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'Cruelty Brought Thee Orchids' (and irony) – The covert social satire of Cradle of Filth

ABSTRACT

Cradle of Filth has certainly received considerable commercial and critical success, but one area neglected by commentators is the essentially satirical and ironic tone underpinning their work. Indeed, there are obvious parallels between the band's music, lyrics and public image and elements of extreme satire, from the Roman period, with its combination of physical disgust and horror, to the studied brutality of modern British satirical cartoons. The conclusion is that the band is both more subversive and politically aware than may have been realized by many, including its fans.

INTRODUCTION

Cradle of Filth are the United Kingdom's most successful underground metal band, having sold over a million records in the first ten years of their existence alone (Fielder 2001: 49). Over a career that has progressed through ten albums and three decades of touring, the band has acquired a reputation for shock and controversy. This ranges from its infamous 'JESUS IS A CUNT' T-shirt (Snow 1997) to claims of having 'sold out' from angry metal purists and an ever-rancorous, ever-changing line-up, with founder Daniel Davey or

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cartoons

Dani Filth to use his stage name, being the only continuous member since the band's formation in 1991.

Throughout this time, Cradle of Filth has both courted controversy and revelled in it. Certainly, the band's lyrical content is meant to shock – its first demo, *Total Fucking Darkness* had songs like 'The Rape of Faith' and 'Spattered in Faeces'. In a similar vein, other tracks throughout their career have included 'Gilded Cunt', 'Of Dark Blood and Fucking' and 'Succumb To This'. One song from their most recent album, 2012's *The Manticore And Other Horrors, For Your Vulgar Delectation*, leaves little to the imagination lyrically: 'Virgin cunts aquiver at this foreplay for the spiteful', Dani shrieks, while in another track on the album, *Pallid Reflection*, the lyrics are more subtle but no less unpleasant: 'Of dutiful victims I beautifully take / With delicious malicious intent'.

This, combined with often shocking album art that verges on the pornographic – a naked woman smearing her breasts with (presumably) fake blood in the inlay art for Cradle of Filth's 1996 EP, *V Empire*, being a case in point – certainly marks out the band as purveyors of shock. That said, they are neither unique in this regard, nor uniquely sacrilegious. Swedish black metal band Marduk had a 1991 demo called *Fuck Me Jesus* which featured cover art of a woman inserting a crucifix into what is either her vagina or anus. The cult Norwegian band, Gorgoroth, meanwhile has featured naked models tied to crosses, rotting sheep's heads and gallons of blood as part of its stage show (Wuensch 2008) alongside its lead singer, Gaahl, being imprisoned for abducting and torturing a neighbour (Blabbermouth 2005) before coming out as gay (Hansen 2008) and diversifying into a career in fashion design (Isdahl and Falkenberg 2011) all of which makes Cradle of Filth look relatively pedestrian – not to say unadventurous – by comparison.

HUMOUR AND HORROR

What marks Cradle out, however, is the strong undertone of dark humour that underpins its work. There is the constant use of wordplay – songs like 'The Nun with the Astral Habit', 'Shat out of Hell', 'Suicide and Other Comforts', 'Malice through the Looking Glass' and 'The Byronic Man' all hint at a delight in language as well as gallows humour. Meanwhile lyrics such as 'I saw the silver lining hidden in a mushroom cloud' from 'The Foetus of a New Day Kicking' and 'A fresh horror blows but ten billion souls / Are blind to see the rotting wood for the trees' in 'From The Cradle To Enslave' suggest not only a keenness for lurid imagery but a playfulness with language that neither mitigates the horrors it describes, nor take itself too seriously. The band's naming its own label imprint, *Abracadava* and instrument endorsements being listed as *instruments of torture* (Cradle of Filth 1996a) are also cases in point, as is the declaration at the start of the acknowledgement section in the *Cruelty and The Beast* lyric booklet that 'Cradle of Filth will now thank [sic] you off, one by one...' (Cradle of Filth 1998).

Even during interviews and public appearances, the band maintains this self-mocking yet still 'in-character' tone. In one 1997 interview, then-guitarist Stuart Anstis complained bitterly that the funeral of Princess Diana had 'cancelled a horror show I was going to see that night' (Moerkegard 1997). More recently, Dani Filth told hecklers throwing bottles at the band during a Download festival to instead 'throw them at our drummer, he's from Yorkshire, he's used to it' (NME 2011). He also informed one publication that he had murdered his girlfriend 'in the office of my East End club with

an ashtray' but avoided prosecution due to him having 'one of those sparkly grins that people fall for' (NME 1999).

In part, this self-mockery is an effective survival strategy, in that it wards off more serious criticism and controversy by emphasizing the inherent irony of the band. Yet I argue this satirical quality is intrinsic to Cradle of Filth's output and theme, and that this belies the apparently gratuitous tone of the music and imagery. Two particular examples of this are 1998's *Cruelty and The Beast* and 2008's *Godspeed on the Devil's Thunder*, which are not only both concept albums, but can also be said to be companion pieces as Dani has stated they both emerged from the same preliminary research and interest in notorious historical figures (Florino 2008).

Furthermore, they both focus on the nature of power and how it utterly corrupts both individuals and their societies. While *Cruelty and The Beast* is about Countess Elizabeth Bathory, the sixteenth-seventeenth-century Hungarian aristocrat who, it is claimed, murdered young women and bathed in her blood to maintain her beauty, *Godspeed On The Devil's Thunder* focuses on Gilles De Rais, the fifteenth-century French nobleman and companion of Joan of Arc, who subsequently descended into devil worship, sexual depravity and mass infanticide. Obviously, both depictions are fictionalized and do not take into account the political context and intrigues that may have been the real cause for these figures' downfall. Nonetheless, both albums explore how these individuals are corrupted by their elite social status and how these notions of class and social privilege help make them monstrous.

CRUELTY AND THE CONTEXT

In order to discuss this further, I would like to demonstrate that Cradle of Filth exists within an ongoing tradition of transgressive satire, where elements of horror and the pornographic are combined with social commentary. Most recently, the trend in modern British satire has been on the one hand deeply critical of social conditions and yet ambiguous in nature; we are shown the flaws and foibles of society and the individuals it is made up of but we are not then mollified by pat moral bromides or easy solutions:

This view opens a way for examining a new, darker, form of social satire that moves away from corrective critique and the comfort of stable values. Though mechanical repetition and inelasticity may still be a source of humour, the focus of the comedy is now the rigid and mechanical ordering of society, and it does not attempt to correct individuals' behaviour as much as it reveals the way complex individuals negotiate the various roles they perform within the social structure.

(Colletta 2003: 19)

In both albums we are simultaneously revolted by the behaviour of the main characters and yet inclined to sympathize with them. Elizabeth's one true love, a fellow bloodthirsty aristocrat, is 'cruelly slain in war' while Gilles' great tragedy, and arguably the point where his downward spiral into depravity begins, is the martyrdom of Joan of Arc. After their downfall, Elizabeth suffers a terrible fate – doomed to spend the rest of her life sealed in a room, while Gilles repents after a vision where he is implored by Joan to redeem himself – 'like Christ to Golgotha, his face to the sun'. Both figures are fundamentally Shakespearian in their tragedy – like Macbeth, they are damned by their actions, yet like him we are never granted the luxury of completely desisting

them. We are presented with figures who are corrupt and wicked, but are enabled in this regard by their social standing and who remain, disturbingly, human and sympathetic despite what they have done.

This reflects a satirical tradition that is older still. In the violence and cruelty employed by both characters, and how this is used to demonstrate the corrupt nature of their societies, we are reminded of Roman satire, which was used as a means of sublimated violence and so employs extreme imagery to make its case. While the poet Horace argued that satire supplants the violence that was society's original means of mediation, Juvenal claimed that it was in and of itself an indictment of society, where violence – literal or metaphorical – exposes its innate fragility (Keane 2006: 43–44). This is certainly the case where 'the tortured cunts of accomplices' are put to the flame in Elizabeth's case and where Gilles is hauled before a church court that he is able to befuddle and openly mock: 'He thought the court a farce / His tongue as sharp as glass... Flexing vexation at clerics aghast / In uproar he caused the cross to be masked'.

The very physical and grotesque nature of the characters' crimes is also reminiscent of Roman traditions. When Elizabeth 'fell / to masturbating with a dagger/ as the witch dabbled spells' in 'The Twisted Nails of Faith' or has 'virgins forced naked / To defile on rent knees/Hacked and racked backwards / Menses choking their pleas' in 'Cruelty Brought Thee Orchids', we see the body defiled and made corrupt, the horror of sexual depravity and the corruption and tainting of flesh made only too clear. Likewise, with Gilles De Rais, who has 'fingertips... scented with / the tears from seraphim cheeks / Part glamour and a hammer / Cadaverous and glib' in *Tragic Kingdom* and a 'torture garden rules of thumb apply / To sacred flesh and the naked eye / Golgothic this erotica / Stinking of honey and worse, sulphur' in 'Honey and Sulphur'. The horror here is that of the body, reeking, corrupt, erotic and defiled.

Roman satire was both disgusted and fascinated with the tainted body. Genitals, oral sex, armpits and contaminated mouths were all potent metaphors for spiritual and physical decay, underlying deeper fears of contamination and 'dirty' sexual acts such as fellatio and cunnilingus. 'The foul saliva of a pissed-over whore' as one Roman writer put it, in a fashion a Cradle of Filth fan might be surprised to find familiar, alongside similar morbid fascination with oral rape and violation, degradation, taint and anal sex acts (Richlin 1992: 26–27). Perhaps, then, it is fitting that Gilles is described as being inspired by Roman writers: 'Suetonius and ovid / filled the moonstruck dreams / with the purple of Rome' says a song that reveals his desire to become *The Thirteenth Caesar*. More fittingly still, the Latin word *morbis* was used by Roman authors to signify both disease and perversion, often at the same time (Richlin 1992: 109). For the Romans and the depraved physicality of both Elizabeth Bathory and Gilles De Rais, the two were assuredly the same.

Naturally, one may well accuse both the Romans, whose self-righteousness rivalled their prurience, and Cradle of Filth itself of hypocrisy – showing us horror and yet encouraging us to dwell upon it with morbid joy. After all, while it may shock many, extreme satire and extreme metal are both ultimately forms of vicarious entertainment, like pornography and horror, for all their posturing, but once again Cradle of Filth follows in an established historical tradition. In pre-early modern popular satire and parody, obscene language and open mockery of public figures, both feudal and ecclesiastical, were tolerated and even encouraged as part of festivals and folk traditions. While this provided a pressure valve for social tensions, and a controlled means of expressing and discussing concerns about society itself, it was also openly aware of its own hypocrisy – the satirists freely acknowledged and

even celebrated their being part of the bigger picture they were attacking (Ndalianis 2012: 111). In that sense, Cradle of Filth is gleefully aware of its own vicarious delight in the grotesqueness it portrays, and its own ridiculous nature. The centre spread of the *Cruelty and The Beast* lyrics booklet sums the band up as 'wall-eyed, vain and insane' and the rest of the booklet describes the band's vile (and fictional) extracurricular activities in ever more obscene, lurid and – most significantly – absurd terms:

This libertine poses as a priest, first cataloguing sordid confessions from his flock before showering his seed into their cold dead eyes. Another of his manias is to have a naked nun sit astride a huge crucifix whereupon he plunges his priesthood into her cunt up to the hilt: his thrusts making her clitoris grind upon Christ's beard.

(Cradle of Filth 1998)

Such a self-portrait is so extreme and obscene that its self-parody is evident. Good satire must make its irony self-evident in order for it to be identified as such by its intended audience. Like Swift's *Modest Proposal*, whose satire is obvious the moment it first suggests the eating of surplus children, the intrinsic sarcasm of Cradle of Filth is both its alibi and its license. The band and its audience are both in on the joke and part of it, and it is this that shields them from anything but the most po-faced criticism. It also allows them to say the unsayable – Elizabeth and Gilles are both grotesque products of grotesque societies, whether it is her and her husband's aim 'to tease dynastic union / And beget them further maniacs' or Gilles' 'frightening wealth' and 'his tightening grip on the weak'. Sometimes extremity is required to expose extremity, and Cradle of Filth demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach.

THE CARTOONIST AND OTHER HORRORS

Dani Filth himself has explained this surprising moral agency in his music, pointing out that Bathory felt herself perfectly justified in what she did on account of her social standing and 'divine right' granted through her noble birth (Lee 1999). Gilles De Rais, meanwhile, perversely escaped the worst punishment that society could have visited upon him by repenting and seeking forgiveness, which he receives regardless of his many victims. In other words, *God Speed...* documents how he transgressed against society, using his rank within it to do so, and then exploited its mores and conventions to be accepted back within its spiritual confines, albeit with him still being executed for murder. As Dani described it:

What I loved about it was the whole insidious and insipid roller coaster ride. He starts as a very pious individual and ends up doing the most hideous things imaginable and then he is granted clemency by the church after being excommunicated. He actually begs for forgiveness and mercy. So he goes from one extreme to another.

(MetalSucks 2008)

In an interview I conducted with Dani in 2008, he further described the story in terms of it being a fable:

Well, I think the actual fascination is more than that. Yeah, it's a great morbid story. But it's also a bit of a fairy tale, and I think that's what

we deal in more – Dark Fairy Tales, which are horrific, but they get the point across.

(Hay 2008: 20–21)

In many ways, however, *Cradle of Filth* is closer in tone, content and intent to an ongoing modern satirical tradition – the British political cartoon. In addition to inheriting a fear of the corrupted body, whether it be through plague, venereal disease or the degradation of human flesh, the eighteenth-century cartoons of Gillray and his contemporaries revelled in pure horror, as dehumanized French sans-culottes gorged on human flesh and roast babies on spits in a fashion which would do Gilles De Rais proud (Porter 2003: 241–42) while the British body politic was hacked apart by butchers masquerading as surgeons, representing the political class at its most harmful and venal (Porter 2003: 239–40).

Cradle of Filth remains closest, however, to modern political cartoonists in the British tradition. With its bitter, sardonic wit and love of visceral horror and spectacle in equal measure, the music of *Cradle of Filth* has much in common with Ronald Searle's *St. Trinians* cartoons at their most sadistic. Here the older girls are sexualized in a deliberately repulsive way and the 'head girl'

Figure 1: Steve Bell, 2009.

Figure 2: *Cradle of Filth*, 1998.

has an impressive collection of severed heads. The other girls, meanwhile, do everything from summoning a demon to abolish homework, to forcibly injecting a reluctant sports day athlete with steroids, to full-blown torture on the rack, echoing the antics of De Rais or Bathory with some gusto (Julien 2007: 110–11). Likewise with Ralph Steadman's visions of death, decay, cannibalism, tainted sex and visual extremity, which easily matches *Cradle of Filth* in terms of content (Navasky 2013: 38).

Indeed, in terms of measured obscenity, not to mention shared intent, *Cradle of Filth* shares a tone and approach with surprisingly mainstream cartoonists such as Martin Rowson and Steve Bell. For the former, there is a similar fascination with depravity and corruption at the highest levels (Rowson 2012) mythologized monstrosity in the body politic (Rowson 2013b) and a blurring of the lines between horror and comedy (Rowson 2013a).

For Steve Bell, in his portrayal of Gordon Brown as an enormous baby covered in its own waste – literally 'Spattered In Faeces' – (2007) his conflation of the mythological, horrific and comical (2009) and utter visceral grotesqueness (2013) there is much in common with *Cradle of Filth*'s own transgression – perhaps fittingly there are even direct parallels in themes and motifs:

CONCLUSIONS

Yet perhaps the final word on the matter should go to Dani Filth himself. In an article he wrote for the UK edition of *Metal Hammer* in mid-2014, he adopted the tone of a social critic and concerned citizen – in so doing, the closeted satirist seemed to break cover:

As the father of a teenage daughter (and despite the role reversal of me being the death metal aficionado here), it makes me question the trust I put in those who are supposed to protect our children from the horrors of the world, be it in the classroom, playground or from the man with the brown mac at the school gates. (Davey 2014)

This leads us to one final, intriguing perversity – for all its desire to shock and transgress, has *Cradle of Filth* been a secret moralist project all along? If so, it is not the first such enterprise to dive into the filth and corruption of the world to draw our attention to it, but it would certainly be one of the most vivid and distinctive.

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