

“I’m a metalhead”: The representation of women letter writers in *Kerrang!* magazine

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Abstract

This paper examines how *Kerrang!* magazine represents women metal fans in its letters pages. Since the turn of the century an increasing number of women have been reading *Kerrang!*, a situation predicted by Jonathan Gruzelier to have a profound effect upon the genre’s culture. To understand the culture of metal I ask two questions: what myths can be read from the letters pages?, and how are women letter writers represented as interacting with those myths? I examine letters pages from June 2000-7 (the month of Download music festival) and, using a methodology drawn from Barthes’ *Mythologies*, I analyse the changing design to identify *Kerrang!*’s ‘myths’, and read the letters to ascertain how they support or belie those myths. I argue that a powerful myth can be read in *Kerrang!*’s design – the myth of the warrior – and I consider the ways in which women are represented as ‘using’ this myth. I conclude that the power of the warrior myth is so strong, and so essential to the culture of the genre, that women letter writers are frequently represented as interacting with it, whether to challenge it and elicit new behaviours within the metal community, or to use it strategically to strengthen their position in a highly masculine culture. Furthermore, whilst some aspects of the warrior trope may be unworkable for some women letter writers, the myth’s potency allows women letter writers to assert themselves with confidence in their everyday lives. In terms of *Kerrang!*’s representation of the culture of the genre, the increased presence of women does have an impact upon the less ‘sociable’ aspects of metal culture, but the ways in which women are represented as gaining strength from the myth of the warrior ultimately reinforce it.

Key Words: Gender, metal, mythology, magazines, community, fandom, letters.

Introduction

First a bit of background on *Kerrang!*. *Kerrang!* is a British metal and rock magazine, published weekly. It began in 1981 as a supplement in *Sounds*

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music magazine to cater for fans of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, but such was its popularity that it quickly became a magazine in its own right. It has been the only weekly magazine for British metal fans ever since, and as such it has held great importance to fans of the genre. Today it also caters for fans of punk and hard rock. Whilst there has long been a stereotype of the metal fan as a young working class white male, as Deena Weinstein elaborates¹, British women had become so enamoured of metal that by 2006 *Kerrang!*'s readership had a greater proportion of women than men². This is reflected in the letters pages: in 2000 published letters to *Kerrang!* magazine from women readers were few and far between. By 2008, however, the majority of published letters came from women. How has this change affected the way that women are represented on the letters pages?

Methodology

The methodology I employ is to scrutinise the letters pages of issues published in the months of June each year from 2000 to 2008. Ozzy Osbourne's Ozzfest occurred in June in the earlier years of my study, and Download festival, the successor to Donington's Monsters of Rock festival occurred in June during the later years. These two big events in the metal calendar are discussion topics in the letters and create a sense of continuity over the years.

I find Roland Barthes' conception of 'myth' really useful here. In *Mythologies* Barthes shows how ideas about our society become 'common sense' or universally accepted, even if deeper consideration reveals these ideas to be flawed or wrong. Reading Barthes' *Mythologies* in tandem with the letters pages I am struck by the ways in which the letters pages convey a sense of unity amongst readers whilst also allowing a strong spirit of independence between them. They achieve this through their choice of letters to print and also in the designs and the photographs. Letter writers themselves are represented as believing in two or three particular ideas about the nature of the metal community. Yet the writers are simultaneously portrayed as revealing that the metal community does not live up to these ideals. After Barthes I label these ideas 'myths': these ideas give an impression of the state of the metal community that on deeper investigation turns out to be inaccurate or wrong. The implausibility of the myths does not lessen their power, however, and I am intrigued as to how women letter writers in particular are represented as interacting with the myths in this heavily masculine genre.

Establishing The Myth

Three particular myths are presented in the magazine: the myth that all members of the metal community are equal; the myth that members of the community are rebellious under the constraints of authority; the myth that metal community members are akin to mediaeval warriors. In this paper I talk about the last of those myths: the myth of the warrior. I will show how *Kerrang!* reinforces it through the letters pages, discuss how women letter writers are represented as interacting with the myth, and finally consider what they achieve or lose by doing so.

So what is the myth of the warrior? Trafford and Pluskowski discuss how the popular cultural representation of the Viking has been prevalent in heavy metal since its inception and forms an important motif in both lyrics and artwork³. Trafford and Pluskowski attribute the following qualities to Vikings:

1. 'bloodthirsty and rapacious attackers';
2. 'barbarian disrupters of civilized life';
3. 'hyper-masculine';

But it's not all bad as they are also:

1. energetic and dynamic;
2. physically (and militarily) strong;
3. unlikely to 'submit[...] easily to any acknowledged authority'⁴.

The Viking imagery, therefore creates a strong vision of a warrior and is a significant cultural reference point for metal fans. Without entirely covering its pages with horned helmets and bloody axes, *Kerrang!* adopts this imagery, giving itself an appearance of metal authenticity. How does it achieve this?

Two factors in the promulgation of the warrior myth are the design of the letters pages, and the printing of photographs of stars and fans. In the earlier years of my study – 2000-2003 there is less evidence of the design of the letters pages engaging with the myth of the warrior. However in Design A the title of the page, with the clever pun 'Feedback', appears in white lettering on a black background. The background is shot through with white to give the impression that the title has been written on black paper, scrunched up in a fit of rage and smoothed out again. The crumpled paper effect conveys passion and disrespect for neatness. Underneath the headline the text 'Your say on the issues that matter' appears in white on a red box. In 2001 Design B renders the title as appearing on a ticket stub, referring to the importance of gig attendance to metal fans. Red is gone, but the black background is retained and the letter headers now have black backgrounds too. In 2002 and 2003 (Design C) the red was reinstated, although in a minor way. It contributes a shock of colour amongst the harsh black and white. Design D shows that in 2004 the letters page was given a design overhaul in

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which the interplay of red and black was now the dominant motif in the design scheme. By 2008 the red and black theme has been dropped in favour of a distinctive yellow and black scheme that gives some different meanings, as I will discuss in a moment.

Why is the red and black scheme so important? Black and red have powerful associations in the West: red is associated with blood, sex and danger. Black is associated with funerals, war and threat⁵. Together the two have strong connotations of warning and give a message of bloody battle, violence and death. The myth of the warrior is signified strongly in the colour use. The yellow and black design loses much of the dynamism of the red and black scheme, however the connotation of warning remains in the use of the yellow with black: the two colours together are often used as warning signs such as in the biohazard symbol⁶. The use of yellow replacing red in some ways distances *Kerrang!* from its metal roots as the force of the warrior myth is lessened.

Photographs that are printed on the letters pages tend to reinforce the myth: amongst the men both musicians and fans wear black, hair is often long, and beards and tattoos are in evidence. The look is reminiscent of the common cultural representation of the Viking and strikingly different from the neater, short-haired and clean-shaven ideal of contemporary masculinity. Amongst the women fans and musicians hair is again frequently long, and it is often obviously dyed, challenging the feminine pretence of hair subtly coloured to be seen as a 'natural' blond or brunette. Not all photographs show metal stars and fans looking like warriors; different fashions can be seen over the nine years of my study. In the early years of the century many images show very short cropped haired men as nu-metal aimed to redefine its masculinity and distance itself from the memories of overblown hair metal, male stars of which used exaggerated femininity, including long hair and make-up to shock. The aggression remains in the challenging and threatening looks cast at the camera, and of course, the black clothes are as prominent as ever. In the later years of my study fashions associated with emo are frequently pictured: women and men's hair now falls in straightened 'floppy' fringes, often black with streaks of blond: the look is softer with eyeliner giving a 'feminine' look. Again, black clothes remain. Photographs showing this kind of fashion fall amongst those of more 'old skool' metal fans or musicians in which the long hair and angry look upholds the warrior imagery.

How are women letter writers represented as using the myth of the warrior?

What Trafford and Pluskowski do not say explicitly is that the Viking warrior is a man and that the hyper-masculinity requires the negation of

femininity. The presence of women on the letters pages, then, is in itself a challenge to the myth of the warrior, unless the women can exhibit their masculinity and show themselves to be fearless warriors. So there are two main ways in which women letter writers are represented as interacting with the myth: (one) directly challenging aggressive behaviour (such as throwing bottles at gigs) that disrupts the civilized veneer of the community (i.e. by confronting the warrior myth head on); and (two) using the flyting and sounding techniques of Vikings in Norse sagas, i.e. using the myth to confront the dominance of masculinity in the community.

The first of these, the representation of women directly challenging other metal fans' gig behaviour, occurs frequently. The throwing of bottles is a very direct way in which fans can reveal their opinions and exhibit warrior-like qualities in the disruption of a more civilized gig-going atmosphere, whilst also revealing that the bottlers do not submit to the authority of the festival organisers. Most of all it is a gesture reminiscent of the throwing of grenades. An example of a letter condemning bottling was printed in 22nd June 2002 (issue 909). Laura writes about the presence of Welsh band Lostprophets at the Deconstruction gig:

There were people there who seemed to think that a nu-metal band had no place there because it was a 'punk' event. I think it's dumb that people fall victim to genre classifications and can't just enjoy the music. There were some real wankers in the crowd who kept throwing stuff at the 'Prophets [...]. There are bands I don't like, but that doesn't mean I throw stuff at them. If you don't like a band just stay away.⁷

A further example occurs in the 23rd June 2007 issue (issue 1164): Emz via MySpace criticises the bottling of My Chemical Romance at Download festival. Emz accepts that different people like and dislike different bands, exhibiting the respect for others' opinions that she believes the bottlers ought to show:

if you don't like them, don't go bloody see them! [...] I'm a metalhead and I love Trivium, Slayer and Iron Maiden but I don't go bottling bands I hate. Live with your hate, don't share it with everyone else using violence.⁸

Both women assert their participation in the community: Laura attempts to establish her inclusion by saying that Deconstruction 'kicked arse'⁹, conveying

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that she is no 'party pooper' and implying that her enjoyment of the festival validates her complaint. Emz names the bands she likes to reveal her identification with the heavier side of metal, and so to a certain extent with those bottlers who objected to the rockier My Chemical Romance's presence. In their criticism of the bottling, both women verbally abuse the bottlers: Laura uses the term 'victim' to imply that the bottling punk fans have been duped by the 'industry' into believing it is important to keep genres distinct; she then names them 'dumb' and 'wankers'¹⁰. Emz implies that the bottlers have emotional problems of self-hatred, calling for them to 'live with your hate'¹¹. Laura's and Emz's critique of the bottlers, as they call for a change in behaviour, to a more peaceful, tolerant and accepting attitude, is a challenge to the myth of the warrior, in its guise of barbarous disruption of civilization. However, despite their eloquent language and attempt to show their inclusion in the community, neither letter really rings true as being from members of the metal community: by challenging the behaviour and so the masculinity of the myth behind it, the women are represented as being on the outside looking in.

I turn now to the second way that women are represented as using the myth, that of flyting and sounding to contradict the magazine itself. Bethan Benwell's analysis of letters published by 'lads mag' *Loaded* reveals that the letters exhibit a kind of masculine exchange called 'flyting' and 'sounding'. This is a form of discourse in which speakers duel to outdo each other with the most outrageous and inventive invective. It is a safe way of expressing affection between friends without compromising masculinity, and it reduces tension without warriors doing one another any physical damage¹². In letters only one side of this 'duel-logue' can be seen, but it reveals itself through direct contradiction and creative insults. As with any magazine letters page, *Kerrang!*'s 'Feedback' also features letters that take issue with articles and, more frequently, with reviews in the magazine.

In the 29th June 2002 issue (issue 910) Micha responds to comments made by the magazine in a previous issue about a website called Concert Flashing, upon which photographs of women baring their breasts at concerts are posted:

I was very offended when you [...] made the comment "Girls with boobs like spaniel's ears have even had a go." What's wrong with boobs like spaniel's ears? My girlfriend has them, and for your information she has great tits.¹³

Kerrang!'s comment, which represents some women's breasts as dogs' ears, has the effect of policing women's bodies and objectifying them. Micha takes issue, not with the objectification *per se*, but at least with the hierarchy of breasts that *Kerrang!* has established. She celebrates the diversity of women's body shapes, and then uses her homosexuality to justify that she is in a position to make a judgement about what constitutes "great tits". Micha is complicit in *Kerrang!*'s objectification of women's bodies, but drawing attention to, and challenging, the offensive language used by the magazine is a strong move. Her signature, 'yes I'm a girl, get over it'¹⁴ confronts *Kerrang!*'s heterosexism. Yet Micha takes her challenge a step further, accusing *Kerrang!* staff of jealousy of women's breasts, and of being unable to get a sexual partner:

You're just jealous cos all you (unwillingly) celibate men at *Kerrang!* don't have any boobs yourselves! Good luck in the lonely hearts column by the way.¹⁵

Micha's insults are inventive and crushing, but her tone is so playful that it is clear she cares not a jot what *Kerrang!*'s editors think of her. Like Trafford and Pluskowski's Vikings, she is independent as she denies *Kerrang!*'s authority over which bodies are worth exposing. She uses the technique of flyting and sounding to criticise *Kerrang!*'s objectifying body hierarchy whilst still showing affection for the magazine. Micha's is a difficult balance: whilst she argues against *Kerrang!*'s heterosexist hierarchy, she remains complicit in the magazine's objectification of women. Yet to get her point about the hierarchy across she must perform masculinity by using warrior-like techniques.

In the 16th June 2007 (issue 1163) Emily writes a response to an article about Paramore, an American rock band fronted by a woman called Hayley Williams. Emily criticises the article for its unkind treatment of Hayley's gender rather than the music of the band:

Kerrang! You little bastards! Your feature on Paramore was about as valid as your mother's chest hair. Around.. oh.. one measly paragraph was actually about Paramore's music... the rest focussed on Hayley's "bossy" and "snooty" attitude. Give the girl a break! In an industry that claims to be about equality, the article tends to focus on Hayley being a FEMALE asserting some kind of leadership! Shock freaking horror!¹⁶

In this letter Emily's style contains many of the elements of the flyting

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and sounding style: she swears, 'you little bastards!', she is creative with her insults, 'as valid as your mother's chest hair'¹⁷, and she confronts her opponent directly. Furthermore Emily's letter is full of dynamic energy as uses a very brief first sentence that sounds like an enraged signal to charge ('You little bastards!'¹⁸), and many exclamation marks. She is certain she is right and will not bow to the authority of the magazine. Emily defends the right of Hayley Williams to be treated with the same respect as accorded male musicians, but to do so she uses the myth of the warrior, like Micha, performing its masculinity.

By using the strength of the warrior myth, by imbibing its spirit of independence from authority (as *Kerrang!*, an established and successful magazine, is), via their energetic and caustic tones, the two women letter writers are able to successfully contest the authority of *Kerrang!* as they enact masculinity. Thus they are represented as strong participants in the community.

To conclude

The myth of the warrior is very powerful in the metal community's self-construction. It cannot be avoided by women letter writers whether they are writing to challenge it and elicit new, less warrior-like behaviours in the metal community, or whether they are able to use the associated flyting and sounding techniques to strengthen their position as insiders whilst simultaneously making feminist-sounding arguments against metal misogyny/sexism. Ultimately whichever of the techniques (to fight the behaviour directly or to employ the myth for feminist ends) women letter writers are represented as using, the myth is the stronger for it. The women who fight the warrior-like behaviour directly ignore the behaviour's deeply embedded roots in the warrior myth and the structural disadvantage that this places women at. As these letter writers are women, challenging the myth of the warrior only places them more firmly outside the metal community and limits their chances of successfully changing bad gig behaviour. The women who use the myth for their own ends, even overtly feminist ends, do so by performing masculinity and, whilst gender is ever fluid, in putting their femininity to one side the women letter writers are complicit in the myth's gender-blindness.

However, whilst the myth may be difficult to square with more traditional conceptions of femininity, it is clear that it is represented as remaining useful to women letter writers. Furthermore it allows us to conceive of more fluid gender constructions in which women are free to use particular kinds of masculinity, in this case warrior/metal masculinity, to fight injustice.

¹Notes

- D Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*. Da Capo Press, New York, 2000, p. 99.
- ² Campaign, 'Magazine ABCs Jan-Jun 2006: Film and music' *Campaign*.
<<http://www.brandrepublic.com/Campaign/News/589406/Magazine>> 25.08.2006.
- ³ S Trafford and A Pluskowski, 'Antichrist Superstars: The Vikings in hard rock and heavy metal' in D W Marshall (ed), *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in popular culture*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2007, p.59-60.
- ⁴ Ibid., p.58.
- ⁵ D Dabner, *Graphic Design School: the principles and practices of graphic design*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004, p.35.
- ⁶ Ibid., p.35.
- ⁷ Laura, Hampshire, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 22.06.2002, p.58.
- ⁸ Emz via MySpace, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 23.06.2007, p.4.
- ⁹ Laura, Hampshire, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 22.06.2002, p.58.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.58
- ¹¹ Emz via MySpace, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 23.06.2007, p.4.
- ¹² B Benwell, 'Male Gossip and Language Play in the Letters Pages of Men's Lifestyle Magazines', *The Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 34 (4), 2001.
- ¹³ Micha (yes I'm a girl, get over it), 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 29.06.2002, p.66.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 66.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 66.
- ¹⁶ Emz via MySpace, 'Letter to the editor', *Kerrang!*, 23.06.2007, p. 4.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.4.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.4.

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