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### **PJ Harvey's Counter-representations of Female Identity on *Dry*, *Rid of Me* and *To Bring You my Love*: Grotesque Mayhem and Gender Disruption.**

#### **Abstract**

Over the course of her thirty-year career, British singer-songwriter PJ Harvey has been widely perceived as a maverick on the independent rock scene, due to the breadth of her artistic palette. As a female performer starting off in the early nineties, Harvey had to navigate the prevailingly masculinist rock industry in order to blaze her own trail. This article focuses on Harvey's representations of female identity in her 1992-1995 three debut albums *Dry* (1992), *Rid of Me* (1993) *To Bring You my Love* (1995), both in her corporeal persona and in her lyrical character gallery. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Harvey's treatment of female identity relies on a grotesque dynamic that foregrounds disruption, contradiction and excess, which conjures up an aesthetics of the extremes. Firstly, we will probe the sexual politics of the early nineties rock milieu in order to identify the gender context which Harvey had to navigate. Secondly, we will examine how Harvey debunks existing scripts of femininity by putting forward corporeal and lyrical counter-narratives of monstrous female identity, conveyed by a gallery of "monstrous feminine" characters. Finally, through a close analysis of Harvey's performance of hyper-femininity, we will investigate Harvey's deployment of gender parody as a grotesque strategy of disruption.



### **Keywords**

rock music - femininity – grotesque - monstrosity- ‘monstrous feminine’ - disruption – contradiction – gender – disgust – transgression

### **Résumé en français**

Depuis ses débuts, l'auteure-compositrice-interprète britannique PJ Harvey s'est distinguée tant par son expérimentalisme que par ses multiples virages esthétiques. En tant qu'artiste de rock débutant dans les années 90, Harvey a dû trouver sa voie au sein d'un milieu rock dont les codes masculins pouvaient faire obstacle aux interprètes féminines.

Cet article se concentre sur les représentations de l'identité féminine dans les albums *Dry* (1992), *Rid of Me* (1993) et *To Bring You my Love* (1995), à travers les incarnations corporelles de Harvey ainsi que ses personnages de chanson. Il s'agira de démontrer que, chez Harvey, l'identité féminine fait l'objet d'un traitement grotesque qui repose sur une dynamique de désordre et de contradiction conduisant à une esthétique des extrêmes.

Tout d'abord, nous sonderons la culture rock du début des années 90 afin d'identifier le discours de genre avec lequel Harvey a dû composer. Ensuite, nous examinerons comment Harvey met à mal les mythes de l'idéal féminin par le biais de deux types de contre-récits grotesques : d'une part l'identité féminine s'incarne dans une galerie de personnages de type « monstrueux féminin », d'autre part, elle apparaît sous les traits d'une hyperféminité outrancière frôlant la parodie de genre.

### **Mots-clefs**

musique rock - féminité – grotesque - monstruosité – ‘le monstrueux féminin’ - désordre – contradiction - genre – dégoût – transgression –



## **Outline**

### **Problematising Female Identity in Rock: The Pitfalls of Female Performance in Rock**

#### **A. The Female Rock Performer as Cultural Other**

#### B. Early 90's Female Performers and the Rock Idiom

### **The Monstrous Feminine as Grotesque Shock Tactics**

#### A. The 'Monstrous Feminine': Female Archetypes in Popular Culture

#### B. Harvey's Embodied 'Monstrous Feminine'

#### C. The 'Monstrous Feminine' in Songs

### ***To Bring You my Love*, the All-feminine and Performing Femininity to Ludicrous Extremes**

#### A. The 'All-feminine': Femininity in Bold

#### B. '50ft Queenie': Performing Femininity in Drag



## **PJ Harvey's Representations of Female Identity on *Dry*, *Rid of Me* and *To Bring You my Love*: Grotesque Mayhem and Gender Disruption**

British singer-songwriter PJ Harvey is widely perceived as a maverick on the independent rock scene. Over the course of her thirty-year career, Harvey has baffled both rock conventions and fans' expectations by constantly reshuffling her musical styles and self-representations.

Her repertoire jump-cuts from the grunge-inflected sonic of her 1992-1993 debut albums (*Dry* [1992], and *Rid of Me* [1993]) to an expansive gothic blues pastoral (*To Bring You My Love* [1995]), an electronic-inspired endeavour (*Is this Desire?* [1998]), a foray into slick FM rock (*Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea* [2000]), a stripped piano-led piece (*White Chalk* [2007]), and more recently to a distinctive blend of rock, pop and folk music (*Let England Shake* [2011] and *Hope Six Demolition Project* [2016]).

Although Harvey's music operates through abrupt stylistic shifts from one album to another, it presents a few set characteristics: firstly, it exhibits a Gothic fascination with violence, gross corporeality and psychic disturbances as we shall see<sup>1</sup>, and secondly, much of it also displays grotesque sensitivities in its propensity for exaggeration, transgression and extreme ambivalence (Thompson 1972). In this respect, Harvey's song-writing can be conceived of as a "Gothic writing of excess", namely a form of writing underpinned by "a pattern of transgression, excess and monstrosity" (Botting 1996,1). Her early nineties albums make for an unpredictable and confrontational listen indeed, alternately rebuffing the audience with sonic assaults (discordance, screams, grating sounds), horrific lyrics and song characters, and coaxing them with playfulness and (black) humour.

This research works from the premise that Harvey stages a (grotesque) "civil war of attraction and repulsion" (Harpham 9) which affects her texts, self-representations and performance dynamics. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that on her three debut albums *Dry* [1992] *Rid of Me* [1993] and *To Bring You My Love* [1995], Harvey pulverises established assumptions about female identity (and indeed her personal identity) by resorting to a grotesque "pattern of disruption and contradiction" (Harpham 1982) which foregrounds paradox, extravagance and transgression. Firstly, in order to stake out Harvey's operative field as a female rock performer, the focus will be on the challenging sexual politics of the early nineties rock scene. Secondly, we will argue that, in response to the pitfalls of female rock performance, Harvey debunks existing scripts of femininity by deploying grotesque shock tactics reliant on two antithetical depictions of femininity. On the one hand, through a character gallery of counter-representations of femininity, she portrays female identity as essentially repulsive, which conjures up "the Monstrous Feminine" (Creed 1993, drawing on Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory). On the other hand, we will examine Harvey's subsequent shift to the "all-feminine" as a grotesque portrayal of conventional femininity to ludicrous extremes which verges on gender parody.

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<sup>1</sup> Punter identifies taboo, paranoia and the barbaric as the centrepiece for Gothic aesthetics (Punter 1980).



## 1. Problematising Female Identity in Rock: The Pitfalls of Female Performance in Rock

Musically, the albums *Dry* and *Rid of Me* share a low-fi grunge anti-aesthetic (minimalist instrumentation and arrangements, DIY vocal style). This anti-aesthetic relies on an antagonistic pattern of sonic opposites: discordance versus silence, sing-screaming versus muffled vocal effects, claustrophobic soundscapes versus sonic outbursts of saturated instrumentation and pounding percussions. This extreme sonic alternation makes the listener oscillate between sensory deprivation and sensory overload, and causes a disruptive musical experience. By contrast, *To Bring You my Love* is an expansive blues rock piece with rich orchestration and harmonies, and a broad vocal range.

In her debut albums Harvey focuses on female subjective formation, which she articulates in terms of psycho-sexual disturbances. Her songs exhibit a fascination with the underbelly of humanity in general and that of femininity in particular, hence a gallery of deranged female protagonists: psychopaths compulsively inflicting pain on others (e.g., Harvey's "Down by the Water"[1995]), narcissists enjoying the spectacle of their own violence onto others (e.g., "Rid of Me" [1993]), and sadomasochistic lovers equating desire with death, pain and eroticised disgust.

Harvey's female protagonists thus cover a broad spectrum of psychic disarray: fear of social and sexual inadequacy (e.g., "Dress"), barbaric impulses (e.g., "Happy and Bleeding", "Hair", "Plants and Rags", "Hook"), lack of desire (e.g., "Dry"), infanticidal tendencies ("I think I am a mother", "Down by the water"), sexual grandiosity (e.g., "Sheela-na-gig", the phallic woman in "50ft Queenie"), and revenge torture fantasies (e.g., "Rid of Me", "Legs", "Rub till it Bleeds", "Snake"). As Harvey relocates the barbaric to the core of romantic relationships, sexuality becomes a psychic and corporeal battlefield, and the site of friction and the barbaric.

In order to contextualise Harvey's counter-representations of female identity, it is worth staking out Harvey's structural position as a female performer in the rock apparatus of the early nineties. In particular, she grapples with two structural issues pertaining to the rock apparatus: cultural othering and the rock canon itself.

### The Female Performer as Cultural Other

The most explicit mark of cultural othering shows in the name of the sub-category that Harvey belongs to: "women in rock", a term widely used in rock journalism and criticism. Music studies critic Marion Leonard (Leonard 2007) insightfully comments that the very term "women *in* rock" epitomises the problematic status of female rock performers, in that it overtly peculiarises their presence in the industry. The phrase "women in rock" thus posits women as a minority group in an implicitly male industry.

Another issue which female rock performers grapple with is the operative framework of rock as an ideology reliant upon shared beliefs, ideals and myths which are not immune to gender bias. In their seminal study "Rock and Sexuality" (Frith and Mc Robbie 1978), Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie formulate rock as an artistic ideology, a mode of expression and control that constructs sexuality, and ultimately reinforces conventional scripts of femininity and masculinity (Frith and Mc Robbie 373). Subsequent critical works went on to probe the implications of the masculinist discourse of rock in terms of



rebellion strategies and gender identity (e.g., Simon Reynolds and Joy Press 1995; Lori Burns and Melissa Lafrance 2002), female subjective formation and gender construction (e.g., Sheila Whiteley 2005). Therefore, because female rock performers operate within a genre coded as expressive and affirmative of masculine values,<sup>2</sup> they are implicitly posited as cultural *others*.

### Early 90's Female Performers and the Rock Idiom

Moreover, the rock idiom itself was problematic for early nineties female rock performers, in that when they engaged with the rock canon (i.e., passion, excess, rebellion, and confrontation), they were widely misconstrued by the rock milieu as driven by “*female anger*” and dismissed for borderline hysteria. As I have shown elsewhere, Leonard demonstrates that in the early nineties the performance of anger and excess leads to diametrically opposed critical interpretations across the gender divide: whereas in such male artists as Kurt Cobain, the self-destructive streak is glorified and mythologised as emblematic of iconic artistic persona, in women such as Harvey, it is pathologised and dismissed as personal ill-health, thereby othering her behaviour as expressive of femaleness rather than rock canon (Leonard 31-32 and Girodet 86-87). Therefore, the very act of using the rock idiom is fraught for female rock singers whose performance of rebellion and excess may be misconstrued as a mere gender signifier. Consequently, insofar as they are both othered and constricted by dominant gender representations of femininity, female rock artists such as Harvey need to construct themselves discursively and deploy disruptive strategies in order to escape the limitations of the “women in rock” interpretative framework.

A cursory look at Harvey's contemporary female peers reveals two types of discursive strategies: some of them blazed a peculiar *female* trail with its own imagery and iconography (e.g., Kate Bush, Tori Amos, Sinéad O'Connor), while others emulated male rock-stars (e.g., tomboys Patti Smith and Joan Jett).<sup>3</sup> However, there was also a third female rocker position, albeit mostly post-punk and North-American: the feminist (punk) indie-rock of the Riot Grrls movement with its defiant confrontation of dominant sexual ideologies. Such bands as Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear unleashed an unprecedented backlash against patriarchy by producing counter-narratives on sexuality, with a focus on domestic abuse, rape, and the shortcomings of heteronormative sexuality. Grunge singer Courtney Love expressed similar feminist sensitivities and frustrations and debunked the myth of compliant femininity with confrontational lyrics and Kinderwhore attire.<sup>4</sup> The Riot Grrls encapsulate the early 1990s *Zeitgeist* and the frustration of gender politics on the rock music scene.

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<sup>2</sup> Norma Coates (Coates 77-79) points out the exclusionary mechanisms at work in the construction of the archetypal rock performer as inherently male, whilst Marion Leonard exposes the gender bias that pervades rock-writing and canonising, whereby women are significantly under-represented (Leonard 31-32).

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds and Press distinguish four categories of female rock rebellion in the early eighties: the “can do” approach (i.e., emulating men), and three subcategories of female rock (infusing rock with femininity, celebrating femaleness, and focusing on the pangs of identity formation). (Reynolds and Press 230-235).

<sup>4</sup> The Kinderwhore look was created and popularised by Courtney Love and a few other early nineties female punk / indie rock artists. It combined torn babydoll dresses or nighties, school-girls' favourites Mary-Jane shoes. An image of sexualised childhood, it combined elements of childhood innocence (the school-girl look, the nightie) with sexualised elements (cleavage, heavy make-up, babydoll dresses).



In their shared focus on the pitfalls of femininity and female sexuality within the patriarchy, Harvey's two debut albums *Dry* and *Rid of Me* reflect the gender preoccupations of their age. However, Harvey consistently steered clear of engaging with collective female identity politics, and her songscape is too idiosyncratic to be typecast as downright feminist.

Judith Peraino (Peraino 1998) insightfully theorises Harvey's early nineties refusal to discuss her song inspirations or personal views on gender roles and feminism as an artful response to the inescapability of gender. In dissociating her personal experience and politics from her songs, Harvey conjures up an enigmatic public persona which puzzles the phallogentric rock milieu and precludes linear feminist and sexist interpretations alike. Building upon Peraino's argument that Harvey strategically uses inaccessibility as a baffling response to the "inescapable gender" issue, I would argue that Harvey also formulates a boisterous response reliant on grotesque patterns of gender disruption.

On the albums *Dry* and *Rid of Me*, and *To Bring You My Love*, Harvey debunks essentialist gender assumptions by putting forward two extreme counter-narratives of femininity: one that runs counter to conventional scripts of femininity (akin to Creed's "Monstrous feminine") and one that overdoes femininity in bold ("the All-Feminine"). This article works from the premise that both of Harvey's counter-narratives of femininity unfold according to grotesque patterns that involve extravagance and exaggeration, abnormality, extreme ambivalence, disharmony and playfulness (Thomson 20-28). I contend that both the "Monstrous Feminine" and the "All-Feminine" partake of grotesque shock tactics that turn established gender assumptions on their heads and leave the listener 'stunned, bewildered or nonplussed' (Thomson 47), which is a staple effect of grotesque aesthetics on reception.

## 2. The 'Monstrous Feminine' as Grotesque Shock Tactics

As part of her shock tactics, Harvey debases femininity in a manner akin to Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque, namely by desecrating the feminine ideal and repudiating it into the lower bodily stratum (Bakhtin 19-20).<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin's formulation of grotesque realism as a drive towards the concrete applies to Harvey's portrayal of femininity in that she brings down dominant femininity by drowning it out in gross corporeality and barbaric impulses. On both albums, the female body is radically desanitised and the female psyche is consistently portrayed on the psychic edge, which reverses the feminine ideal and conjures up female monstrosity.

Abigail Gardner (Gardner 2015) theorises Harvey's video performances of femininity not only as 'masquerades' (Riviere, 1991, 90-102), but also as essentially archival in their interplay with an existing reservoir of feminine archetypes. Conflating the phrases 'masquerade' and 'cultural memory', Gardner's coinage 'memorade' aptly reframes Harvey's video performances of femininity within a cultural conversation with 'visualised memories of archetypes of femininity' (Gardner 70)

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<sup>5</sup> "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity." (Bakhtin 19-20)



## The 'Monstrous Feminine': Female Archetypes in Popular Culture

Expanding upon Gardner's argument about Harvey's cultural interplay, I contend that Harvey's lyrical and corporeal impersonations of femininity draw upon a cultural reservoir of archetypal female monsters, notably the witch, the Medusa, and the possessed woman (Girodet 99). As such, Harvey's femininities can insightfully be examined through the filter of the 'Monstrous Feminine' as formulated by feminist film theorist Barbara Creed (Creed 1993). Creed theorises the 'Monstrous Feminine' in relation to feminist Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory of the abject and the maternal. Kristeva defines abjection as 'that which does not respect borders, positions, rules', that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 4). Because the abject threatens life's integrity, it must be "radically excluded" (Kristeva 2) from the living subject, and cast out on the other side of an imaginary border (see Girodet 99-100 for further analysis). Kristeva thus locates abjection in liminality, the mother-child relationship and the feminine body. Building upon Kristeva's theory of the abject, Creed argues that monstrous representations of womanhood in popular culture primarily rely upon its sexuality and reproductive functions, hence a typology of monstrous female archetypes encompassing the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the possessed woman, and the witch. In foregrounding the centrality of gender in the cultural construction of monstrosity, Creed's 'monstrous-feminine' brings to light the affinities of the female gender with the monstrous in the popular consciousness.

I argue that in its focus on repulsive biology, Harvey's portrayal of female identity taps into the 'the monstrous feminine' imaginary, as part of a disruptive strategy that flouts the culturally dominant scripts of femininity and conjures up an aesthetic of disgust (Girodet 88-105). It is also noteworthy that Harvey's counter-representations of femininity surface both in her embodied artistic personae and in her lyrical impersonations.

### Harvey's Embodied 'Monstrous Feminine'

Using her own body as a site for identity deconstruction, Harvey puts forward monstrous self-representations, thereby adopting extreme corporal personae to match her albums' aesthetics. She thus morphs into a repulsive Medusa on the artwork of *Dry* and *Rid of Me* and into a duplicitous seductive diva on *To Bring You My Love*<sup>6</sup>. In both instances, her self-representations embody different sides of the "monstrous feminine": the Medusa persona revolts with her warped sexuality and sadistic impulses, while the duplicitous diva persona simultaneously solicits and rebuffs with her flirtatious barbaric smile.

Harvey thus experiments with *female* monster-mongering by turning her body into a shape-shifting album protagonist, thereby taking spectacular control of both her public persona and gender, and rendering them contradictory and unstable. As she rattles the cage of her gendered body, Harvey stages a "carnal insurrection" (Reynolds and Press 337) whereby she turns the female body (and her own) into the site of an epistemic crisis. Harvey's 'carnal insurrection' is enabled by the fact that as an embodied medium, popular

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<sup>6</sup> Artwork covers can be respectively seen at <https://pjarvey.net/music/dry-demos/> and <https://pjarvey.net/music/to-bring-you-my-love/>. Accessed 01/05/2022.





music foregrounds the corporeality of the performer, since the musician lends their voice, body language, and public persona to their music (Hebdige 55-65).

Through this incarnation process, the musician's body thus becomes a signifying practice which entails a choice of signifiers, performance strategies, and semantics of self-representations to be decoded by the listeners/viewers. In Harvey's instance, she uses her *corporeal* subjectivity, namely her corporeal persona, as an aesthetic foil for her musical text: she enacts the 'Monstrous Feminine' in the flesh.

Harvey's radical use of her body as a medium can be read as Body Art, a type of contemporary art in which the artist uses their own body as a canvas or artwork.<sup>7</sup> Harvey's strategy of non-alignment in her early self-representations echoes early 1970s feminist Body Art in its refusal to abide by existing stereotypes of femininity and its consistent flouting of social taboos. In exposing the unofficial part of female sexuality, 1970s body art subverts the representation of womanhood in art and thus reclaims female artistic and corporeal agency. In line with such 1970s feminist body artists as Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Ewa Partum, and Lynn Hershman Leeson, Harvey turns her body into an artistic battleground against conventional femininity. Whilst Harvey makes full use of her corporeal subjectivity to stage an embodied assault on essentialist assumptions of femininity, she also weaves the Monstrous Feminine into her lyrical character gallery.

### The 'Monstrous Feminine' in Songs

Harvey's 'Monstrous Feminine' self-representations find their lyrical match in a character gallery ripe with taboo female corporeality (such as menstrual bleeding, excess or lack of sexual appetite, and warped maternal instinct) and in subversive rewrites of conventional hetero-normative scripts of romance. In her portrayal of womanhood as gross corporeality, Harvey uses exaggeration as a conduit to abjection: she degrades the female body by alternately de-sexualising and over-sexualising it. In the song 'Dry' (1993), Harvey rips up the myth of compliant female sexuality by impersonating a character who flaunts the taboo of frigidity in her lover's face by repeating 'you leave me dry' like a mantra. Conversely, in 'Sheela-Na-Gig' (1992), the 'Monstrous Feminine' surfaces as crude female over-sexuality in grotesque overload.<sup>8</sup> The protagonist tries to seduce her lover with a self-conscious performance of womanhood (i.e., 'Look at these my child-bearing hips/Look at these my ruby-red, ruby lips') that accumulates conventional signifiers of femininity (e.g., lipstick, breasts, curves), and yet she is brutally dismissed by her lover as filthy. 'Sheela-Na-Gig' thus conjures up a form of female monstrosity issuing from outsize femaleness, whereby woman's sexuality becomes abject precisely because it is no longer discursively contained or sanitised.

Another form of 'Monstrous Feminine' occurs in the shape of menstrual blood, in such songs as 'Happy and Bleeding' (1992) and 'Me Jane' (1993). In the latter song, Jane reclaims her territory from Tarzan by hollering her femaleness to a pounding soundscape: 'Move it over Tarzan can't you see I am bleeding'. Both instances testify to Harvey's use of the corporeal taboo as a means to convey a portrait of womanhood that runs against

<sup>7</sup> "Body Art." *Tate*. Tate, 2015. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/b/body-art>. Accessed 01/05/2022.

<sup>8</sup> Sheela-Na-Gig : a traditional celtic fertility icon who squats and exhibits exaggerated genitalia, whom Harvey turns into a lusty hermaphrodite (See "Sheela-Na-Gig." *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* for a more detailed definition and Girodet 102 for a detailed analysis of Harvey's use of Sheela No Gig).



the sanitised sensitivities of society and culture, whilst highlighting the monstrous affinities of womanhood.

Moreover, Harvey subverts hetero-normative romantic archetypes such as Sleeping Beauty and Prince Charming, as well as Romeo and Juliet by infusing them with the 'Monstrous Feminine'. In 'Hardly Wait' (1994), a transgressive rewrite of the traditional tale 'Sleeping Beauty', Harvey articulates sexual desire in sadomasochistic overtones, thereby debunking the myth of the passive woman ignited back to life by Prince Charming. The song hinges on a reversal of expectations: whereas the title 'Hardly Wait' expresses eager sexual anticipation, the song actually deals with lust gone stale and lack of desire, as conveyed by the repulsive imagery evocative of death and decay (e.g., 'lips cracked dry' and 'tongue blue burst')

Much to darkly comic effect, during the seduction ritual, the protagonist implores her lover to make her waters break. The intrusion of the mothering taboo imparts abjection to the love ritual, which causes a mix of discomfort and unholy glee on the part of the listener.

The protagonist also exposes the performativity of the romantic ritual when she says that she will 'play the part'-of Sleeping Beauty and by extension, of the passive female. Finally, where conventional fairy tale princesses swoon in the arms of their beloved, Harvey's heroine sadistically promises to 'open this mouth wide/and eat your (his) heart'. Consequently, Harvey's rewrite turns the traditional script of 'Sleeping Beauty' on its head: the female protagonist is wide awake indeed, and she transforms conventional romantic rituals into a barbaric feast. The final lines further reverse the tale, as the repeated lines 'In my glass coffin I am waiting' are sung with vocal distortions evoking sinister demise rather than the proverbial happy ending of fairy tales. In this sadistic rewrite of hetero-normative romantic rituals, Harvey turns sexuality into the site of friction where the 'Monstrous Feminine' arises from the cracks of warped sexuality and crude corporeality.

Finally, Harvey also uses maternal monstrosity as a centrepiece of abjection, through a portrayal of motherhood that subverts the scripts of maternal injunction. Her 1995 album *To Bring You My Love* thus features two disturbing songs about the maternal: 'Down by the Water', in which the infanticidal heroine playfully sings about drowning her daughter, and 'I Think I Am a Mother', where pregnancy is depicted as an ambivalent ordeal. Harvey thus casts doubt on the myth of maternal fulfilment as the ultimate accomplishment in a woman's life.

Through her 'Monstrous Feminine' song protagonists, Harvey portrays the female body as the site where essentialist assumptions collapse: female identity is depicted not as contained and domesticated, but as unpredictable, barbaric and wild. However, this Bakhtinian grotesque strategy of degradation of the feminine ideal is only one aspect of Harvey's gendered monster-mongering: she also resorts to gender parody as a grotesque strategy of disruption.



### 3. *To Bring You my Love*, the All-feminine and Performing Femininity to Ludicrous Extremes

Alongside her monstrous feminine rendition of female identity and as part of a grotesque strategy of extravagance and exaggeration, Harvey overblows femininity to ludicrous extremes.

#### The 'All-feminine': Femininity in Bold

In 1995, with the album *To Bring You my Love*, Harvey radically overhauls her rendition of femininity and switches from a 'Monstrous Feminine' to an 'All-Feminine' character gallery, which she embodies with a new diva persona in a red silk dress, high heels, and heavy facial make-up.<sup>9</sup> Whilst the female song protagonists of *To Bring You My Love* retain barbaric traits such as aggressive and murderous impulses, they also convey more conventional love pining (e.g., 'To Bring You my Love', 'The Dancer', and 'Send His Love to Me'), as well as fantastical outsize femaleness (e.g., 'Long Snake Moan', 'Meet Ze Monsta').

Whilst instilling radical instability into both her song world and persona, Harvey's abrupt stylistic shift from monstrous anti-femininity to hyper-femininity may be more structurally coherent than meets the eye. Indeed, in conveying femininity with an accumulation of signifiers (e.g., lipstick, red dress, high heels), Harvey's all-feminine foregrounds the performativity of gender, thereby turning dominant femininity into an extravagant accoutrement. This propensity for exaggeration and excess instils a ludicrous slant to both her impersonations (Harvey's diva attire multiplies, as seen in the artwork cover and live performances of the album *To Bring You my Love*) and song protagonists, which locates Harvey's 'All-feminine' within a grotesque operative framework, much like her 'Monstrous Feminine'. Therefore, whilst outwardly at odds, Harvey's 'monstrous feminine' and 'all-feminine' function as two sides of one and the same grotesque strategy of gender disruption whereby Harvey debunks the myths of femininity by mixing and matching signifiers.

Moreover, Harvey's performance of the All-Feminine points to a strategic overdoing of femininity whereby Harvey's over-accumulation of signifiers of conventional femininity suggests mimicry and parody rather than gender alignment. This self-conscious performance of gender brings to mind feminist cultural theorists such as Tori Moi, Mary Ann Doane, Luce Irigaray who have elaborated on grotesque gender parody as conscious strategizing through exaggeration. Doane's analysis of gender mimicry is a particularly illuminating tool to examine Harvey's overdoing of femininity. Doane postulates that in overdoing femininity, mimicry makes femininity 'strange' ("Mimicry as a political strategy makes it possible for the female spectator to understand that recognition is buttressed by misrecognition", Doane 182).

Building upon Doane's notion of 'making-strange', I contend that Harvey's overdoing of conventional femininity exposes it as a mere performance in character, which points to the constructedness of gender. This strategy brings to mind 1990s gender theorist Judith Butler's contention that gender identity is a cultural construct which is performed on the

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.artovercovers.com/2019/11/07/pj-harvey/>  
<https://www.nme.com/news/music/pj-harvey-73-1312884>  
<https://pjharvey.net/music/to-bring-you-my-love/> Accessed 01/05/2022.



surface of the body, through a series of words, gestures, and acts that fabricate the illusion of a gender core, whereas there is no such thing as a unified and steady gender core (Butler 1990). In Harvey's terms, such gender signifiers as dress, make-up, high heels, pouting are as many props enabling and enforcing the performance of femininity, and also invite the grotesque carnivalesque with its focus the extravagant and the ludicrous. This grotesque rendition of femininity as outrageous mimicry surfaces in the camp corporeal style of her 1993-1996 personae and culminates in the song '50 ft Queenie' (1993) which as a glaring instance of femininity in drag warrants closer scrutiny.

### **'50ft Queenie': Performing Femininity in Drag**

'50ft Queenie' is bold as brass rock, a raging tale of self-affirmation by a phallic uber-female, a song of reverse machismo where the female protagonist boasts her phallic size and compares herself successively to a queen, a king, and a force 10 hurricane. The song's tempo is fast and furious, its soundscape bursting with the raw energy of abrasive guitar-work and sung-screamed vocals. The percussive sound matches the aggressive self-affirmation of the protagonist who claims to be 'number one, second to no-one', and keeps taunting the listener to 'come on and measure' her, repeatedly bragging about her measurements (rising from 20 to 30, 40, and finally 50 inches long).

The song is a quintessential grotesque number ripe with excess, the satirical and the playful. Its larger-than-life protagonist flirts with supernatural omnipotence ('Biggest woman /I could have ten sons /Ten gods /Ten queens'), and her self-aggrandising reaches ludicrous proportion (starting at 10 foot in height and finishing at 50) against a backdrop of brazen antagonism ('I'll tell you my name: F-U-C-K'). It is also noteworthy that as a supernatural female who mixes and matches biological attributes (she boasts a womb *and* a phallus), 50ft Queenie collapses gender boundaries. The phallic female of "50ft Queenie" marked the early nineties independent rock scene with her parodic take on macho bravado, and can be read as a gibe at male rock-stars and their performance of macho heterosexuality (e.g., 'cock-rock' antiques).

Moreover, by re-assigning phallic omnipotence to a female protagonist, Harvey affirms a third sexual act (and identity) that wreaks havoc with the hetero-normative matrix. '50ft Queenie' stands out as an outstanding piece of carnivalesque grotesque: it is comically extravagant and ludicrous, and it transgresses the boundaries of gender, proportion, and normality. The song is a uniquely jubilant genderfuck<sup>10</sup> flaunt in the face of the dominant masculinity and heteronormativity of the early nineties.

Harvey's contradictory performances and impersonations of femininity can be read as a carnival of feminine signifiers that exposes the unreliability of gender identity. The proliferation of monstrous female avatars thus suggests that not only is femininity

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<sup>10</sup> "Genderfuck" (more commonly known as gender-bending) originates from 1970s gay vernacular, and was theorised by American sociologist Laud Humphreys' 1972 work *Out of the Closets: Sociology of Homosexual Liberation*, and subsequently popularised in the August 1972 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, in reference to the glam rock style and a new "macho" transvestism mixing signifiers of femininity (i.e., make up, dresses, pumps, full make-up) and macho virility (beards, bodily hair). The term "gender-fuck" has been widely used to describe the act of consciously and conspicuously challenging established gender binary conventions through androgyny, hyperbole, and cross-dressing. In LGBT studies, the term can also refer to a deliberate strategy of sending mixed messages about one's gender as part of a strategy of social activism.



fabricated through performance, but so is Harvey. Along with her first-person narrative impersonations, Harvey puts forward what feminist theorist Judith Butler calls 'corporeal styles', namely 'an "act" which is both intentional and performative, where *'performative'* suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' (Butler 190). Harvey thus gives flesh to Butler's argument that gender has no intrinsic existence, and is only a cultural fantasy projected on the surface of the body.

Furthermore, in impersonating such camp<sup>11</sup> femininities as '50ft Queenie', Harvey effectively queers her own gender, performing it a double drag which comically exposes the purely 'imitative structure of gender' (Butler 187) and therefore its vacuity. Therefore, if Harvey's drag is a social performance that creates gender reality according to a strictly imitative pattern, so is her persona a pure reflection without an original, a projection with no intrinsic substance. In other words, she turns herself into a shape-shifting artistic grotesque that forever confounds interpretation.

## Conclusion

Throughout her 1992-95 lyrical and physical masquerade, Harvey toys with the dissonance between anatomical sex and gender identity, thereby debunking essentialist gender assumptions. While this disruptive stance is in line with the preoccupations of many of her contemporary female rock performers, it is unique in its reliance upon the peculiarly antithetical structure of her grotesque shock tactics. At one end of the spectrum, Harvey uses 'the Monstrous Feminine' as a Bakhtinian grotesque means to debase the feminine ideal through an aesthetic of disgust. At the other end of the spectrum, Harvey debunks conventional femininity by making it nonsensical and ludicrous. In presenting multiple counter-narratives of femininity, she places polymorphism and unreliability at the core of female identity, thereby rendering dominant scripts of femininity inoperative.

Grotesque theorist Harpham theorises that for an object to qualify as grotesque, it must arouse three responses: laughter, astonishment, and either disgust or horror (Harpham 1976, 463). Harvey's extreme counter-representations of femininity match all three criteria: their extreme outlandishness astonishes and occasionally disgusts the receiver, leaving them torn between horror and laughter.

Moreover, not only does Harvey convey her portrayal of gender identity by grotesque means, but she also puts herself across as grotesque. Insofar as Harvey's persona seems just as unpredictable, shape-shifting, and contradictory as her music, she qualifies as a 'grotesque subject' as defined by Sara Cohen Shabot, namely 'a figure of inner estrangement foregrounding otherness within self' (Cohen Shabot 63). In other words, as a 'grotesque subject', Harvey embodies plural ways of being, a state of constant flux and becoming. Harvey's gender strategy partakes of a wider grotesque pattern of disruption and contradiction which underpins her entire musical career, and has enabled her to effect abrupt stylistic shifts and experiment with paradoxical aesthetics such as the eroticisation of disgust, psychic and corporeal *grotesquerie*, as well as with more mainstream pop rock imagery.

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<sup>11</sup> We understand the word 'camp' as per Susan Sontag's theory of camp as an aesthetic reliant upon artifice, over-stylisation, irony, playfulness and extravagance. (Sontag 1964).



I would argue that this early strategy of extreme mutability enabled Harvey to create a level playing field whereby her own persona is so unreliable that it baffles linear interpretation, and therefore emancipates her from the cultural gender expectations of the rock milieu. After such extremes of contradictory self-representations, Harvey's persona is stripped of any permanent core, and morphs into a *tabula rasa* to be projected on. This set the tone for her subsequent thirty-year career, as Harvey's lyrical and corporeal impersonations have been consistently unpredictable and shape-shifting: in turn cool urban girl, 'Madwoman in the attic' Victoriana and sexy rock chick, Harvey's work and corporeal personae have been consistently put forward polymorphous femininities.

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