

Bloody Rain and Thorny Roses. Gender Coding in Thrash and Hair Metal

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Abstract: In the mid 1980s two new subgenres of heavy metal were created in the USA: hair/glam and thrash metal. Hair metal was mostly played by men who were perceived as effeminate – something which seemingly goes against metal's emphasis on masculinity (and implied homophobia). Thrash metal distanced itself from its rival by a more masculine visual code, a more aggressive sound, but also with the choice of words and subjects in their lyrics. By comparing early albums by some of the most famous bands of both subgenres it is possible to point out the most common supposedly 'feminine' and 'masculine' keywords, themes and images which are embedded in their albums, as well as different strategies of constructing 'masculinity'.

Keywords: heavy metal, lyrics, gender stereotypes, masculinity, misogyny

While heavy metal was still a very vaguely defined genre during most of the 1970s, until the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWoBHM) at the end of the decade, in the 1980s it didn't just enjoy mainstream success on both sides of the Atlantic but started to splinter into subgenres. This trend of dividing heavy metal into ever more strictly defined sub- and sub-subgenres is ongoing still. While many bands themselves don't care for such labels or reject them as they don't want to limit themselves creatively and therefore rather refer to themselves as just (heavy) metal or use the even broader terms (hard) rock or rock 'n' roll, many journalists and fans argue in magazines and on the internet about what kind of heavy metal a band is playing and even use terms to anachronistically describe bands which existed before those subgenres were invented.

But there is one major split which had a huge impact on heavy metal music. By the mid 1980s the genre drifted apart with “softer” bands, which had more in common with album orientated rock bands like *Journey* on the one hand, and “harder” bands, which were more influenced by the NWoBHM and took its sound to new extremes, on the other. The most prominent representatives of this new development were hair metal (in the USA usually referred to as glam metal) and thrash metal, which were both very successful during the second half of the 1980s¹.

The two were seen as opposites, rivals even, especially in California and in particular Los Angeles as it was the centre of the glam scene which was intrinsically tied to the Los Angeles’ Sunset Strip, while many thrash metal bands too came from California, such as *Metallica*, *Megadeth*, *Slayer*, *Testament*, and *Exodus*. They set out to deliberately distinct themselves from the less heavy and effeminate glam metal, which initially gained bigger attention by the mainstream media (like MTV²) and attracted a much larger female following. As documented in many interviews with hair and thrash metal musicians, the latter despised the former not only for their more “poppy” music but also for their effeminate appearance, which often provoked and still provokes negative comments, which quite often reveal some homophobic sentiments. Probably the best known and most often repeated³ quote comes from *Megadeth*’s frontman Dave Mustaine, who was a guitarist in *Metallica* until 1983; when asked: “What

¹ Many of these bands were already formed in the early 1980s but most debut albums were released in the mid 1980s. By the early 1990s heavy metal – and hair metal in particular – lost its mainstream popularity.

² MTV also played some videos by thrash metal bands, especially in the programme *Headbangers Ball*.

³ Usually shortened to “(glam is) gay L.A. metal” or “gay L.A. music”; one can find it in the comments on a vast number of YouTube videos of or about hair metal bands.

you think about glam rock⁴?” he replied: “To me, glam rock stands for..., glam means gay L.A. music”⁵. In an episode of *Heavy: The Story of Metal* he again pointed out that he thinks “Glam stands for gay L.A. metal” and added: “I mean if you have to dress up like a chick on stage to get people to come and check you out then you've gotta ask yourself, first off, you've got unresolved issues [...]”⁶. Thrash metal’s Big Four have been outspoken about their dislike of bands, which were considered glam. “God, we hated those bands, we hated *Quiet Riot*, and *Poison*, and *Warrant*, and *Bon Jovi*, an *Mötley Crüe*, I mean hated those bands!”⁷, recalls *Anthrax*’s guitarist Scott Ian, a memory shared by *Metallica* drummer Lars Ulrich: “We’ve despised it. Everything at that time was very black and white. Either you loved it or [shows middle finger]”⁸. In an anecdote Ulrich tells about one night in 1982, where they had been standing in front of the Troubadour at the Sunset Strip, wearing *Iron Maiden* T-Shirts, and being drunk he shouted: “Fuck *Mötley Crüe*!” when he spotted Nikki Sixx and Tommy Lee from *Mötley Crüe*, which lead to Sixx chasing after him, but luckily he “could run faster than him in his sixteen inch platform boots”⁹.

Hair metal bands were aware of the hatred from thrash metal musicians, who despised them for being too soft and too

⁴ The term glam rock usually refers to artists from the early 1970s, mainly from the UK, like David Bowie, Mick Ronson, *T. Rex*, *Roxy Music*, *Sweet* or *Slade*, but in the United States they were called glitter rock. In this question the term glam rock refers to glam metal musicians (calling them rock it is either a hint at their lack of heaviness or just a broader term used instead of metal, as heavy metal can be seen as a subgenre of hard rock or rock).

⁵ The footage features in various documentaries such as *VH1’s Behind the Music* episode on *Megadeth* (2001).

⁶ *Heavy: The Story of Metal. Seek & Destroy* (2006).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

effeminate; *Poison's* drummer Rikki Rockett: “You know, the really heavy bands hated us, which we thought was cool. We probably got into close to thirty street fights. People didn't know what to make of it, people either want to fuck us or fight us. And I'm proud of that.”¹⁰

The female/male dichotomy seems to be the main characteristic which manifests itself in all aspects of these two heavy metal subgenres, like their visual codes, the music itself but also in things such as band names, album and song titles, and the choice of words and subjects of their lyrics. The importance of masculinity in heavy metal has been addressed in literally every work on the history of heavy metal music,¹¹ as it is perceived as its key element, while the violation of masculine conventions by hair metal is addressed whenever this subgenre or its rivalry with thrash metal gets discussed in documentaries¹² as well as in book chapters or paragraphs¹³. Linking genres to gender isn't limited to (heavy metal) music, it can also be found in literature¹⁴ and films¹⁵. In each case genres associated with things such as emotions, sentimentality, romance are perceived as female, while action, adventure and violence oriented genres are perceived as male. Hißnauer and Klein point out that actions, gestures, bodies or language aren't *a priori* masculine or feminine, but they have

¹⁰ *Metal Evolution: Glam Metal* (2011).

¹¹ E.g. in books by Walser (1993), Weinstein (1991), Roccor (1998), Kahn-Harris (2007), as well as in documentaries such as *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005) or *Heavy Metal: Louder Than Life* (2006).

¹² Such as *Get Thrashed* (2006), *Metal Evolution: Glam Metal* (2011) or *Behind the Music: Poison* (1999).

¹³ As can be found in Weinstein (1991), Walser (1993) and Roccor (1998). Glam metal on its own has so far been neglected as a subject of scholarly articles and books.

¹⁴ Discussed e.g. by Sodeman (2015).

¹⁵ See Braidt (2008).

masculine or feminine connotations.¹⁶ Gender identities are constructs, the results of an ongoing complex process. Butler explained: “Indeed, to understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life. [...] When the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that a subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity.”¹⁷ Connell stated that the configuration of gender practice guarantees the dominant position of men and subordination of women,¹⁸ which is also evident in music where rock is seen as superior to pop, as the latter is seen as a feminine genre. Heavy metal musicians who play lighter music and have a larger female fan base are discredited as posers – which has a lot to do with its feminine connotations.¹⁹ Marginal members of subcultures are more likely to be female as “Core’ membership [...] is based upon the greatest degree of subcultural commitment and the most severe resistance to the dominant order. [...] the marginal members are those who maintain a closer connection to dominant institutions, most notably the home and parental family, and express an interest in image as opposing to ideology [...]”.²⁰ The effeminate hair metal

¹⁶ Hißnauer and Klein (2002), p. 21. They have also published a list of stereotypically masculine or feminine characteristics, p. 26.

¹⁷ Butler (1990), p. 198.

¹⁸ Connell (1995), p. 77.

¹⁹ Female metal fans too are sometimes seen as “posers” and in order to be taken seriously they have to look and behave like ‘one of the boys’. See Roccor (1998), p. 117 and p. 189. Weinstein even claims that the metal style is always male and females either dress like the boys (but when the wearer is female it doesn’t have the same meaning) or they “try to emulate the bitch goddesses they see in their heroes videos”. See Weinstein, p. 134.

²⁰ Muggleton, p. 158.

too is accused of being more interested in image than ideology and thus being “fake” metal as opposed to thrash metal which supposedly doesn’t care about the image but is all about the true (masculine) spirit of heavy metal. These clichés are constantly repeated and enforced, even in documentaries and scholarly works which on the other hand question heavy metal’s masculinity and even the strict dichotomy of femininity and masculinity.²¹ The books by Weinstein and Walser (both published in the early 1990s) are still the most important works dealing with heavy metal and gender. Since then several books and articles on heavy metal have been published but none of them had the same impact. Documentaries have proved to be a more popular medium to discuss heavy metal, even for scholars like Sam Dunn. And although the male-female dichotomy of thrash and hair metal is frequently pointed out and acknowledged, so far there has been no comparative study on this subject.²²

This article is going to look at the most common supposedly “feminine” and “masculine” themes, images, and keywords which are embedded in albums of bands from both subgenres, as well as their different strategies of constructing masculinity. Sonic and visual levels interact with words; all of them are gender codified and help to convey the artist's image. A closer examination will reveal whether hair metal is effeminate through and through and thrash all masculine, or whether one can argue that despite being perceived as a feminine subgenre, hair metal is at its core more misogynist (as a means to restore its masculinity) than thrash.

It isn’t possible to deal with every single album by every hair and thrash metal band in this article, therefore only a small

²¹ E.g. by Walser (1991) and in *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey* (2006).

²² The article by Howe and Friedman (2014) on sex and gender in the 1980s heavy metal scene too doesn't deal with it.

but hopefully representative sample will be analyzed. All songs are from albums released in 1986 and 1987 respectively, and are by some of these subgenres most famous American²³ bands. The selected thrash metal albums are *Master of Puppets* (1986) by *Metallica*, *Reign in Blood* (1986) by *Slayer*, *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?* (1986) by *Megadeth*, and *Among the Living* (1987) by *Anthrax*. These bands are also known among heavy metal fans as the Big Four²⁴ and the chosen albums are considered classics of the genre. *Look What the Cat Dragged In* (1986) by *Poison*, *Night Songs* (1986) by *Cinderella*, *Slippery When Wet* (1986) by *Bon Jovi*, and *Girls, Girls, Girls* (1987) by *Mötley Crüe* are going to represent hair metal. *Poison* and *Cinderella* are two of the most iconic hair metal bands and these albums their very successful debuts,²⁵ *Slippery When Wet* was *Bon Jovi's* first number one album on the US album charts, while the album by *Mötley Crüe* reached number two²⁶.

²³ Both genres were particularly popular in the United States and have their roots there. Hair metal in its purest embodiment was almost limited to the USA, except for very few exceptions such as *Tigertailz* from the UK. Other non-American bands occasionally associated with this subgenre either predate it (but have been influences, most notably *Hanoi Rocks* from Finland) and/or don't share their visual appearance (like *Def Leppard* from the UK or *Europe* from Sweden). While most classic thrash metal bands hail from the USA as well, there have been popular trash metal bands from other countries during the 1980s as well, especially from Canada (*Annihilator*, and to some extent *Anvil* and *Voivod*) and Germany (*Sodom*, *Kreator*, *Destruction*).

²⁴ A name given to them back in the day as they were the four most successful thrash metal bands. This term is still frequently used by fans, journalists and in documentaries such as *Metal Evolution: Thrash* (2011).

²⁵ Both reached number three in the US Billboard album charts. All information on chart positions is retrieved from <http://www.allmusic.com>.

²⁶ It wasn't their most successful album though, as it was succeeded in 1988 by the number one album *Dr. Feelgood*.

Music

The most important aspect of heavy metal is of the music itself. As already pointed out, hair metal is a softer subgenre, which some people nowadays don't even want to recognize as heavy metal, just as hard rock, as it is usually rather very melodic and upbeat. Typical songs like *Talk Dirty To Me* by *Poison* or *Nothin' For Nothin'* by *Cinderella* feature a sing-along chorus, while one can only shout "Master! Master!" during *Metallica's Master of Puppets* or it is even impossible to do something like that with songs like *Criminally Insane* by *Slayer*. It is also not unusual for a hair metal song to feature keyboards and some acts, like *Bon Jovi*, even have a keyboard player. The more pop-orientated nature of their songs is one key factor to the bands' commercial success. Not only did the albums by those bands peak higher in the album charts,²⁷ they even had hit singles in the Billboard Hot 100. *You Give Love a Bad Name* and *Livin' on a Prayer* both topped the charts, while Bon Jovi's other single release from the album, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, reached number seven, *Cinderella's* songs *Nobody's Fool* reached number thirteen, *Poison* hit number nine and thirteen with *Talk Dirty To Me* and *I Won't Forget You* respectively, and *Mötley Crüe's Girls, Girls, Girls* peaked at number twelve. Not one single release from the now classic thrash metal albums made the top 100. Gender attributions are made to these two subgenres of heavy metal partly based on the nature of the music. Because of the use of elements such as the dominance of major scales, sing-along choruses, usually rather high pitched melodic vocals, the use of instruments like keyboards and the thus more cheery and upbeat sound of the

²⁷ *Master of Puppets* reached number 29, *Among the Living* 62, *Peace Sells... Who's Buying?* 76, and *Reign in Blood* only 94 in the Billboard album charts.

songs, hair metal often gets likened to pop with which it shares many of these typical elements. Bobby “Blitz” Ellsworth, singer of thrash metal band *Overkill* says about the dominant sound of heavy metal in the 1980s: “And then metal got a new kind of moniker and it was more of, really what it was was reinvented pop and I think that it was almost an insult to a lot of us who grew up on *Black Sabbath* and *Judas Priest* and I suppose the later coming *Iron Maiden* etc., etc.”²⁸. Many “lighter” metal bands had their biggest success with acoustic or power ballads, like *Here I Go Again* (1987) by *Whitesnake* or *Every Rose Has Its Thorn* (1988) by *Poison*, both number one hits which sounded more like Bonnie Tyler’s *Total Eclipse of the Heart* (1983) or *I Want To Know What Love Is* (1984) by *Foreigner* than metal ballads like *Victim of Changes* (1976) by *Judas Priest*. According to Roccor such ballads marked a turning point towards pop music and thus also femininity.²⁹

As Robert Walser pointed out in his book *Running With the Devil*, virtuosity is one key aspect of how masculinity is construed in heavy metal music. It “often stages fantasies of masculine virtuosity and control. Musically, heavy metal articulates a dialectic of controlling power and transcendent freedom. Metal songs usually include impressive technical and rhetorical feats on the electric guitar, counterposed with an experience of power and control that is built up through vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion, and sheer volume of bass and drums”³⁰. He concludes: “It is not only lyrics or visual imagery but the music itself that constructs gendered experiences”³¹. This goes back to old clichés about men being

²⁸ *Get Thrashed* (2006).

²⁹ Roccor (1998), p. 178.

³⁰ Walser (1993), p. 108.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

more rational and having greater technical and mathematical skills than women,³² and to express them by showing off great virtuosic skills on an instrument – especially the guitar – or with one's voice is hence considered a proof of masculinity. Hair metal is known and discredited for putting “less emphasis on complexity and virtuosity”³³ and thus perceived as a less masculine form of heavy metal music. The generalisation that glam metal bands were more concerned about their looks than their sound is probably the most important reason why there is still a lot of prejudice against all bands associated with hair metal and the contempt for the entire subgenre. There might be bands who seem to fit the cliché, like *Poison* where even in their VH1 documentary nobody praises their musicianship, on the contrary, photographer Ross Halfin says their songs are “crap” and they “couldn't play”, while music journalist Dave DiMartino calls them a “fake dopey band” which isn't “original in the slightest”.³⁴ But not only were individual talents sometimes overlooked, bands were also restricted in their creativity as they were under pressure from labels to stick to a formula which already proved to be successful. The late singer of *Warrant*, Jani Lane, said he was told that their album (which was intended to be called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) didn't have an obvious single and that they should write something like *Aerosmith's Love In An Elevator* (1989). So he wrote the song *Cherry Pie* (1990) which became a top ten hit and subsequently everything (including the album) got called and marketed as *Cherry Pie*.³⁵ Lane lamented: “[...] and my legacy is *Cherry Pie*, everything

³² Roccor too claims that technicality is linked to masculinity, as women – due to the nature of their upbringing – usually lack technical skills. See Roccor (1998), p. 177.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁴ *Behind the Music: Poison* (1999).

³⁵ *Heavy: The Story of Metal. Looks That Kill* (2006).

about me is *Cherry Pie*, I'm the *Cherry Pie* guy, I could shoot myself in the fucking head for writing that song”.

Thrash metal was perceived as the rocky – and thus male – ying to hair metal’s poppy yang. There is still this myth that rock music is mostly for boys while girls prefer pop and that the two are opposites. Unlike hair metal, thrash metal back in the 1980s usually didn’t feature ballads or keyboards, and while hair metal bands sometimes only have one guitarist (like *Mötley Crüe* and *Bon Jovi*) thrash metal bands usually have two guitarists (like all four examples in this article), which gives the guitar sound more power and makes guitar “duels” between the two players possible. Instruments themselves are also gender coded. Guitars are male instruments with a “female”³⁶ body and a phallic neck, with which some musicians like to pose and play on stage, while keyboards are considered a female instrument and “the use of a feminine-coded instrument in the context of heavy metal evokes the spectre of homosexuality”³⁷.

Thrash metal bands didn’t want to have anything to do with those supposedly feminine sonic aspects associated with hair metal; instead they wanted to create something which is “pure in the line of heavy metal”³⁸. As British music journalist Malcolm Dome put it, this was a “new generation, who wanted serious, straight-forward, undiluted metal”³⁹. They took influences from British heavy metal bands as well as from (hardcore) punk⁴⁰ and

³⁶ Even a Gibson Flying-V or other guitars with angled and pointy instead of curvy figures can be seen and used as female bodies, which is underlined by acts like when *Judas Priest's* K.K. Downing used to lick it between its “legs” thus evoking images of performing cunnilingus.

³⁷ Walser (1993), p. 130.

³⁸ Scott Ian in *VH1 Behind the Music: Anthrax* (2002).

³⁹ *Get Thrashed* (2006).

⁴⁰ The NWoBHM had already included influences from the punk scene.

pushed them even further. When it emerged, thrash metal was considered “the heaviest, fastest music you could hear”⁴¹. Scott Ian said: “We enjoyed to go fast, we wanted to go faster” and *Slayer’s* Kerry King used to listen to hard rock and heavy metal thinking for the most part “That ain’t angry enough”.⁴² This more aggressive and usually very fast kind of metal wasn’t for everybody, as Kirk Hammett of *Metallica* recollects, there were people thinking it was too much and complaining that it didn’t sound like *Van Halen* or *Rush*.⁴³ And although thrash metal was perceived as the harder and masculine counterpart to glam metal, it wasn’t the most extreme subgenre of heavy metal which emerged in the mid to late 1980s, as they also gave birth to subgenres like speed metal⁴⁴, black metal⁴⁵, death metal and grindcore. British grindcore pioneers *Napalm Death* were probably the fastest band of the time. Bill Steer, who back then was their guitarist,⁴⁶ remarked: “I mean not even *Slayer*, they are considered to be the most extreme, you know, whatever, thrash metal band and there are certain speeds they won’t exceed ever. You know, it’s kind of like they’ve set themselves certain limits and they are never gonna, you know, I think *Necrophobic* is probably their fastest track, I don’t think they’ll get faster than

⁴¹ Chris Jericho in *Get Thrashed* (2006).

⁴² *Get Thrashed* (2006).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ It is a very vaguely defined genre. The term back then was – and occasionally still is – applied to thrash metal bands (even used almost synonymously).

⁴⁵ Tough musically not that extreme (in terms of fastness), this subgenre, which was very popular in Norway, celebrates more traditional, archaic images of masculinity – see Richard and Grünwald (2011), p. 43-44 – and is also linked to some actual acts of violence.

⁴⁶ He was only in the band for a few years in the late 1980s, while he was also in the death metal band *Carcass* which he founded in the mid 1980s.

that.”⁴⁷ And indeed thrash metal was very fast but never took it to such extremes.

There are also differences in the vocal styles, while many hair metal vocalists tend to sing in a melodic way, with high pitched (like *Mötley Crüe*'s Vince Neil) to slightly raspy voices (like *Cinderella*'s Tom Keifer), thrash metal musicians often tend to have less melodic, aggressive sounding singers or shouters, who can have high pitched, snarly voices (like *Megadeth*'s Dave Mustaine) or a deep, manly voice (like *Metallica*'s James Hetfield). But there are also exceptions like *Anthr*'s Joey Belladonna who is more like a classic rock singer and very melodic, which some critics seem to consider too effeminate and unsuitable for this kind of music.⁴⁸

Looks

Just based on music alone it is sometimes hard to tell whether a band is hair metal. The more radio friendly pop-orientated rock sound has been present before the emergence of hair metal and during the late 1980s some bands adapted or experimented with this sound for a brief period, like British heavy metal godfathers *Judas Priest* on their 1986 album *Turbo*. The crucial criteria are the band members' looks, and the most important hints are in the subgenres names: hair metal and glam metal respectively. Although the vast majority of heavy metal musicians back then sported long hair, these bands are known for having really big, coiffeured hair. They use backcombing and lots of hairspray, sometimes also perms (which led to the occasionally used derogative term “poodle rockers”), and some of them

⁴⁷ *Arena: Heavy Metal* (1989).

⁴⁸ Comments like this can be found in the comments section of various online videos and articles.

bleached or dyed their hair. They tried to achieve a desired glamorous look by putting on make-up and wearing shiny and glittering fabrics or other things which are usually associated with women. Musicians like *Dokken's* George Lynch acknowledges that they were a “semi-glam L.A. metal band”, while Slash of *Guns 'n' Roses* – who in the beginning wore make-up and had backcombed hair and had a hit with their softer song *Sweet Child O' Mine* (1988) – thinks that the L.A. glam scene were a lot of posers and *Guns 'n' Roses* “were sort of the antithesis to that” although they are frequently put in the glam metal category themselves.⁴⁹ *Mötley Crüe* pioneered the glam look which they perfected on their 1985 album *Theatre of Pain* (which also contains the ballad *Home Sweet Home* which became their biggest chart hit). Previously they had combined more traditional metal studded red and black leather outfits with high heeled boots and make-up, a look which was quite unique at the time,⁵⁰ now they deliberately went for the opposite: “lace and frilly stuff”⁵¹. *Poison* knew what they wanted right from the start, they wanted” to be the most glamorous, the most outrageous, the most sleazy”⁵² of them all and stuck to their sound and image throughout their career. *Cinderella* on the other hand started out as the full glam metal package but on the following albums gradually toned down their look and changed their music and integrated a more bluesy, sometimes also country-style sound, which also gave more prominence to Tom Keifer’s voice. *Bon Jovi* might now be considered a hard rock band, but started out as a hair metal band before they changed their look. As Robert Walser states, the glam metal look is “rebellion against what men are supposed to be like,

⁴⁹ Both quotes from *Metal Evolution: Glam Metal* (2011).

⁵⁰ *VH1 Driven: Rise and Rise of Mötley Crüe* (2003).

⁵¹ *Mötley Crüe's* singer Vince Neil in *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005).

⁵² *Poison's* singer Bret Michaels in *VH1 Behind the Music: Poison* (1999).

grabbing on to signs that are associated with women, make-up, long hair, clothes that are colourful and flashy and everything, that becomes your hypermasculine identity to look like a woman” because “having the guts to be glam is the most masculine thing that you can do in this world” and “It shows us, so many of the things we take to be natural and unchanging and just the way things are, are not just the way things are”.⁵³

For many people this violation of the current norm of masculinity is still unacceptable, and thrash metal musicians were among those who disapproved of hair metals gender-bending. *Slayer's* guitarist Kerry King states: “I’ve never understood it. It seems like all the guys did everything they could to look more feminine. I come from a family where men are men and women are women, and there ain’t no middle ground.” Thrash metal musicians were the antidote to glam metal’s “pretty boys”. Though in fact, there wasn’t that much difference between them, and to jump to the conclusion that glam was played by pretty boys, who relied simply on their looks to attract a large female fan base and therefore also had a lot of willing groupies, while trash was played by ugly guys for a bunch of other ugly guys, is not only a common misconception but plainly untrue. As heavy metal was still a rather fresh genre, both subgenres consisted of mainly slim or athletic young men⁵⁴ with long hair – the difference was in the packaging. Thrash metal musicians were not that concerned about looking telegenic and definitely didn’t want to be associated with the “unmanly” looking glam metal musicians and their music. As *Metallica* singer and guitarist James Hetfield says to the

⁵³ *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005).

⁵⁴ There are also a few female hair metal musicians and bands like *Vixen*, but no notable female thrash metal bands and very few individual women, like Sabina Classen of *Holy Moses*. Heavy metal was (and to this day still mostly is) dominated by men.

audience in some old live footage: “If you are here to see spandex and big hair, you are in the wrong place.”

Some argue that the key to glam metal’s success with women lies in the musicians’ effeminate looks, as some claim all women have bisexual tendencies, they feel less threatened by their softer and more woman-like appearance, or because women feel like they have something in common with them as they could talk about things like hair.⁵⁵ These assumptions sound pretty naive and haven’t been verified by any studies. They also neglect two important factors as to why women prefer hair metal and its musicians. Firstly, because of its more pop-orientated nature it is more accessible to them than the thrash metal, as, as a result of a long history of gender constructions in our society, girls are traditionally brought up to be the “fairer sex” and have female qualities, be interested in female things and surround themselves with things which are typically female. The slow but steady rise of female heavy metal musicians and fans (also of harder subgenres) is undoubtedly linked to the progress of women’s liberation, which finally allows them to embrace things which were previously considered *tabu* as they were considered unfeminine. Secondly, one mustn’t understate the influence of the media. Not only were hair metal bands better suited to be marketed to girls for the aforementioned reason, their flashy visual appearance was more suitable for the media which wanted to catch the viewers attention and thus these bands were marketed in magazines and music videos as heartthrobs or desirable bad boys with a sense for the latest fashion. As pointed out in documentaries like *Metal Evolution*, MTV in particular embraced glam metal and when MTV started to show glam metal videos the movement really

⁵⁵ See interviews with women in *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years* (1988) or with Deena Weinstein in *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey* (2005).

started to skyrocket.⁵⁶ Robert Walser states “Glam was MTV ready because of the emphasis on spectacle that already existed in the live concert”. Their music videos often showed a combination of performance footage (on a stage, in front of a screen or in some fictional setting) of the flashy musicians, shots of the audience with focus on good-looking women, other depictions of sexy females, scenes of parties, and are occasionally placed in a fictitious story which forms the framework. Thrash metal music videos on the other hand weren’t just rarer, the sole focus of them is usually on the performing band, with no big spectacle around them, and only occasionally incorporates other footage usually depicting negative or unsettling real or fictional images, like the news footage used in *Megadeth’s Peace Sells* video, or when *Metallica* finally released their first music video *One* (1988) it contained scenes from the disturbing 1971 anti-war film *Johnny Got His Gun*.

Cover art

Perhaps the most important visual medium of heavy metal is its record’s cover art, which not only serves as a basis for merchandise like t-shirts, but also has to convey an image of the band and their music to reach its designated target audience. The record cover captures the artist’s public persona and includes clues as to how they want people to see and interpret them and their music.⁵⁷ Each subgenre has its own specific ideology and iconography⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ *Metal Evolution: Glam Metal* (2011).

⁵⁷ Zuch (2012), p. 72.

⁵⁸ Some of the most important themes are summed up in Roccor (1998), p. 208-215.

Poison's cover of *Look What the Cat Dragged* features four close-up photographs of the band members on a white background with black, blue, and pink circles with soft edges which cause the colours to fade into each other in the middle of the background. The pictures of the band members are rhombic, which makes them look more dynamic than static square shapes. The album title is spread equally around the left, bottom, and right edge, while the band name appears on the top edge and overlaps with the two top pictures. The band name is written in green, is italicised and looks more like calligraphy due to its letters consisting of curved strokes. The most eye catching thing on this cover though are the musicians' close-up portraits, which show the men with a flawless complexion and lots of make-up on their faces. The band knew exactly what kind of look they wanted, as they went up to the photographer with magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Cosmopolitan* and their pictures ended up looking like those in these glossy magazines.⁵⁹ The whole cover looks very colourful and dynamic and is a classic example of glam metal cover art.

Pretty much the same can be said about the cover of *Night Songs* by *Cinderella*, which portrays the band standing in a street setting that frames them on all sides, while lilac smoke is behind them. The whole scene, except for the band, is tinted in some pinkish-purple light, which matches the band's name which is at the top centre, again with some frilly curves but also some spikes at the top. Its colour fades from left to right from a dark purple to a pale lilac but the letters also feature white edging. The album title at the centre bottom is white too and it can also be found in the band members clothes' colour code which is mainly black and white with some reddish accessories. They wear tight spandex trousers, animal prints, lace, frills and (sparkly) scarves, combined

⁵⁹ *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005).

with some jewellery, make-up and big hair. Again there is almost nothing masculine about this cover.

Mötley Crüe's cover for *Girls, Girls, Girls* again features a street setting, this time a less stagey and more real, dirty street, with wet puddles and litter. It shows two of the band members in the middle sitting on motorcycles, while the other two stand beside them on the edges. The whole cover is in black and white with only some blue light coming through a door, and the red band name (still with its masculine metal-umlauts⁶⁰) and album title kept in the style of neon lighting as seen on strip clubs and similar venues. That they are indeed in front of a strip club becomes apparent on the back cover which shows a slight variation of the picture and contains a stripper standing in the doorway. Although the band is wearing make-up, big hair and some feminine elements in their clothing, they go for a decidedly more masculine look, with elements like a studded black leather vest and accessories like motorcycles and a scantily clad sexy stripper to underline their virility.⁶¹

Bon Jovi's cover for *Slippery When Wet* seems rather unspectacular, as it features a wet surface with black background that looks like a glass window with condensation, and it looks like as if someone has written the album title with its finger on this surface. Apart from that it only features the band name at the top in red and white letters. But this isn't the originally intended image for the cover which had been banned.⁶² It was supposed to feature a close-up of a busty woman's torso, who's wearing a shirt with the album title on it which is ripped in some places and

⁶⁰ Used most prominently by *Motörhead*, but also other bands like thrash metal band *Läüz Rockit*.

⁶¹ Roccor too thinks that the motorcycles and scantily clad woman serve as manifestations of their manliness. See Roccor (1998), p. 210.

⁶² *Banned Album Covers*.

displays her figure. The band can be seen on a picture on the back cover, which shows them at the end of a gig, wearing spandex, animal prints, scarves other typical glam metal elements. It is usual for hair metal covers to show either the band or a good-looking woman on the front cover, and a band picture or picture of individual band members on the back cover, like these four examples do. They tend to use light or gay colours and “girly” flourish typefaces.

As can be seen in the following examples, thrash metal albums usually don't feature the band on the cover, instead band pictures can be found either on the back or on the inner sleeve, and no pictures of sexy women. They often use either dark or very intense colours, and their band logos⁶³ usually have a very graphic structure.

The *Master of Puppets* cover by *Metallica* shows a symmetrical⁶⁴, centre perspective image of a graveyard with crosses and the sun setting behind it in the red horizon, while hands in the top corners of the picture hold strings which lead down to the graves. The band name appears more like an image than typography due to its three-dimensional, sculptural look and it is located on the top between the two hands. The band can be seen on the back cover in live photos, as well as a band photo where they just stand in front of a bleak background, unlike *Poison* on their back photo where they pose all made-up in front of a lilac and pink background.

⁶³ With thrash metal bands – and indeed also most other heavy metal bands since the late 1970s (including hair metal bands like *Poison* and *Cinderella*) – the names usually always look the same, like some sort of corporative brand, while some hair metal bands (like *Mötley Crüe* and *Bon Jovi*) don't always use the same typeface).

⁶⁴ Except for one helmet on a cross.

The band name on *Megadeth's Peace Sells... But Whose Buying?* again has a three-dimensional look due to the use of shadows which also helps to make it look golden which fits the cover's warm colour scheme, as the image, which depicts the band's mascot Vic Rattlehead leaning over a "for sales" sign in front of the destroyed UN building in New York, which is kept in purple, red and orange tones.

Slayer's cover for *Reign in Blood* on the other hand mostly uses muddy dark greenish colours and black with some deep red. Singer Tom Araya says about the image: "*Reign in Blood* is basically a horror story about how the evil one, Satan, plans to rule by living off the blood of his enemies, all his betrayers are impaled in this cave, you know [...] they are like impaled on this cave and the blood drips down and its shaping him and it's making him stronger, and that he'll return and reign in blood."⁶⁵ While the grey album title is located discretely in the bottom right corner, the bright red band name (in a golden circle on top of a pentagram consisting of four swords) sticks out on the top left corner. Again the band can be seen on the back cover, partly making aggressive faces, pulling hair and holding cans of beer.

The cover of *Among the Living* by *Anthrax* shows a dark wall of same-looking figures, all with their heads lowered and among them stands a man who lifts his hat and reveals two horns while his other hand seems to give a blessing. He is said to be Rev. Henry Kane from the movie *Poltergeist II* (1986).⁶⁶ He is surrounded by a yellow light or aura, which ties in with the pale yellow band logo on the top and the album title at the bottom of the picture. The band photo on the back shows them casually posing at a subway station, mostly sporting typical thrash metal fashion, consisting of tight jeans, t-shirts, leather jackets and (white) sneakers.

⁶⁵ *Arena: Heavy Metal* (1989).

⁶⁶ *Audiobiography: Anthrax. Among the Living* (2012).

One look at any of these covers allows a fan to immediately recognise the bands' style of heavy metal. These covers capture the female/male dichotomy which is reinforced by the choice of colours, fonts and images. All of these elements work together in order to create a product which is either also deliberately aimed at females audience or represent the bands as purveyors of heavy metal, which means the exclusion of most feminine elements as they are not perceived as metal.

Names and lyrics

The split of themes evidenced in the covers can also be found in the names and lyrics.

While only few hair metal bands' names are as feminine as *Cinderella*, thrash metal bands tended to choose names which are either literarily very metal (*Metallica*) or deal with heavy – and thus masculine – issues such as death (*Megadeth*), murder (*Slayer*) or a lethal disease (*Anthrax*). Album titles (often taken from song titles) too echo the focus on serious, negative issues or horror scenarios in thrash metal, though some, like *Master of Puppets* or *Among the Living*, only get its full effect in combination with the album cover. Hair metal bands don't deal with such topics; they are mainly preoccupied with one subject: *Girls, Girls, Girls*. Slippery *When Wet* could be innocently interpreted as referring to a wet floor, but it could also be cheap sexual innuendo. Apparently, Jon Bon Jovi was inspired by strippers when he came up with the title, and it refers to girls soaping themselves up naked in the shower.⁶⁷ *Look What the Cat Dragged In* can be seen as a neutral tongue-in-cheek self-

⁶⁷ *VH1 Behind the Music: Bon Jovi* (2000).

referential title,⁶⁸ while *Night Songs* could be either masculine or feminine, as night is a time for romance but also of danger lurking in the dark or loneliness, which is pretty much invalidated by its cover.

The track lists on the albums are as follows:

<i>Look What the Cat Dragged In:</i>	<i>Night Songs:</i>
<i>Cry Tough</i>	<i>Night Songs</i>
<i>I Want Action</i>	<i>Shake Me</i>
<i>I Won't Forget You</i>	<i>Nobody's Fool</i>
<i>Play Dirty</i>	<i>Nothin' for Nothin'</i>
<i>Look What the Cat Dragged In</i>	<i>Once Around the Ride</i>
<i>Talk Dirty To Me</i>	<i>Hell on Wheels</i>
<i>Want Some, Need Some</i>	<i>Somebody Save Me</i>
<i>Blame It on You</i>	<i>In From the Outside</i>
<i>#1 Bad Boy</i>	<i>Push, Push</i>
<i>Let Me Go to the Show</i>	<i>Back Home Again</i>
<i>Slippery When Wet:</i>	<i>Girls, Girls, Girls:</i>
<i>Let It Rock</i>	<i>Wild Side</i>
<i>You Give Love A Bad Name</i>	<i>Girls, Girls, Girls</i>
<i>Livin' on a Prayer</i>	<i>Dancing on Glass</i>
<i>Social Disease</i>	<i>Bad Boy Boogie</i>
<i>Wanted Dead or Alive</i>	<i>Nona</i>
<i>Raise Your Hands</i>	<i>Five Years Dead</i>
<i>Without Love</i>	<i>All in the Name of...</i>
<i>I'd Die for You</i>	<i>Sumthin' for Nuthin'</i>
<i>Never Say Goodbye</i>	<i>You're All I Need</i>

⁶⁸ A 1996 CD reissue (Disky DC 870712) contains a quote by Bret Michaels in the liner notes: "The first album was meant to shock people. We didn't want guys in suits and ties buying our records. We were like the *Sex Pistols*, only we wanted to be shocking and glamorous, not shocking and ugly".

Wild in the Streets

Jailhouse Rock (live)

Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?

Master of Puppets

Wake Up Dead

Battery

The Conjuring

Master of Puppets

Peace Sells

The Thing That Should Not Be

Devils Island

Welcome Home (Sanitarium)

Good Mourning/Black Friday

Disposable Heroes

Bad Omen

Leper Messiah

I Ain't Superstitious

Orion

My Last Words

Damage, Inc.

Among the Living:

Reign in Blood:

Among the Living

Angel of Death

Caught in a Mosh

Piece by Piece

I Am the Law

Necrophobic

Efilnikufesin (N.F.L.)

Altar of Sacrifice

A Skeleton in the Closet

Jesus Saves

Indians

Criminally Insane

One World

Reborn

A.D.I./Horror of it All

Epidemic

Imitation of Life

Postmortem

Raining Blood

On the whole, the titles give a fairly good impression of the songs' themes, although there are some misleading ones, such as *Social Disease* which doesn't contain any social criticism instead it's about love as the lyrics reveal:

"You can't start a fire without a spark
But there's something that I guarantee
You can't hide when infection starts
Because love is a social disease"

Love in all its variations, from heartbreak to “true love” or just plain lust, is the most common topic in these hair metal songs.

The word *love* can be found several times on all four records. They all also refer directly to girls, sometimes calling them sweetheart, honey, or baby. Also featured on most of them are words like kiss and dreams, sometimes even tears (or cry), hearts, roses, and rainbows get mentioned – all love related or other sentimental terms, just like the occasional oh (or ooo), which leads to results like:

“And sometimes that rainbow, baby
Is better than the pot of gold”
(Cry Tough)

“I’d die for you
I’d cry for you
I’d do anything
I’d lie for you
You know it’s true
Baby I’d die for you”
(I’d Lie For You)

Sentimentality is perceived as feminine and thus such songs are supposed to resonate with a female audience, just like songs about having fun, which often use words like dancing, weekend and night (a word which is also used in romantic contexts).

But there are also songs on each record about being “bad boys”, or at least having “a bad reputation” (*Raise Your Hands*).

“What you heard about me
Well, it’s probably right

I'm the boy next door
The one you were warned about"
(#1 *Bad Boy*)

Crazy, nasty, dirty, are words often used to describe themselves. They like to paint a picture of “living fast” (*Hell on Wheels*) and reckless, and a decadent and hedonistic lifestyle.

Girls are said to love a “bad boy” but this image also helps to stage their masculinity. Especially these effeminate looking men used women to prove their heterosexuality by objectifying them:

“I can't wait to get my hands on them
I won't give up till they give in
Now I'm not looking for a love that lasts
I need a shot and I need it fast
If I can't have her, I'll take her and make her”
(*I Want Action*)

“She's only fifteen
She's the reason – the reason I can't sleep
You say illegal
I say legal's never been my scene
I try like hell but I'm out of control
All in the name of rock 'n' roll
For sex and sex I'd sell my soul”
(All in the Name of...)

These songs often reveal a misogynist nature, which can't be found in thrash metal lyrics. Women or sex aren't the subject in thrash metal. Gary Holt of *Exodus* sums them up perfectly, by

saying that they wanted provocative lyrics about the heaviest things: murder, Satan, rape, violent death, and nuclear war.⁶⁹

Although there is the occasional mentioning of guns or blood in hair metal lyrics, only *Mötley Crüe* actually deliver a darker picture in some of their songs, dealing with drugs and death (like *Dancing on Glass*). But thrash metal lyrics tend to be even harder. Here there is no “oh, baby”, instead a broader vocabulary which includes many conventionally masculine coded words like killing, blood, and death which can be found in various variations on all four albums, but also: power, destruction, disease, terror, horror, violence, as well as hell an related things.

“I lurk in the alleys, wait for the kill
I have no remorse for the blood that I spill
A merciless butcher, who lives underground
I’m out to destroy, and, I will cut you down”
(*Black Friday*)

There are emotions in these songs but they are usually masculine too like hatred, anger, aggression and pain. Occasionally words like dancing, kiss, or crying pop up, but never in a romantic context:

“Time for lust, time for lie
Time to kiss your life goodbye”
(*Leper Messiah*)

The lyrics also contain more swearing. The topics of the songs range from horror stories, comics (e.g. *Judge Dredd* in *I Am The Law*), to social commentary. Though women usually don’t feature in these songs (Walser uses the term “excription” for the

⁶⁹ *Get Thrashed* (2006).

"absence of women in songs and videos")⁷⁰ there is nothing apart from conventions and gender-conscious conditioning which makes songs about things like the treatment of native Americans inaccessible for 'typical' women.

“Respect is something that you earn
Our Indian brothers’ getting burned
Original American
Turned into second class citizen”
(*Indians*)

Sometimes they deal with very masculine subjects like war, which can get rather explicit.
“Auschwitz, the meaning of pain
The why I want you to die
Slow death, immense decay
Showers that cleanse you of your life”
(*Angel of Death*)

But there are limits to thrash metal’s lyrical extremity, e.g. there are no songs like *Chainsaw Gutfuck* (1991) by *Mayhem* or *Addicted to Vaginal Skin* (1992) by *Cannibal Corpse*. There are no depictions of (sexual) violence towards women, but there is one song on these albums, which could be interpreted as displaying some latent homophobia, addressing hair metal bands:
“Bands dress like women, with hairspray and lace
I'd pass an image law, stick it in their face
Let’s see how long they keep dressing this way
Wearing this image twenty four hours a day”
(*Imitation of Life*)

⁷⁰ Walser (1993), p. 117.

Conclusion

Sam Dunn says in his documentary *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* that heavy metal on the surface seems to be hypermasculine and aggressive, but then continues to ask: "But is it that straight forward?"⁷¹ Of course it's not. And the most obvious example is the hair metal subgenre. Everything about it seems to be labelled feminine while its archrival thrash metal seems to be its masculine counterpart: spandex vs. jeans; shoes with heels (e.g. cowboy boots) vs. flat shoes (sneakers); white/bright vs. black/dark covers; soft, round, frilly vs. hard, pointy, geometric typefaces; lyrics about love, fun, and parties vs. violence, war, death, and destruction. And while there is some truth in this generalisations,⁷² which have lead to the common assumption that hair metal *per se* is "gay" and for girls, instead of just appearing "unmanly" due to its extensive use of things conventionally associated with girls. But at a closer look, hair metal is also marked by conventional heterosexual male masculinity, which is sometimes quite chauvinistic and tends to objectify women. Thrash metal too doesn't conform to the concept of hegemonic masculinity⁷³, and even within heavy metal's norms of masculinity, which have been undergoing changes since then,⁷⁴ the typical 1980s thrash metal look is no

⁷¹ *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005).

⁷² There always exceptions to such strict unwritten rules.

⁷³ As defined by Connell (1995).

⁷⁴ The most important are a reduction or even elimination of supposedly feminine elements and a greater emphasis on masculine things. Tattoos have become commonplace, just like beards, long hair worn in ponytails (which from the front gives the impression of short hair), short hair and even bald heads, muscular body types or beer bellies, and black has become the most dominant colour in heavy metal. Similar transformations towards an even harder and more masculine image can be found in the music and record cover

longer perceived as very masculine, on the contrary, a clean shaven face, combined with long hair worn loose, very tight (blue) jeans, white sneakers and a possibly white band shirt, is more like the minimum requirement for being perceived as masculine. So, one can conclude that female and male attributions aren't all black and white (or pink and blue), but they are ever changing constructs which depend on their social and cultural context.

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