and places: Black Sabbath draws on the realm of fantasy and the occult (e.g. “The Wizard”) and Led Zeppelin draws on contemporary fantasy such as Tolkien (“Battle of Evermore”) and Classics (“Achilles Last Stand” [sic]). These trends are continued and developed by other “traditional” metal bands such as Iron Maiden, who use Classical material (“The Flight of Icarus,” “Alexander the Great”) as well as literary material (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”).

These early bands demonstrate some of the main trends of heavy metal lyrics: in comparison with most popular music, there is less focus on the quotidian, and the ancient world is just one of the realms on which bands draw for inspiration, with the others being books (especially fantasy), movies and history. For example, the American band Virgin Steele recorded two albums based on Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (*The House of Atreus Acts I & II*; treated at length by Liverani), as well as a concept album about Adam’s first wife, Lilith (*Visions of Eden*).

Similarly, the German band Blind Guardian is often referred to as “Tolkien Metal” because of their use of that author’s material (e.g., their concept album *Nightfall in Middle-earth* is based on *The Silmarillion*). But they also use material from other fantasy novels, as well as Classical material, as in their song about the Trojan War, “And Then There Was Silence.”

This avoidance of the mundane is part of metal’s larger concerns with “power” and “the epic” (Weinstein, Walser). This idea of larger-than-life grandeur is reflected in the length of some metal songs covering Classical material, e.g. Manowar, “Achilles: The Agony and Ecstasy in Eight Parts” (28 min.) and Symphony X, “The Odyssey” (24 min.). Such interest in grandeur and “the epic” also accounts for the use of Latin, which appears frequently in heavy metal music (with varying degrees of accuracy) in part because of its otherworldliness, and its antiquity.

Finally, there is a nationalistic aspect to the use of Classical material by some European bands, as the ancient world allows for the exploration of identity at a remove from the present day. While multiple bands from Italy (e.g. Heimdall, Stormlord, White Skull) all have full albums dedicated to Roman topics from a primarily Roman point of view, bands from lands outside of Italy but once controlled by Rome offer different views: the Swiss band Eluvietie focuses on the Gallic Wars from a Celtic perspective (*Helvetios*), and the German band Rebellion recorded a concept album based on Arminius’ war against the Romans (*Arminius – Furor Teutonicus*).

The role of metal as receiver is of particular interest because it is generally considered a non-elite medium, and is often denigrated by scholars and critics alike (Arnett, Hjelm). The presence of Classical material in heavy metal confirms that certain aspects of the ancient world have an enduring and complicated appeal and suggests multiple things: metal, as a male-dominated genre, reflects an escapist reading of the ancient world as largely absent of women;

the metal that uses Classical material is primarily made by Caucasians, and so testifies to the material's Western appeal, at the same time suggesting the continued need to introduce this material to a wider range of people; similarly, the connection of the ancient world with fantasy worlds suggests a certain lack of historical sense, and thus a need for contextualization. Our job as Classicists must include overcoming such restrictive views without losing sight of the range of ways in which this material appeals to non-specialists.

Works Cited

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