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Vampire or Megalomaniac Serial Killer?: The Bloody Countess Elizabeth Bathory

The legend of the Countess Erzsébet¹ Bathory presents a unique case in which the fictional elements of vampire and witch folklore combine with true historical facts to create the quasi-mythical figure of the Bloody Countess. Alejandra Pizarnik wrote the short story “La condesa sangrienta” (1968, “The Bloody Countess”) based on the historical figure of the Countess Erzsébet Bathory as compiled in the socio-historical text *The Bloody Countess: Atrocities of Erzsébet Bathory* by Valentine Penrose. In addition, Andrei Codrescu, using Hungarian archival documents, writes the novel *The Blood Countess* in 1995. Even though Pizarnik is transparent about the fictionality of her text, Codrescu’s truth claim of basing his “novel” on historical documents does not make his text any more historically reliable than Pizarnik’s. Therefore, today’s presentation will focus primarily on a discussion of the historical text as well as the two fictional texts and the film *Eternal* (Canada, 2004) and how the “monstrous” character of the Bloody Countess is a product not only of her murdering over 650² virgins but also of her various sexual perversions and psychopathic madness. The weaving and inter-weaving of history, fiction and popular culture will be key to examining how the “monstrous” characterization of Bathory is unfairly and predominantly linked to her sexual deviance: her suspected lesbianism, her marital infidelities and an overall deviation from the proscribed role for women in her society and culture.

The Penrose text provides the reader with the historical context and events in the life of Elizabeth Bathory and the very text that the Argentinean Pizarnik reveals as the foundation for her fictional short story “The Bloody Countess”³. By examining and comparing these two texts one will note an interesting relationship between history and fiction in the appropriation of the figure of Elizabeth as the Bloody Countess⁴ into popular culture⁵. Basing ourselves on Penrose’s presuppositions provided in his historical document on Elizabeth, one can attribute the origin of Elizabeth’s vicious homicidal behaviour to the environment in to which she was born. Specifically: she was a child of aristocratic inbreeding⁶ during a time of warfare where torture and violence were an everyday occurrence⁷ that was able to indulge in a life of privilege as well as sexual and intellectual freedom that her social ranking allowed her⁸.

Elizabeth was born during a very tumultuous historical period that saw the struggle between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as well as the Turkish wars for the conquest of Europe (the same wars that kept her husband away from her years at a time). Elizabeth was, above all, an educated woman for her time, with a strong sense of megalomaniacy based primarily on her sense of entitlement that her noble birth and social standing provided her. In the attempt to rationalize Elizabeth’s sexual and murderous perversions as related to her psychopathic madness Penrose reveals that not only was Elizabeth born in 1560 “within the mould of sorcery” (13) but she was also the product of much inbreeding typical of the Hungarian upper class⁹ to which her family belonged. Coupled with the fact that she had she received a traditional education by both a Protestant minister and Catholic monk in her childhood as well as instruction in the art of witchcraft by, among others, her faithful Darvulia (Codrescu 142-43); one could say that genetics only account for part of Elizabeth’s psychopathy. That is to say, Elizabeth’s moments of genetically inherited epilepsy and insanity were tied to the established

Bathory family trait of “a marked taste for monstrous or unnatural acts of lust” (Penrose 24, 26).

Albeit, her use of manipulation and intimidation to satisfy her own selfish needs were traits associated with the psychopathic killer component to her personality and were further accentuated by the lack of any empathy for her victims or remorse for her actions.

But can the murder of over 650 young girls be blamed entirely on moments of epileptic madness? On the contrary, I would argue that her attention to detail in the torturing and killing of young girls could not have been caused solely but episodes of uncontrolled madness and/or epilepsy but rather a sign of a more deeply rooted sadistic inclinations. Elizabeth’s methods of torture evolved with time from simply biting and piercing servants who did not do their task properly to more intricate and elaborate methods of extracting personal pleasure from inflicting pain and ultimately death on her victims.¹⁰ Some of the contraptions she used to arouse pain (and pleasure) included: the Iron Maiden, a iron cage in the shape of a woman embedded with precious stones that would close upon its victim piercing her with its daggers located in the interior of the cage (see Pizarnik 466-67; Codrescu 45-46); in “death by water” the victim would be taken outside in the middle of winter naked and water poured over her, freezing her to death (see Pizarnik 467-68); a cage lined with sharp blades that would be pulled up to the ceiling piercing the victim’s flesh as it swayed (see Pizarnik 468; Codrescu 297); also other modes such as branding, piercing, biting and the severing of body parts (see Pizarnik 468-70). Throughout the various episodes of torture and killing, Elizabeth would sometimes talk¹¹ and shout during the sessions at times “pacing up and down her room like a rapacious animal” (Penrose 29) and other times have breakthrough moments in her cold demeanour of genuine emotion.

One cannot ignore that Elizabeth’s sexuality plays an important part in her monstrous characterization, but to say it is the only reason would be essentializing the psychological

complexity of her murderous impulses and would also undermine the morbidity of her numerous killings. Let us recall that serial killers have been profiled as being motivated by psychological impulses and/or sexual compulsion. Penrose, Pizarnik and Codrescu all seem to bring forth that Elizabeth experienced both the psychological and sexual gratification in her killings: not only would the torturing of her victims alleviate her “epileptic” seizures and attacks of melancholy (and anger), but they would also replenish the youthfulness of her skin¹².

Even though her noble class provided her with more freedom than women of lower social standing, Elizabeth was not beyond reproach (Penrose 29). Prior to the rumours of lesbianism¹³ and other “unnatural” sexual tendencies Elizabeth already had the reputation of having had extramarital affairs during her husband’s prolonged absences while away at war against the Turks. But to say she was monstrous based solely on her lesbian tendencies and sexual perversions would be essentialist and would take away from our present discussion. Notwithstanding, it is interesting to note that Penrose compares Elizabeth, at various points in his text, to another serial killer: Gilles de Rais. In his own right Gilles de Rais was accused of murdering eight-hundred young boys¹⁴ from 1433-1440 as well as sodomy, necrophilia and making pacts with demons. Similar to Elizabeth, De Rais also took sadistic pleasure in torturing and smearing the blood of his victims on himself, but unlike Elizabeth, in the end he did show remorse for his crimes and was never classified as having vampiric qualities.

I would argue that Elizabeth’s vampiric qualities revolve around her obsession with blood and its mysterious powers. As a woman living in a dominantly patriarchal society, Elizabeth recognized that the sign of menstrual blood brought on not only the loss of childhood innocence but also “separated her forever from the world of men” (Codrescu 141) and opened her to the

“world of women and the suffering of the flesh” (Codrescu 140). Codrescu also makes a point of “explaining” Elizabeth’s fascination with blood as part of her cultural imaginary:

I [Elizabeth] grew up listening to stories about the miraculous restorative powers of blood. Hungarian folklore awash in blood. Blood and beauty are wedded in fairy tales, folk sayings, and conventional wisdom.... Given this red liquid medium in which I spent my life, it would have been surprising if I *didn't* bathe in blood. To bathe in blood was simply to acknowledge the literal reality. (313-14)

Elizabeth’s infamous blood baths were supported not only by the recommendations of her witches but her obsession with maintaining her youthful beauty in order to avoid becoming an “uncharitable void of nothingness” (Penrose 71). At first Elizabeth was instructed by her witches that bathing in the virgin blood of a young girl would help preserve her beauty and youth. But as time began to show itself in her appearance despite these baths in virginal blood Elizabeth is advised by her witches (specifically Majorova, as indicated by Penrose) that she must bathe in blood similar to her own: the noble blood of young ladies. Elizabeth, with the aid of her witches, is able to secure young noble ladies to come to her castles under the premise that they would be receiving special training in good manners and languages.

It is important to mention that for years rumours were widespread of the mysterious disappearances of pretty young girls while in the service of the Countess of Bathory. Although very organized at the beginning of her murdering spree, towards the end Elizabeth (and her assistants) began to show signs of carelessness in disposing of the dead bodies and of answering to questioning parents looking for their daughters. At this point it seems that Elizabeth becomes all consumed with the torturing and killing in order to fulfill both her psychotic and sexual pleasure and her obsession with her youthful beauty and not so much in taking the necessary

precautions so that her deviant behaviour not be exposed. In essence, she loses control of her murderous impulses leading ultimately to the discovery and disclosure of her crimes.

Notwithstanding, it is only when the young ladies of noble lineage begin to vanish that the gossip of Elizabeth's strange behaviour and alleged murderous penchant is demanded to be formally investigated.

Some critics question the validity of said investigation due to the unique circumstances that Elizabeth's nobility and social status allowed her (yet again). In this particular instance it is important to note that the King Matthias himself owed much money to the Bathory-Nadazdy family and if Elizabeth were to have been formally charged by the King's court the family riches would have automatically passed on to the reigning monarch. Thus, what occurs is the questioning, torturing and eventual execution of Elizabeth's witches and other servants for their participation in the ritualistic killings of the victims.¹⁵ However, due to the financial implications and tarnishing of the family names, Elizabeth herself is "investigated" under the aegis of the family court (and never formally charged in the king's court) and is condemned to live out the remainder of her life walled in one of her rooms in her castle at Cahtice until her death on August 14th, 1613.

The relationship between fact and fiction surrounding the macabre story of the Bloody Countess has not only attracted historians and writers but also filmmakers, musicians and artists in various forms. As a brief example, in 2004 the film *Eternal* is released based loosely on the story of Elizabeth Bathory. This particular film takes place at the same time as its production and follows the murderous and sexual escapades of Elizabeth King (the reincarnated version of Elizabeth Bathory for the 21st century). Similar to her historical counter part (and alluded to at various points in the film itself) Elizabeth thrives on the blood of young women to maintain her

beauty and immortality. Nevertheless, the film tends to focus more so on the mythical vampiric qualities of the Countess Bathory in which Elizabeth not only bathes in the blood but also sucks it and ingests it from her victims as a typical vampire.

As we have already discussed, there is a wealth of historical documents and evidence substantiating the gruesome details of Elizabeth Bathory's serial murders and psychopathic behaviour, however, we have also seen that the line between fact and fiction often become blurred and at times even blend together. To date the Bloody Countess' story continues to draw the interest of historians, critics and artists and in the process, one could argue, the victimizing of her victims for a second time: many of them, especially those who did not belong to the noble class, destined to remain faceless and nameless in the legend of the Bloody Countess. It is beyond a doubt that Elizabeth Bathory was a psychotic megalomaniac serial killer spurred in her killings by her belief in the occult and witchcraft to grant her most desired wish: to remain youthful and beautiful forever. I would say that maybe she has succeeded in this immortality—at least in the lines of the pages dedicated to unweaving the intricate inter-weaving of the history and fiction surrounding the details of her life story.

Works Cited

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¹ Some texts on the Countess Erzsébet Bathory use, Elizabeth, the English version of her name.

² This number tends to vary from 50 to 600 to 650. Codrescu in his novel proposes that it was in truth 650 since at the inquisition of the witnesses to her crimes on January 7th and 11th, 1611: "Jacob Silvazy, the overseer at Castle Cahtice, produced in evidence a register in the Countess's own handwriting where she had recorded the names of 650 girls she had killed" (333).

³ Originally published in Spanish as "La condesa sangrienta" in *Extracción de la piedra de locura. Otros poemas* (1968).

⁴ In some cases she is also referred to as the "Blood Countess", as in Codrescu's novel.

⁵ The hi"story" of Elizabeth Bathory has been adapted into music, theatre, film and even sculpture.

⁶ Codrescu also stipulates that Elizabeth's witnessing the vicious murders of her two sisters at the age of nine may have also affected her murderous sensibility (44). Nevertheless, there does not seem to be any mention of this fact in Penrose's historical text even though Codrescu purports that the details of Bathory's life that he uses in his novel are "taken from historical documents in the Hungarian State Archive" ("Prefatory Note").

⁷ Penrose makes a point of stating: "... Erzsébet was surrounded, particularly in Pistyán, by a society which she took pleasure in choosing for its corruption, for its infinite variety and vice." (29).

⁸ The Bathory family was more powerful and richer than the Nadazdy family, therefore, upon their marriage Elizabeth retained her maiden name while Franz added the name Bathory to his (Codrescu 193).

⁹ Inbreeding amongst the aristocracy of 16th century Europe was not uncommon since it was viewed as a method of guaranteeing the purity of the noble family line.

¹⁰ Codrescu also points to the deliberateness in the torturing:

Reluctantly, the commission concluded that "these carefully designed devices are proof that she was not simply the victim of uncontrollable anger". In other words, she may have begun by cruelly lashing out in an accepted manner at her insubordinate servants, but in her maturity she had prepared refined, sophisticated means of gradually and skilfully arousing pain and, very likely, pleasure. (339)

¹¹ Codrescu adds: "She [Elizabeth] herself employed a vocabulary seldom used by women in society, particularly during her fits of sadistic eroticism" (29).

¹² Some critics attribute the first time that Elizabeth noticed the power of virginal blood to an occurrence when she scratched a servant for having tugged her hair too hard while brushing it. It is then that she noticed that the spot on her hand where the young girl's blood had fallen seemed to plump up and become youthful.

¹³ Elizabeth's Aunt Klara was purported to have been a woman who "liked to dress like a man and kept a large retinue of beautiful young girls whose only job was to pamper their mistress" (Codrescu 42).

¹⁴ These numbers also tend to vary greatly, at times as low as 100, primarily because of the lack of investigative documents kept at the time.

¹⁵ The reliability of witness testimonies is questionable at best since the testimonies were acquired through the customary methods of torture or threat of torture of the time.