

# THE DEATH OF A SHADOW



A STUDY OF CHARACTERS IN ELDEN RING

# Death of a Shadow

## A Study of Characters in *Elden Ring*

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*Cover*: “Min-OE”, Cy Twombly, 1951. Painted at Black Mountain, NC, and inspired by bronze sculptures excavated from Lorestān, Iran. “Symmetrical order surges with elemental emotion or danger. Dualities are evoked in the stark contrasts of palette, the prickly erectile forms, and the worn surfaces, but we are left with uncertain conclusions about the dialectic between good and evil, life and death, the beastly and the human.”

Carol A. Nigro, ‘Cy Twombly’s Humanist Upbringing’, in *Tate Papers no.10*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/10/cy-twombly-humanist-upbringing>, accessed 19 May 2024.

Thanks to the members of the Ward, the Colloquium, and Fear the Old Lore for their curation and appreciation of *Elden Ring* and all the titles that came before it.

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I wish for my death; I am nothing more than a tool.

Lulufon (ルルフオン), from *Shadow Tower: Abyss*

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When *Elden Ring* debuted, director Hidetaka Miyazaki adopted a certain posture in interviews: this, more than FromSoftware's previous fantasy action-RPG entries, is a game about characters. This new, or more accurately "newly emphasized", element is highlighted in interviews, such as the one published by *IGN* after the 2019 E3 reveal:

It's not just the player-character, of course, it's lots of characters in the game, who are all beckoned back and will have their own adventures and motives.

[...]

One is the ease of understanding, the level of understanding the players have of the story and the narrative and we feel like, because this is a game that's based around its characters, this is a lot easier to understand, a lot easier to approach in that sense. So it's less abstract. While the player-character themselves is, as you might be familiar with other games, a little more nameless, a little more of a blank slate for the player to project themselves onto, other characters will provide that sense of depth and that sense of color and multifarious motives and ulterior motives that are going to keep them engaged and keep them second guessing as they explore through the world.

That means that while the characters around you have more personality, the player becomes *Elden Ring*'s main character. This may be a rather traditional approach in RPGs – especially in Japanese games – but it is exciting to think that NPCs will likely function as an additional layer of exploration for the player to unravel the world's mystery.

As well, *Xbox Magazine* published an interview that concluded with this statement:

We chose this character because of his eccentric aspects as well as the way he portrays the darkness that the world and story possess. While *Elden Ring* may be a classic dark fantasy title, it is more than just that. This character also represents one more theme in addition to the previously mentioned eccentricity. That theme is the will, or ambition of mankind.

These quotations capture a very definite focus: characters, and their stories and ambitions, are crucial to the making and understanding of *Elden Ring*. Miyazaki singles out memorable encounters with demigods like Rykard or Radahn, but as the final quotation shows, this tendency to view characters as a key medium extends even to less prominent figures, those without speaking roles like the Godskin Apostle.

Studying characters is therefore more crucial than ever, not because their presentation has necessarily deepened (examples like Solaire or Lucatiel shine in their respective stories) but rather because it's clear that the artists and writers behind them are more cogently than ever using them as

instruments in relating the vast and foggy world of the Lands Between to the player. This particular study will focus on several of these, which can be split roughly into two groups: shadows, the animal guardians that serve Emphyreans on their path to godhood, and maidens, who serve the Tarnished on their own path.

## Shadows

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Full autumn moon:  
my shadow takes me with him  
and returns.

*Ware o tsurete  
waga kage kaeru  
tsukimi kana*

From *Japanese Death Poems*, Yoel Hoffman, p. 301

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The term “shadow” has haunted players since the network test, when the Raging Wolf armour (at the time, the “Bloody Wolf” armour) provided a glimpse of the concept:

According to the old legends, wolves are the shadows of the Empyrean. Vargram aspired to such a state himself.

At even that early time, it was clear that Fromsoft was revisiting a previous archetype of theirs. Readers familiar with *Sekiro* should recognize immediately how the “wolf” who is a “shadow” recalls the eponymous Sekiro, one-armed wolf and shadow, a shinobi. Even the concept of an “Empyrean”, a visionary leader with a connection to the divine, recalls his master Kuro, who inherits the vital powers of the Divine Dragon through his bloodline.

The most robust example of this relationship in *Elden Ring* is Blaidd, the shadow serving Ranni the Witch. Blaidd belongs to a line of deeply sympathetic companions whose stories closely follow the player’s, alongside Solaire, Ostrava, Siegward, Siegmeyer, Alexander, Millicent, Lucatiel, Anri, even occasionally Patches. The interpersonal element in their characters brings them to life, as each successive encounter brings them back to the front of the player’s mind. Lifted out of the mass of text, dialogue and descriptions by their personhood, they make some of the best reflections on the text possible by showing a perspective that can change over time and in relation to their surroundings; an item can only comment on something once, after all.

Blaidd is thus our window into the character of the “shadow” in *Elden Ring*. Quote-tweeting over a rendered image of Blaidd, the @ELDENRING twitter account offered a general comment on the “wolf”:

A loyal wolf will always bite at his master’s enemies.

Loyalty to a master, against whose enemies they fight, is the most basic function of the shadow. Blaidd is in fact introduced this way to the player, searching for Darriwil, a “traitor”, to kill. However, this isn’t the only obligation they have. Iji explains later in Ranni’s questline another detail about Blaidd:

The Two Fingers gave Blaidd to Lady Ranni, as a faithful follower. Her very shadow, incapable of treachery. But if Lady Ranni, as an Empyrean, resists being an instrument of the Two Fingers, the shadow will go mad, transforming from a follower into a horrid curse. But such is his destiny. In such matters, Blaidd's own thoughts hold no weight. It pains me so, but he must be neutralised. For Lady Ranni's sake.

Iji has laid out another important principle, that an empyrean's shadow will turn on its master and, somehow, be a "curse" on them if they betray their own role. The shadow is also not without some kind of internal life:

Unthinkable, how could Blaidd... How did he break free from his cell? No, more importantly... Blaidd became a curse that plagued Lady Ranni, yet in madness, gave himself to her. I've made a grave misjudgement. And I thought myself a capable war counselor... I'll catch up with you soon enough, Blaidd. When I do, I only hope you'll accept my apology.

The aggregate picture is a character who, despite the will of the virtually-divine Two Fingers and his own madness, struggles to defy his own fate and, in a small way, even Ranni's to fulfill his vision of service to a master.

Blaidd is also entrapped by other characters' ideas of what that service should be, who resemble in some ways key characters from *Sekiro*: the world-weary smiths, suppressing their monstrous, fiery natures, Iji and Sekijo; the detached intellectuals, Seluvis and Emma; and the divine descendants with the will to shatter the chains of their heritage, Ranni and Kuro.

The tension of loyalty and ideals is similar: deciding whether to adhere to the Iron Code, a pivotal moment in *Sekiro*'s narrative, is about choosing whether or not to reject personal ideals (loyalty to Kuro) and obey Owl, Wolf's father, and Owl's interests. Blaidd rejecting the Two Fingers' rule and obeying Ranni is this same tension.

Within the scope of true "shadowbound beasts", there is one more character to examine: Maliketh, "Death of the Demigods", usually introduced first as "Gurranq" at the Bestial Sanctum.

Maliketh was a shadowbound beast given to his Empyrean. Marika's sole need of her shadow was a vessel to lock away Destined Death. Even then, she betrayed him.

Maliketh is a character defined by betrayal: Ranni's theft, taking Death from him, and Marika shattering the Elden Ring.

Thou, who approacheth Destined Death. I will not have it stolen from me again.

Marika... why... wouldst thou... gull me? Why... shatter...

Forgive me, Marika... The Golden Order... cannot be restored.

Ranni and Marika share in common this point: betraying their shadows to achieve a certain end, while their shadows remain loyal and seek to regain their Empyreans. Ranni killing her Fingers and leaving the earth, Marika shattering the ring; in their wake, their shadows become obsessed and destructive in their failure to continue serving.

Vargram is just an aspirant to being "shadowbound" for an Empyrean, but he has the wolfish form, albeit as a costume, not his body, and he wields the Godslayer's Greatsword, a "sacred sword" of the Gloam-Eyed Queen, as well (it's worth noting that Blaidd's Royal Greatsword and Maliketh's Black Blade obtain their special powers, cold and death respectively, after some later event that demonstrates their singular loyalty). He captures the image of a shadow, the wolf fighting for its master, the Empyrean. He even resembles Blaidd and Maliketh in his hopeless desire to be with his lost Empyrean: the defeated Gloam-Eyed Queen.

## Maidens

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And had my days been longer  
still the darkness  
would not leave this world—  
along death's path, among the hills  
I shall behold the moon.

*Nagaraete*  
*kono yo no yami wa*  
*yomo harete*  
*shide no yamaji no*  
*iza tsuki o min.*

From *Japanese Death Poems*, Yoel Hoffman, p. 65

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Most maidens in the game are dead. On arrival, one in the Chapel of Anticipation meets us, propped against the east wall in a pool of blood. At the Chapel of Inhibition, another is found dead, slumped in a chair by the altar. The enigmatic Hyetta, not herself very long-lived, appears overlooking Liurnia only after her doppelganger, Irina, is killed at the Weeping Peninsula. Bernahl's maiden is dead. Anastasia, even as an impostor, only ever appears as a red phantom. Therolina has been made a puppet of Seluvis'.

Of all the examples, only Melina and perhaps Enia seems to be an exception, although Melina was burned and turned into a spirit long before we met her. Maidens have two functions: interpreting for the Fingers (e.g. Hyetta) and granting Tarnished "the strength of runes".

Have you heard of the finger maidens? They serve the Two Fingers, offering guidance, and aid, to the Tarnished. But you, I am afraid, are maidenless. I can play the role of maiden. Turning rune fragments into strength.

Maidens traversed the Lands Between for different reasons. Some to seek audience with the Fingers. Others, to find the Tarnished who they were destined to guide.

A [Finger Seal] bestowed by a Finger Maiden which serves as a catalyst for casting sacred incantations.

Use to summon the spirit of the Finger Maiden Therolina. Spirit of Finger Maiden who never met the Tarnished she was meant to guide. Uses healing incantations and Holy Water Pots, but she is not a fighter by nature and is ill-suited to battle.

A Maiden without a Tarnished. A Tarnished without a Maiden. And yet no guide to bring them together.

These are all women, as well, contrasting the masculine shadows. Melina and Millicent have in common an armour set, the Traveler's Set, which characterizes its wearers by their fate and womanhood, and the Missionary's Cookbook makes the issue of gender even more clear.

Worn by young women who set off into the world to confront their fate.

A record of crafting techniques left by a man who, unable to become a Finger Maiden, instead became a missionary, and went forth to spread holy teachings.

Melina is the foremost maiden to study, as, much like Blaidd, she reveals a changing, living perspective, but there is a flaw:

There is something for which I must apologize. I've acted the finger maiden yet I can offer no guidance, I am no maiden. My purpose was long ago lost...

She is an imperfect subject, only “[playing] the role of maiden” by bestowing “the strength of runes” and “an invitation to the Roundtable Hold”, which Varré initially remarks on our lack thereof. Her actual purpose is clarified when encountering the “husk” of thorns: burning again, although she doesn’t say so, to let us enter the tree.

Think not, of the kindling. [...] I know... I'm asking you to commit a cardinal sin. But it must be done to reach the path beyond. And that is the path I wish to travel.

My purpose was given to me by my mother. But now, I act of my own volition. I have set my heart upon the world that I would have. Regardless of my mother's designs. I won't allow anyone to speak ill of that. Not even you.

Although this isn’t clear until after we set off for the Giants’ Forge, and in fact after someone is burnt there, there is a suggestion that this is another, secret aspect of maidens. Mysteriously, Bernahl suffers the same loss.

Silver armor engraved with tiny beasts. Worn by Bernahl the Recusant.  
Beasts are drawn to champions, and to lords. And this armor befits a champion worthy of becoming a lord. And that is what Bernahl was.  
Until his maiden threw herself into the fire.

Nowhere is it clarified what fire or why she did this. Datamining has revealed interactions with a maiden aspiring to be burnt and turned into a vessel for fire, “kindling” in a sense (the extracted material uses 火種; the conventional term in the release version of *Elden Ring* is 種火). Shabriri preys on this, insisting that in fact our own flesh can be kindling as well; Enia only specifies that a certain visionary quality is necessary.

You are about to sacrifice something precious. The life of a fair maiden, that you would toss into the fiery forge. Only so that you may be Lord. What a horrible thing to ponder. Your ascendancy requires her sacrifice, whether she wishes it or not. But how would the Lord, crowned so, be looked upon? Chosen Tarnished and would-be Lord, dare to tread the path of true rigor. Spare the poor girl, and singe your own flesh in her stead. [...] Seek audience with the Three Fingers and the flame of frenzy. If you inherit the flame of frenzy, your flesh will serve as kindling and the girl can be spared...

You must find kindling. Only the smoldering flame in the Great Forge of the Giants, on the highest peak in the Lands Between, can burn the Erdtree. But special kindling is required to reignite the flame. For the flame to burn the Erdtree, a sacrifice is needed. Of one who envisions the flame. And can lead you to the Rune of Death.

And indeed, Melina’s dagger, the Blade of Calling, refers to its former owner as “the kindling maiden”. The character of the maiden, then, comprises a few parts: conducting the strength of fragmented runes to empower a certain Tarnished they’re fated to meet; serving the Two Fingers and bearing out



their guidance to the Tarnished; and, possibly, envisioning fire, as prophets “sometimes glimpse within the faith”. A “Finger Maiden” such as Hyetta is described as *miko* (巫女), which implies, among other things, a kind of shamanistic connection to the forces that maidens channel, which underscores again the concept of “vision”, thus envisioning and embodying the impersonal forces of fire, life and will.

We can also choose to betray Melina, if we don’t let her fulfill her vision and purpose. Millicent is a very relevant point of comparison in this case: these two characters share not just a costume but also a deep sympathy in their stories. They are young women who have forgotten their destinies except for dim recollections that draw them forwards until their full purpose is clear, revealed when they reach their respective trees and discover that they’re meant to be sacrificed for a new order. Their visions are different, however, since Melina says her sacrifice is of her own heart and volition whereas Millicent characterizes resistance as being her “own person”.

Betrayal changes these women, revealing yet another layer of “purpose”. Gowry specifically highlights betrayal as the catalyst to Millicent’s transformation.

Millicent trusts you, rather deeply in fact. Sever that trust. Nurtured by betrayal, her bud will flower most vividly. When Malenia ascends to godhood, Millicent too shall be reborn. As a scarlet valkyrie.

Nothing is said or written about what happens to Melina if we turn on her, except what she says herself after we destroy the Erdtree.

Like the concept of a “shadow”, the “maiden” and her champion has a place furnished in FromSoftware’s design language from previous titles. *Dark Souls III* especially made a serious fixture of knights from Carim and their servitude.

A Carim knight will dedicate an entire career to attending a single maiden, just as Morne once served one goddess alone.

Eygon and Irina are the quintessential knight and maiden, but other data, such as Morne and Caitha, Elfriede and Vilhelm, Garl and Astraea, or even Lautrec in his worship of Fina, capture some part of this relationship.

Consider as well the two sides each one of those women presents: Irina, who “dealt in dark” and “treachery” but fears the dark and seeks to become a firekeeper; Caitha, who is a goddess of mourning to some and a demoness to others; Elfriede and her identity as Friede, in tension between her dark and violent nature and her desire to retreat into the cold Painted World; Astraea, the pinnacle of faith who rejects God and becomes “the most impure demon” (“She would never turn to evil with that upstanding knight to guide her.”); and Fina, who is loving but “fickle” and whose ring will break if ever removed. Maidens are defined by vision and a quasi-shamanistic relationship with abstract and elemental powers, the champion-maiden bond, and the latent possibility of betrayal and the monstrous form she might take after it.

## Monsters & Companions

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Let your end and your beginning  
To a single point unite!  
All things fleeting, all things running,  
Pass them in your own swift flight.  
Thank the Muses for their favour:  
They have promised for your heart's  
Theme a union forged for ever  
With the form your mind imparts.

*Laß den Anfang mit dem Ende  
Sich in Eins zusammenzeihn!  
Schneller als die Gegenstände  
Selber dich vorüberfliehn.  
Danke, daß die Gunst der Musen  
Unvergängliches verheißt,  
Den Gehalt in deinem Busen  
Und die Form in deinem Geist.*

From *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, trans. David Luke, p. 122-123

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Throughout these comparisons and long summaries of qualities, some flexibility in the character of the “maiden”, “shadow”, “champion”, and “Empyrean” has likely become apparent. Why should Vargram be a shadow if he’s a Tarnished destined for lordship? Where is Malenia’s shadow? What about Miquella’s? And what is the nature of Melina, who isn’t any of these things but affects some of their qualities?

Much like shadows, service and common vision underpin the maiden-champion relationship. When Melina is channeling runes, she asks the player-character to share “thoughts”, “ambitions”, and “principles”; later, after the first accord is fulfilled, she proposes to guide the player again, according to a common goal to make the player Elden Lord, similar to shadows being given by the Fingers to see their Empyrean through to godhood, the complementary state to lordship.

Recalling Bernahl’s set again, not only maidens but beasts are attracted to champions, recalling the shadows as well as Serosh, Godfrey’s chancellor or regent. Their relationship is unfortunately quite mysterious, but Serosh embodies an element of restraint as Godfrey’s counselor, which he sheds, violently, when pressed. The best expression of this appears early on, in the description of the Beast Crest Heater Shield.

Features a beast as its crest, serving to remind warriors not to succumb to the arousal of battle.  
Fight with passion, but become not its prisoner.

Serosh is unlike the shadows, but they do have in common a kind of betrayal: Serosh’s sole function in the plot is to be torn apart in a spasm of barbaric violence by Godfrey when he abandons his lordly pretense. Inasmuch as beasts are attracted to those on the path to Elden Lord, the reverse seems to be equally true. Is Serosh more like a shadow, obeying and upholding a vision that Godfrey might no longer share, or a maiden, counseling him? Maybe a champion in his own right, as Lord of Beasts?

How applicable a title may be is secondary to the flexibility of their usage, and their power to symbolize a particular relationship. I would like now to apply these symbols back to the text, as a tool to resolve a particular relationship: ours to Melina, after we’ve betrayed her.

Why Melina has a talon-like seal over her left eye was a “lore” flash point from the moment she was revealed. Early speculation based on the network test drew some meaning from the Four-Toed Fowl Foot, of all places: “three digits is seen as a bad omen”, an anticipation of the Three Fingers.

After the player meets them and they're spurned by Melina, she returns, eye unsealed, to kill them with Destined Death, the Death rune. Why Melina should appear in this capacity demands an answer, constituting one of the most dynamic endings to the story.

A few key features were quickly identified: her luminous purple eye, her self-identification with night, and of course, the Death rune itself. Her unfathomable origin left nothing off the table.

Easily the most popular contention at the time of writing is that she is some instantiation of the Gloam-Eyed Queen, an Empyrean beaten by Maliketh in an earlier age. To briefly summarize the state of speculation at the moment, the Queen is Velka for Fromsoftware fans in the '20s: an absent character whose influence and followers are interspersed through the narrative; a divine person who is in conflict with her fellow Empyreans; a dark, occult and sinister character whose fate is ambiguous.

Her ambiguous end is readily identified with Melina's ambiguous origin, but that's a trivial element. Instead, consider the specific qualities held to be common between the two. Firstly, and perhaps the image that best sells the connection, is Melina's eye. The momentous reveal alongside her power over Death begs an explanation. Characters with remarkable eyes are at once very common and very scarce: the plot revolves, after all, around a tribe of people who lost the light in their eyes, the Tarnished; but as for exceptions to this motif of grace shining (or not) through the eyes, only a few stand out, such as spirit tuners and of course the Gloam-Eyed (or "Dusk-eyed", by a now-repaired localization) Queen herself.

There is as well how Melina describes her relentless pursuit:

Should you rise as the Lord of Chaos, I will kill you, as sure as night follows day. Such is my duty, for allowing you the strength of runes.

"Night", and especially death as night following day, evokes the deep symbolic relationship between death and darkness; that very phrase, "death and darkness", comes from *Bloodborne's* cutting room floor as the discarded moniker for the crowlike demons, shrouded ghosts and grotesque man-spiders that populate its nightmare worlds. Many deathly forces in *Elden Ring* trace a connection to the night, especially Death Birds and Death Rite Birds who only appear then.

And finally, Melina invokes the Rune of Death itself. This is a coveted power, as the text stresses with examples like the Black Knives and Ranni's theft, and the list of notable wielders is rather short: Death Birds, Maliketh and his Kindred, the vulgar militia, and the Gloam-Eyed Queen and her apostles. Arguably any power derived from Godwyn and deathroot also is a form of the Death Rune's power as well.

Later, the Rune of Death spread across the Lands Between through the underground roots of the Greattree, sprouting in the form of Deathroot.

The only character besides Melina that seems at first to capture all three is, of course, the Queen, barring yet more identity-munging. These elements are flawed, however, inasmuch as their semiosis in the text lacks specificity; that is, the exact relationship between these symbols, what they signal, and who they signal it for bears re-examining.

## Melina the Beast

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Shabriri is chaos incarnate. I cannot die. Ahh, may chaos take the world!

From *Elden Ring*

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The structure of this character study already should provoke some doubt. Shadows have been the subject in parallel to maidens because Melina's eye should spark recognition of someone else: Blaidd. His vivid purple eyes are virtually unique amongst the cast. It's worth reflecting on what colour "gloom" or "dusk" really is; purple is often taken for granted, but sunsets really are a myriad of colours, rarely glowing so intensely violet. Rather than make a guess about something not shown, better to refer to a concrete image provided by someone the player will be repeatedly met with. Long since redacted, but memorable for its striking directness, is the v1.0 description of the Beast Eye, which stated simply that it was Maliketh's; another shadow with purple eyes.

Then there remains the question of Destined Death. In fact, Ranni's quest offers an answer here: a miniboss, and the penultimate encounter before the Moonlight Altar, is a "Baleful Shadow", an assassin in the form of a red, phantom Blaidd. His sword is burning with a permanent buff, the red-black fire of Destined Death as it's characterized under Maliketh's control, which can be seen in the hands of the Vulgar Militia, gargoyles, and Black Knives (albeit stolen). It even inflicts the characteristic damage-over-time debuff on hit. It is unquestionably a form of Destined Death, except in the hands of a shadow and agent of the Greater Will.

As for the emphasis on the night as a metaphor, its power to symbolize something specific is quite weak. *The Overture of Elden Ring* lingers on the timeless connection between death and the nighttime while discussing *Bloodborne*.

The connection between sleep and death in popular perception is very old indeed. It stretches back to Greek myth, in which Thanatos, the god of death, and Hypnos, the god of sleep, are brothers. Both of them were born of Nyx, goddess of night. Night, death, and dream certainly seem to share some primordial connection.

So characterized, it's unreasonable to associate its usage as a symbol completely with one character. Other examples, like the Death Birds mentioned above, or the "Duskborn" ending, dilute the metaphor further.

To put it directly: Melina is not a maiden, but she adopts that role; at the end she's not a beast, but she's almost certainly adopted this role instead. The images of Death, night, and her leering purple eyes are calculated to contrast her former maidenhood, and the emphasis on betrayal, and the transformative power of betrayal, when the player rejects what she took to be a common vision of Order (which is to say, the mere continuation of a sensate world distinguished from shapeless Chaos) encapsulates both identities.

There is a subtle similarity between the two most radical endings, the Age of Stars and Lord of Frenzied Flame: Ranni, the Empyrean who replaces Marika, takes her head and allows it to crumble in her hands, whereas the same occurs as the player rises with their head swallowed by the sickly yellow flame of chaos. There's no Empyrean named in this ending, but the player is embraced by the Three

Fingers, gains the power to “envision” fire, and is a vessel for the divine in replacing Marika; they become a *de facto* Empyrean in the context of the Frenzied Flame ending. Melina can be conceived of then as the player’s shadow, betrayed and enacting the shadow’s curse. No one in this particular conclusion is playing their true role: not the kindling, nor the Tarnished, or the god Marika, or the shadow, or the maiden. Through the power of chaos, every actor is recast.

“The Lord of Frenzied Flame”, despite being so apocalyptic, passes almost silently, and its swirl of competing images is alienating, ecstatic, and foreboding. The *Souls* series and its sister games, *Sekiro* and *Bloodborne*, all portray chaos somewhat differently, but as a cosmic force, it hasn’t been nearly so explicit in the text before. The subtle framing of that choice between law or chaos reflects and summarizes the tone of each title.

*Demon’s Souls* offers a scene where the Slayer of Demons grinds their Maiden’s head into the muddy floor inside the Old One to claim its soul, foregrounding the cold and selfish cruelty of “chaos” in Boletaria; *Dark Souls’* “Dark Lord” ending is, by contrast, almost noble, although grotesque as well as the Primordial Serpents loom in the darkness over the smashed Lordvessel; *Dark Souls II* is virtually unconcerned with chaos, and pays very little attention to it to instead present the Bearer of the Curse as a visionary (a lawful position, essentially, representing clarity) regardless of the vision; *Dark Souls III* offers a moment of human connection and sympathy in the darkness of death and chaos, if betrayal is chosen over the lonely execution of the Champion of Ash’s duty to link the fire.

*Bloodborne*, a game soaked in gorey chaos, presents the choice of the material, ordered world of daylight as rapturous, and the descent further into outer chaos as a freshly birthed Great One is divorced from humaneness (literally being cradled by an artificial creature in a dream); and *Sekiro’s* Shura ending, the nearest in violence to *Elden Ring’s* chaos ending, is a string of murders in which Emma, your confidante and physician, Isshin, a mentor and rare example of a lord who is willing to pass in his own time, and even Owl, your own father and, until the moment you kill him, a co-conspirator, are tragic victims.

The increasing misery of Lordran, Drangleic and Lothric, the grim realism of class struggle and religious zealotry in Boletaria, the suggestion of dangerous mystery buried in Yharnam, and the senseless pain of the Sengoku period are crystallized in these betrayals and transformations. When Melina becomes the beast at the apparent end of *Elden Ring’s* history, it begs one last appraisal of her role. Picking up out of the ash the whistle she gifted us; abandoning her reasoned plea to struggle against fate; choosing to kill her own champion. Focusing on her as both the maiden whose monstrous side is waxing and the betrayed shadow whose loyalty is snubbed, the final impression of a cold, wild-haired Melina is a yardstick for the vertiginous depths of cruelty enacted between the moment the camera fades and when it comes up again on her empty expression.

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DEATH (Separation)—Known to be the First Sword, the immortal and cursed weapon which the god Humkt used to bring death to the world. Others claim this to be the first of the Runes citing the separation of the world from chaos as the first action in creation.

*Runequest* (1978), by S. Henderson, W. James, S. Perrin, & R. Turney, p. 58

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## 2025 Addendum: Cosmogony

Since releasing this essay in 2022, I've been questioned by readers about the value to *Elden Ring* of this particular reading of Melina's character. To paraphrase: "Why should the writers continue to focus on this idea of the 'shadow', which is not an obscure or novel idea in the text, in one of the most climactic reveals players will experience?"

I hoped to suggest, by quoting *Runequest on Death and Chaos* (a well-known influence on Miyazaki and Fromsoftware on the whole, giving rise to iconic characters like Quelaag from Cragspider the Firewitch, for example), that Death and the character of the shadow is deeply intertwined with the nature of Order. The "Lord of Frenzied Flame" plotline deals more directly with the origins of the world than virtually any other narrative present in the base game.

Melina's involvement, and her eventual transformation, serves as a capstone to this narrative that reveals the origin of Order as a result of Death imposed on Chaos; that is, when the player is attempting to return everything to its original, formless state as described by the Three Fingers and Hyetta, Melina interposes Death. We can understand her goal here based on her earlier dialogue at the Frenzied Flame Proscription:

However ruined this world has become, however mired in torment and despair... Life endures. Births continue. There is beauty in that, is there not?

I ask you, one more time. Please, seek not the frenzied flame. As one who strives to become a Lord, deny not the lives, the new births of this world. Those who would are not fit to be called Lord. When the land they preside over is lifeless.

You... have inherited the frenzied flame. A pity. You are no longer fit. Our journey together ends here. And remember... Should you rise as the Lord of Chaos, I will kill you, as sure as night follows day. Such is my duty, for allowing you the strength of runes.

She doesn't regret allowing us to use her power as a maiden for any goal that allows for new life to be generated. Specifically, she only wants there to be the possibility of birth, growth and regrowth, which is consistent with her other endings and her vision of fire.

In other words, the use of Melina for her own sake, not as a secret other character, is valuable in this scene, as it follows through on her existing, known motivations. The use of the shadow archetype is valuable in this scene as it engages with the themes of betrayal, death, mismatched vision, transformation and the desire to correct the betrayer that is present in her character in this scene. This microcosmic collision of the elements of Death, Chaos and Order is valuable because it illustrates their dialectical relationship, wherein separation fractures the perfect formlessness of chaos and allows the most basic organization of the world to emerge.

At the risk of ruining the scope and tone of this addendum, I'd like to highlight that the Gloam-Eyed Queen and the cast of characters who are textually related to her do not generally reflect on these things. "Gloom", as much as that word has been abused over the years since I wrote this, refers to the most remote end of the day. Appropriately, an iconic encounter, and likely one of the player's first, with an apostle of hers is in Dominula, where windmills grind and the women harvest skin and bones; this process of harvesting is a cornerstone of the Godskin philosophy, the basis of their dress, and features even in their birth, illustrated by the Godskin Swaddling Cloth.

The prevailing motif here is that they are harvesting and "recycling", so to speak, ordered units of life, especially gods, however you choose to take that, who are by nature found at the centers of ordered cycles of life in the Lands Between. This links back to Miyazaki's original statement on the

Godskin Apostle, that he represents human ambition: from within an existing structure that separates profane and sacred (humans and gods), the apostles, nobles and their queen want to peel apart and reconfigure these existing elements of Order.

It's clear that the narratives of the apostles and nobles, where they appear, do not relate to the key idea in Melina's transformation, which is the production of ordered life from Chaos. I opened this essay by recognizing the narrative value of the Godskin Apostle and set out to privilege characters' stories in understanding *Elden Ring*. To this end, I will consider the nobles and apostles the best and most direct commentary on the Gloam-eyed Queen.