

# MARGIN

## THE DIVAS ISSUE

Volume I, Spring 2012  
Haverford College

**Margin** is Haverford College's student-edited themed publication. Each issue features a topic marginalized in academic discourses, presenting submissions of critical essays, reviews, creative writing, visual media, and any other artifacts that critically or creatively engage the theme. We seek to publish the work of students, scholars, artists, musicians, and writers, both from within and outside of the Haverford community.

[haverford.edu/margin](http://haverford.edu/margin)

[margin.journal@gmail.com](mailto:margin.journal@gmail.com)

- - -

*Margin*: The Divas Issue  
Volume 1, Spring 2012

Editorial Board

Alex Jacobs '14

Rachel Kobasa '13

Alethea Rockwell '12

Waleed Shahid '13

Hannah Silverblank '12 / Editor-in-Chief & Founder

Design by Duncan Cooper / [soogood.org](http://soogood.org)

Sponsored by the John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities,  
Haverford College / [haverford.edu/hcah](http://haverford.edu/hcah)

## **WHEN BEYONCÉ**

*Samuel Fox* ..... 10

## **Safety First**

*Nike Desis* ..... 11

## **“The song nobody knows”: Reexamining the Dangers of the Siren Song**

*Hannah Silverblank* ..... 14

## **The Mermaid Eftalya**

*Gail Holst-Warhaft* ..... 53

## **Reasons I Don't Use the Word Diva, #1 and #14**

*Jane Holloway* ..... 55

## **The Presentation of Fame in Everyday Life: The Case of Lady Gaga**

*Mathieu Deflem* ..... 58

## **Curly Is a Diva**

*Curly* ..... 69

## **Portrait of the Abbess as a Pop-Culture Diva: How Hildegard Became a New Age Superstar and Why It Makes Me So Nervous**

*Maud McInerney* ..... 72

## **DR in Human/Pleiadian Form**

*K-Fai Steele* ..... 85

## **Madeline Kahn and a Bottle of Bread**

*Alex Sugiura* ..... 86

## **i just wanna b free**

*sylvie* ..... Attached CD

## Letter from the Editor

“A diva is a female version of a hustla,” or so Beyoncé claimed in her 2008 single, “Diva.” While I must admit to a secret past as a Beyoncé fan, this lyric has always been a source of tension and discomfort for me. Colloquial use of the term “hustla” usually refers to a male who dedicates his focus and energy to money-making pursuits, which often include drug-dealing and pimping (according to online slang dictionaries and my general sense of the word’s application in popular music). So how is the figure of the “hustla” definitive of—or even relevant to—divadom?

My best guess would be that Beyoncé regards the experience of divadom primarily as a kind of opulence—“gettin’ money, divas gettin’ money,” indeed!—that is attained through some abstract combination of cleverness and bad-assery, which she locates in the figure of the “hustla.” Different iterations of the diva’s extreme wealth seem to occupy most of the song’s lyrical content, though a listener might find glimpses of a more dynamic divadom.

In Beyoncé’s defense:

Our singer sketches a portrait of the diva as triumphant success story: “Fifty million round the world / And they said that I couldn’t get it.”

She presents herself as a figure that actively engages with her own royal reception and fame: “I know you read the paper / The one that they call a queen.”

She posits a divaic identity which is both aware of its multi-media success and is also constituted within the media itself: “Every radio round the world know me / ‘Cause that’s where I be.”

She acknowledges that the diva stands alone in her greatness: “Take it to another level / No passengers on my plane.”

One aspect of divadom seems conspicuously absent from Beyoncé's definition of the diva: the voice. This omission is particularly surprising coming from a celebrity vocalist, who uses the very medium of her voice to carry these strange assertions. Why does Beyoncé orient the diva's power within her acquisition of money and fame, rather than within the potency of her song and voice? And furthermore, why should a diva be defined as a "female version" of some male original? Can a diva really be called a "female version" of anything—let alone a "hustla"—when the term's own operative origins align it with a feminine voice?

In popular American music of the past two or three decades, some male singers have attained tenuous claims to divadom (Elton John; Stevie Wonder; Prince, among others). These examples are exceptional, however, for these stars are usually rendered in popular discourse as a "male version of a diva," rather than as divas themselves. For example, when Elton John performed at VH1's 1999 program, "Divas Live," he was not included in the ranks of divas like Tina Turner, Cher, and Whitney Houston, but rather was described as an "honorary diva"; Stevie Wonder has performed at three of the program's ten installations, but always as a "special guest performer" instead of a headlining diva. Thus I find it particularly strange that Beyoncé both excludes the voice as a component of divadom and situates her diva status as relational and secondary to a masculine original.

Though Beyoncé's vision of the diva does not sit well with me, her song "Diva" stands out as one of the only self-conscious dissections of the theme that has reached a mass audience. In popular usage, the term "diva" has come to signify a range of characteristics. It can be used to refer to a female pop singer with a powerful voice and wide commercial success. We often ascribe the "diva" epithet to people or characters whom we render dramatic, demanding, pushy, difficult, and/or excessive; divas can be dangerous, (self-)destructive, volatile, and stormy. The term "diva" can also arouse conceptions of greatness, divinity, fame, power, and seduction. And while this repository of qualities does not always seem coherent or unified, none of these "divaic" characteristics are mutually exclusive.

Despite (or because of?) this excess of meanings, the term “diva” is often tossed around freely and without much clarification. We say it and see it regularly—in news headlines like “Sarah Palin, Diva?”; in book titles like *Diva: The Totally Unauthorized Biography of Whitney Houston*—but what do we mean when we say the word “diva”? What do we hope to convey when we call someone a diva? What kind of speech or communication results from this utterance?

When I first became interested in diva studies, these vague questions intrigued me, and I was eager to find the answer. And as it turns out, I wasn't alone. Ever since I first expressed a critical interest in divas, all of my friends, family, peers, and professors have voiced a specific pair of questions which engage my uncertainties about the meaning of the word “diva”:

First question: “Is [*insert name of any person who is a female singer/a sassy person/a powerful presence/a loud-voiced person/a controversial figure here*] a diva?”

Second question: “Well, wait, what is a diva, after all?”

Okay, okay, fine, I'll tell you. After all, this journal seems to be a pretty fitting vehicle for me to transmit my vision of divadom.

After about a year of dedicated inquiry, I've decided that the definition of a diva is...

No, wait, I won't say! I can't say. Unlike Beyoncé, I don't intend to posit an essentialist or universal definition of the term “diva”; so it seems that I must sincerely apologize to the reader who has picked up the Divas issue of *Margin* in attempt to finally resolve the burning, unanswered questions that divadom invokes. Instead, rather than resolving the question, I hope that the work of this journal will open and reveal new avenues of inquiry, as the various contributions engage the broad theme of “divas” through particular lenses and media. I believe that this collection of diva studies works toward a

critical divadom in intellectual, creative, and suggestive ways, as these pieces collaborate with one another to provoke new kinds of questions, complexities, tensions, and comparisons in diva studies.

On behalf of *Margin's* merry band of editors, I hope that you enjoy this journal's theme as well as the atypical mode of discourse in which the theme is explored. *Margin* takes as its mission the practice of seeking out themes and topics that academic discourse may traditionally marginalize or overlook. We aim to direct our critical gaze toward the meat in the margins. With this practice, we hope to accomplish two things: first, to invite the margins to become the body-text of our journal, and second, to facilitate multi-media modes of critical inquiry that have themselves been marginalized. *Margin's* editorial board is proud to present the work of a variety of students, professors, artists, musicians, and learners—from communities throughout the United States—who have contributed fresh and provocative variations, visions, and revisions of the “diva.”

We begin our first issue with Samuel Fox's poem, “WHEN BEYONCÉ.” Samuel's piece resonates with me particularly in its exploration of diva fandom and devotion: it offers glimpses of the desires, adulations, expectations, obsessions, and affections that all constitute the loaded relationship between the diva and her audience. Nike Desis' series, “Safety First,” comes next, and presents a set of tensions about divas, the dangers they wield, and the dangers that threaten them: do divas need to be protected? Do they need to be tied up? Do we need protection from them? Do we need to be tied up? What restraints do we put on our divas, and why? After Nike's work, we arrive at my own current project, a shortened version of my undergraduate thesis, entitled “The song nobody knows: Reexamining the Dangers of the Siren Song.” In this piece, I set up an exchange about powerful and dangerous female singing voices between the Sirens, Helene Cixous, Lady Gaga, and Madonna. Next, “The Mermaid Eftalya,” a poem by Gail Holst-Warhaft, describes the Turkish/Greek singer Deniz Kızı Eftalya; this piece addresses a whole treasury of divaic concerns, ranging from the

(dis)embodiment of voice, the desire and pleasure in the act of listening, and the mythology of the female singer, just to name a few.

Jane Holloway's images, from the "Reasons I Don't Use the Word Diva" series, issue an overt challenge to the "d-word" itself. They seem to resist the notion that divas *have* power, and instead suggest that divas only signify it, promise it, suggest it; yet at the same time, it seems that a new and stormy kind of power may be generated and claimed in practices of diva-worship, diva-parodying, and diva-identification. Mathuieu Deflem's paper, "The Presentation of Fame in Everyday Life: The Case of Lady Gaga," offers certain insights into his well-known course at USC, "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame," and explores Lady Gaga's self-conscious and performative manipulation of her own celebrity. And just like Lady Gaga, *Margin's* contributing sticker-artist, Curly, engages in an overt, playful, and active practice of persona-building. Curly's stickers often announce that Curly is the world's greatest living artist, and—like Beyoncé—Curly fancies himself/herself/itself to be a diva (note the title of Curly's collection: "Curly is a Diva").

Maud McInerney responds to New Age and feminist receptions of Hildegard of Bingen in her essay, "Portrait of the Abbess as a Pop-Culture Diva: How Hildegard became a New Age Superstar and Why it Makes Me So Nervous." Within this piece, Maud notes the recent emergence of the abbess' celebrity; she demonstrates the ways in which Hildegard's new fame reintroduces a long-forgotten cultural figure, but notes that the plotting readings of Hildegard's new fans ultimately deprive her of much complexity and her temporality as a medieval figure; she reminds us, finally, not to silence our divas. In K-Fai Steele's image, "DR in Human/Pleiadian Form," we find a visual manifestation of an unsilenced diva, whose voice pours and expands with beauty and excess. The voice overflows and grows out of the mouth, moving out into a space which is at once divine and empty. The diva figure in Alex Sugiura's "Madeline Kahn and a Bottle of Bread" draws our attention to the strange and complex exchanges between divas and their fans, inviting us to consider the mysteries they offer and the problems of reception, desire, and possession. The final piece in *Margin* is a track from Philadelphia's own, sylvie.



We hope that you can take some of the questions and suggestions that have arisen in our other pieces and apply them to your listening of “i wanna b free”: perhaps you'll find that you carry something new in the way you listen to divas.

*Hannah Silverblank*

*Editor-in-Chief and Founder of Margin*

—

## **Acknowledgments**

We are so grateful to the kind and generous individuals who have helped to make *Margin* a success. We want to send James Weissinger a huge, huge, huge pile of thanks for the superhuman amount of work he has put into this project. We also thank Joshua Ramey, our faculty advisor, for the support and creative thinking that he has offered throughout this process.

We wish to extend our heartiest gratitude to the Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities, not only for their generous sponsorship but for their consistent support and guidance with Haverford's academic publications.

I also wish to personally thank Israel Burshatin, Deborah Roberts, and Kim Benston for helping me in my development of this project. I would like to acknowledge, also, the work of my dear friends in the Divas Reading Group, who are all top-notch diva scholars.

Finally, I want to thank Whitney Houston and Etta James for the contributions that they have offered—and continue to offer—to popular music, culture, and divadom. They will be missed.

## **WHEN BEYONCÉ**

*Samuel Fox*

When Beyoncé  
first feeds her child Cheerios  
I want to be there.

When Beyoncé  
Cheerios  
I want to be her.

When Beyoncé, I first want  
Cheerios.

## Safety First

*Nike Desis*







## **"The song nobody knows": Reexamining the Dangers of the Siren Song**

*Hannah Silverblank*

The Sirens first appear in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey*, where they call out to Odysseus' ship in their famously deadly voices, "You can call all you want / But there's no one home / And you're not gonna reach my telephone."

If that claim were true, then the Western tradition of the feminine singing voice might have taken a radically different course. In place of these chart-topping pop lyrics, the Sirens instead issue an invitation to Odysseus, luring him to join them on the rocks and to consume the knowledge that they bear in their voices. The above quote is from a verse in Lady Gaga's hit single, "Telephone," a song which engages and participates in the tradition of female singers with dangerous voices—a tradition which traces back to the Sirens. While the messages in the song of the Sirens may seem incommensurate with those of pop divas like Lady Gaga in this quick example—the Sirenica message being one of invitation, the divaic message, one of rejection—these two kinds of singers inhabit a shared cultural heritage, as they both wield a mellifluous danger in their throats. In this essay, I set the Sirens into dialogue with pop divas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and thus embark upon a comparative study of these two powerful singing figures. In this discourse, I explore the way that the pop diva has in some ways emerged as a descendent of the Sirenica tradition, but the primary aim of my study is to generate a more dialogic exchange between the figures rather than simply tracing a lineage of female singers. I wish to show that the Sirens and pop divas, when read as an interface, can both complicate and illuminate larger questions about the depiction of powerful feminine vocal expression. I wish to examine what in particular is dangerous about these kinds of powerful singing voices, as this should help to illustrate what kind of power they bear and what it is that they threaten.

This investigation is occupied with two primary elements of the dangerous feminine song: its vocal and rhetorical qualities as well as attitudes towards the voice. In other words, I will explore the promises and temptations it offers,

the topics or themes it narrates/describes, the way it is expressed and performed, and finally, how all of these elements are textually depicted in ancient literary accounts of the Sirens and in the multi-media manifestations of divas like Lady Gaga and Madonna. For this study, I will read from a variety of sources, but, on the ancient side of things, I lend my primary focus to Homer's *Odyssey*. For my diva analysis, I turn to the music videos for Lady Gaga's "Telephone" and Madonna's "Bedtime Story." In treating all of these texts—using reception theory and Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" as a theoretical framework—my aim is to investigate the kinds of danger that are manifest in the songs and accounts of dangerous female singers and to ask, how dangerous are these voices, really? What do they threaten, and what are the dangers they bear? Through a comparative investigation, what do these figures "say" to each other about textual renderings of the dangerous female voice? What larger dialogue emerges, and how may this change the way we read both figures?

Using Cixous' *écriture féminine* to read the Sirens and divas—and using these figures to read one another—I wish to argue that the Sirens' voices, though literally deadly, function as a suppressed but pulsing glimpse of *écriture féminine* that courses through ancient literature. Even though Cixous tells us that "the Sirens were men," I nonetheless locate some of Cixous' descriptions of female writing in the Sirens: the Sirens entice endlessly because "all of her passes into her voice" (Cixous 391), and they threaten passersby because they engender desire that can "transform directly and indirectly all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift" (Cixous 392). Despite the fact that the Sirens do, in fact, sing in *écriture féminine* at times, their power and danger is mitigated within a tradition of male writing: while we may catch glimpses of the Sirens, we never see them, and we never hear their song. Their danger thus becomes the manifestation of a possible threat rather than an actual potency: the texts which house the Sirens present their danger but obfuscate their voices. The Sirens are thus narrated in a realm of danger that prevents them from being heard, and the danger in the Sirens' song thus becomes an instrument in keeping the Sirens silenced and suppressed.

In this essay, I will use the music videos of Lady Gaga and Madonna to demonstrate that we can read the *écriture féminine* within the Sirens' song, and I will ultimately argue that the relationship that certain pop divas have with their voices functions as a response to a tradition of Siren song: pop divas like Lady Gaga and Madonna work to generate a new mode of expression in their music videos, and in doing so, they avenge the silencing of the Sirens. As they laugh like the Medusa and cut off their mermaid tails, these divas learn to sing in new ways that engage the tradition of the Sirenic voice to carve out a new space where the voice cannot be silenced, overlooked, or forced to communicate through a restricted vision of language. Furthermore, I will argue that the Sirens are dangerous because they issue a subversive invitation as they offer the pleasures of a retreat from certain masculine systems into the feminine openness and multiplicity that Cixous posits in her *écriture féminine*—pleasures which can disrupt the systems of social order and poetic expression for the Sirens' ancient listeners. Pop divas carry a similar danger as they make active claims to a new mode of multi-vocal power, and in doing so, challenge a tradition that limits the female voice.

As I set the Sirens and divas into dialogue, I take this project as an example of reception theory. Though reception projects take on varied forms - both within Classical Studies and other fields - they share the common banner, which was established by Charles Martindale in *Redeeming the Text*:

"Meaning, could we say, is always realized at the moment of reception" (Martindale 3). There are three primary reasons why I regard this study as a reception project, rather than a simply comparative study: first, the "meanings" that I find in the Sirens' danger and in the divas' danger are activated by this kind of dialogical reading. I do not wish to claim that Sirens essentially call divas to mind, nor do divas require a consideration of the Sirens to have meaning; instead, I wish to suggest that this kind of comparative analysis realizes certain meanings about these singers. I undertake this study as an example of reception theory because I believe that these figures mutually receive each other in interesting and provocative



ways. Perhaps more obviously, I believe that divas function in some ways as heirs the Sirenic tradition, because they have, in certain ways, inherited a long-standing discourse about the powerful and dangerous feminine voice that originates in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Working under this framework of reception theory, I wish to now discuss some of the connections I find between Batstone's claims and *écriture féminine* posited in Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous' theory of female writing engages productively with many of the suggestions of reception theory, and it is my aim here to bring these two fields of discourse together to frame my later readings of feminine expression in classical literature and in popular music. Both reception theory and Cixous' *écriture féminine* take on a project that works against traditions of fixity. Reception theory works against notions of a fixity, purity, and static hiddenness of textual meaning; Cixous' theoretical invocation works against a fixity of available discourse as well as the fixity and limiting boundedness that this discourse imposes on female writing.

Against these respective kinds of determination, both theoretical models work toward notions of openness. Reception engages an approach wherein meaning is constituted through the "encounter," and thus rejects the notion that meaning can be arrived at or accessed through an unveiling of its hidden manifestation. In the place of this hidden but autonomously present meaning, this theory posits an endless network of possible meanings and an endless possibility of meaning-generating networks. Because the focus of Cixous' argument lies not in reading or analytical practices, but instead within a framework of feminine writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa" works toward an openness of expression, speech, and writing. She advocates for a voice that rings out, not blockaded by the boundedness of walls or barriers, a voice which overflows in "more than one language" and "in a profusion of meanings" (Cixous 394). These outpourings actively engender openness, not only in the multitude of encounters that they enable, but also in the fixed boundaries and enclosures that they craftily surpass and violently crumble.

I use Cixous throughout my exploration of depictions of feminine voice and expression for a number of reasons. First, “The Laugh of the Medusa” explicitly engages many of my own concerns for this project, and in particular, the connections between the monstrous female/feminine and the voice, as well as the tradition of silencing of feminine expression. Throughout this essay, many of my questions about the dangerous voices of certain female singers will call upon some of Cixous’ suggestions about the tradition of male writing. I will expand on certain points of interest here to set up some of my readings of the Sirens, Lady Gaga, and Madonna; but first, I wish to establish my use of Cixous as selective, and here I will outline what in Cixous I resist before I specify the ways in which her ideas are useful to this work.

Firstly, I take issue with Cixous’ use of terms like “female” and “woman,” because—although she claims to reject any essentialist definitions of “woman”—she often seems to perpetuate a vision of universal femininity in claims like “We’re stormy” (Cixous 389), or “you [woman] don’t build walls around yourself, you don’t forego pleasure as wisely as he” (Cixous 391), or “women are body” (Cixous 394). In some of these remarks, Cixous reclaims what is often regarded as feminine irrationality and transforms it into a generative intellectual and poetic capacity, but she still preserves problematic limitations for women; in calling women “stormy” and “body,” Cixous maintains the traditional binary in which women are associated with nature/corporeality and men with culture and civilization/intellect. If Cixous wishes to “return [women] from afar... from below, from beyond ‘culture’” (Cixous 389), it is then problematic to leave them in the realm of storms and flesh; for if woman speaks primarily through a stormy body, how can she “make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” (Cixous 394)? If she wishes to reject, or at least move beyond, the dominance of a male kind of writing that “has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence politically, typically masculine—economy” (Cixous 390), why does she not allow more multi-vocal play in *écriture féminine*, wherein female writing can traverse both territories and exceed traditional notions of woman’s storminess and association with the flesh?

Despite this reservation about some of Cixous' terminology, I do find her two modes of writing very pertinent to my assertions about the voices of Sirens and divas. She works to both reveal and destroy a tradition that subjugates and vilifies the female. She illuminates the dominance of a practice within male writing (or at least, in literary and cultural canons) where femininity is as terrifying and fatal as the face of the Medusa and the voices of the Sirens:

But isn't this fear convenient for [men]? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they only have to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (Cixous 393)

Here Cixous addresses several crucial issues for this investigation. First, that there exists a Sirenic tradition and transmission that has extended outside of literary scholarship and into a larger discourse about the feminine voice: for when she argues, "they only have to stop listening to the Sirens," she tells us that "they"—encompassing man, woman, and reader—have been "listening to the Sirens" since Homer. In other words, this formulation of feminine voices that resides in the Siren song participates in a much larger discourse about feminine expression, song, and voice.

The second suggestion that interests me here is Cixous' parenthetical but resounding utterance, "the Sirens were men." Packed into this remark is the assertion that the Sirens are a manifestation of masculine fear about feminine seduction, power, and voice—an anxiety about the sexual other—rather than a representation of minatory but alluring femininity. Furthermore, she suggests that the Sirens belong to a tradition of male writing, which she describes as a "phallogentric tradition," and a masturbatory one at that: it is a "self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogentrism" (Cixous 390). As she tells us that "the Sirens were men," she tells us that their power and danger does not emerge from a truly fatal feminine voice, but rather from a masculine conversation that engages an idea of the feminine and ultimately suppresses it. Cixous demonstrates that, in this tradition, to look at

the Medusa ensures death, and to hear the Sirens' song does the same; she identifies the ways in which this tradition represents the female as unrepresentable because its representation implies death. She unpacks this a bit when she argues, "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves. They need to be afraid of us" (Cixous 394). Here we can see that this presentation of the monstrous female does not only enact a suppression of the feminine as a means of controlling woman or controlling male anxiety: it is also a masturbatory, pleasurable act of play in that it generates a self-made image of seduction and desire, which is controlled and conquered both in the narrative treatment of this femininity and in stories about the Sirens. The "hard on! for themselves" emerges from the pleasures in the self-manufacturing of such a seductive creation, in the control of the creation, and the ultimate escape from it. The Sirens certainly are sexy, but the arousing charge that they bear is generated not from any kind of sexual engagement, but rather from a tradition of "phallogentric... self-stimulating."

Thus Cixous tells us that male writing operates within a tradition that both listens to the Sirens and manufactures them. She then notes that, if we stop listening, "history can change its meaning." This suggestion is at once bold, loaded, and ambiguous, but I believe that it invites the kind of reading proposed in this essay, where we begin to read the Sirens, we cease to listen to the Sirens, and we ask the Sirens and pop divas to listen to *each other*. By doing this, I hope that we can "smash the yokes and censors" (Cixous 394) that enclose the Sirens, and change the meaning in this history by opening up a new and generative encounter. In this discourse between the Sirens and divas, we can more fully witness and engage Cixous' suggestions that feminine expression is made monstrous, and is thus obscured; furthermore, we can pursue new avenues of exploration to see if the Medusa's face really isn't "deadly," and if she is, as Cixous argues, "beautiful, and... laughing." Let us now begin our journey with our captivating female singers, and let us see what kind of dangers we can find in them. Let us listen carefully to hear what their voices hold.

## *The Sirens' Dangerous Song*

First, I would like to address the voices of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*. These voices are laden with complex and often contradictory qualities, and often seem to operate on multiple different levels. In the *Odyssey*, the voices of the Sirens are famously honey-sweet (“**ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἄπὸ στομάτων,**” *Od.* XII.187), and the song's lyrical component is narrative and memorial; the song, though sweet in melody, also offers a temptation to the intellect of the listener. The Sirens advertise their own voices as “honey-sweet,” and in doing so, they suggest that their voices are aesthetically pleasant, but they also align their song with food. Thus they inscribe within their own voices an element of consumption: the passerby is invited to hear the sweetness of the sound (tasting it) and to consume the sweetness of knowledge (eating the honey). In addition to this story of pleasure and consumption that the Sirens tell about their song, they also offer to tell a story within their song: through their strange access to knowledge, they tailor their narratives to the interests of their listeners. To Odysseus, they promise to sing of Argive glories of the past: “**ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ’ ὅσ’ ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρέϊη / Ἀργεῖοι Τρῳῆς τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν, / ἴδμεν δ’ ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ**” (*Od.* XII.189-91). Thus they tempt the listener with intellectual promises, as they offer the pleasure of a story and the satisfaction of curiosity.

In addition to this appeal to the mind, Holford-Strevens offers another intellectual dimension to the Sirens' song, as he posits an intertextual reading of their promise in Book XII: “In the original Greek, the verses are markedly euphonious, and also close to the *Iliad* in diction, as if they were a blasphemy upon it, a sinister parody of the epic praise inspired by the all-knowing Muses that perpetuates the hero's memory” (Holford-Strevens 17). For Odysseus, this functions as an intellectual offer because they promise stories, knowledge, and a remembrance of things past, but for the reader—according to Holford-Strevens' observation—this promise applies as well, but in a textual sphere. Just as the Sirens invoke Odysseus' biographical/historical

past in their promise, they also playfully invoke the reader's textual past, as they perform in voices that imitate the *Iliad*. Thus the Sirens' intellectual appeal operates two spheres: the acoustic sound, as heard by Odysseus, and the textual 'sound', which recalls for the reader the *Iliad*. Using Holford-Strevens' suggestion, we can see that the Sirens' song possesses multiple levels of signification and suggestion.

Keeping in mind that the song of the Sirens makes an appeal to the minds of its listeners, I now wish to emphasize that the reader does not actually *hear* the song. We learn about the Sirens and their song through layers of narrative mediation; the entire account of the Sirens' episode is told through our narrator's quotation of Odysseus as he recounts his journeying to the Phaeacians. It is Odysseus who narrates Circe's warning about the Sirens (*Od.* XII.39-54), and again it is Odysseus who narrates their invitation to listen to their song. Thus we must consider the Sirens' song as a narrated, and thus a mediated mode of expression, and we must also remember all that is *missing* from Odysseus' account. He does not describe the experience of hearing the song, but only mentions his longing to listen (*Od.* XII.192-194); he does not describe what stories they actually tell in their song, only what they promise to tell; furthermore, he does not describe their sound or style with any detail. So although I have worked to demonstrate that the Sirens' song operates with a multifarious vocality—calling both to the immediate listener and the reader—I also wish to suggest that the Sirens' song is either undescribed or indescribable. Within the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is the only listener who has escaped their song alive, and yet he tells his audience extremely little about the song itself.

Of course, Odysseus does tell us certain things about the Sirens' song, even if he does not explicitly describe it with much detail, and I wish to argue here that the relationship that Odysseus maintains with song itself is a complex one, which offers context for his relation to the Sirens' song. The narrative rendering of the episode, as well as its relationship with surrounding episodes, helps to illuminate some of the danger that issues from the Sirens' throats. In addition to the explicit threat of physical death that Circe describes (*Od.* XII.39-46), the Sirens offer to Odysseus a powerful lure into

the pleasure of the past through their tempting offer to sing intimately about Odysseus' own *kleos*. This escapism might be incredibly inviting for Odysseus for several reasons: first, the Sirens appeal to Odysseus' occupation with his *kleos*, and manipulate their song so that it might resonate with Odysseus' experience of his own song. Odysseus consistently considers his *kleos* throughout the *Odyssey*, and therefore a tension emerges between the man and his reputation: the verbalization of the story of Odysseus—expressed both by himself and by others—undergoes a necessary estrangement and distancing from its subject, as occurs when 'reality' is transformed into language. This space between Odysseus and his verbal *kleos* suggests that the authority and autonomy of the two entities are not necessarily coterminous. The *kleos* of Odysseus journeys through its own odyssey, as Zachary Biles argues, "The *Odyssey* in fact displays a special interest in εὐρύν as an epithet of *kleos* in connection with the active transportation of *kleos* from one place to another that is envisioned in this poem as an aspect of a vital tradition" (Biles 200). Here we can see a tension emerge between the trajectories of these two odysseys and their respective vitalities: the life of Odysseus is distinct from the life of his κλέος, and the hero's life even situates itself in conflict with its *kleos*. Biles notes, "Since *kleos* is thought to outlast the person and to compensate for his mortality, it necessarily entails an expectation of the hero's death" (Biles 201). To combat the morbidity associated with the prominence of Odysseus' κλέος, the hero must actively engage his *kleos* to maintain agency and vitality within and against it.

In Book VIII Odysseus hears himself portrayed in Demodocus' song, and this episode thus bears witness to the hero's navigation of the threats of song as a medium. Demodocus' performance generates a sense of self-estrangement for Odysseus as he begins to experience himself as a text—in that his *kleos* constitutes the song itself—as a character within that text. This space between subject and song that emerges apparently serves as a source of sorrow for Odysseus, who weeps upon hearing Demodocus' song, and eventually works to usurp authorial control from the bard. Biles accounts for Odysseus' sorrow as a mode of self-mourning: he argues, "Odysseus returns

to the world of men only to find himself relegated to song, keeping company with two men, Achilles and Agamemnon, with whose early deaths Odysseus was all too familiar at this point (11.385-540). In his long absence, the only lingering aspect of his existence is his association with the deceased” (Biles 201). The problematic presence of Odysseus’ *kleos* thus presents Odysseus with a choice: the hero may “forget his *nostos* (12.42-43) and abandon himself to his past song of Troy”—thereby sinking into his own *kleos* and succumbing to its morbidity—or he may continue his *nostos* in order to pursue the active generation and participation within his own *kleos*. Odysseus selects the latter, choosing to continue as an agent within the story of his *kleos* and to direct the delivery of his *kleos*: he spends the rest of the *Odyssey* seeking his *nostos*, and he takes charge of Demodocus’ performance. Here again we witness Odysseus’ artful and layered weaving of self: he crafts a false persona—“*Ξείνοιο ... / ὃς νέον Ἀλκινόοιο δαΐφρονος ἵκετο δῶμα / πόντον ἐπιπλαγχθεῖς, δέμας ἀθανάτοισιν ὁμοῖος*”—while he threads the background for the character of Odysseus, then again unweaves the artificial identity. At last, he verbally orchestrates his own song for four books of Homer’s epic, taking the performance into his own hands.

Demodocus himself is not actively depicted as a threatening figure in the *Odyssey*, but his presence in Book VIII—and Odysseus’ response to his song—distinguishes the bard as a singer with a dangerous voice. It may initially seem that the Sirens’ song is the most dangerous song in the *Odyssey*: after all, it is famously deadly and irresistibly tempting. In the case of the Sirens, however, their expression of Odysseus’ *kleos* carries a very different danger. The two Homeric Sirens do emit a song about Odysseus’ *kleos*, with which he cannot intervene (he is tied up), but this vocal performance is actually less dangerous than Demodocus’, despite the fact that he cannot take charge of this song. For while Odysseus has no power to redirect their song or steal the show, as he does with Demodocus, we must note that no one else hears the song of the Sirens: not Odysseus’ shipmates, nor the Phaeacians, nor the readers of the *Odyssey*. The Sirens pose a threat as they narrate the *kleos* of Odysseus, but what actually happens in the text is just the opposite:



Odysseus narrates the Sirens' *kleos*, and in this sense, Odysseus ultimately outshines the Sirens, undermining the power of their song.

The Sirens' voices are still threatening, however, in their manipulative and seductive appeal to his *kleos*, rather than in their narration of it. In other words, while Demodocus is dangerous in his control over the transmission of Odysseus' song, the Sirens' danger emerges in the way that they appeal to Odysseus' relationship with his *kleos*. The particular invitation from the Sirens—to hear the stories of the Trojan War and to become wiser—functions as an offer to leave the temporality of the 'real' world and to enter that of song, music, and narration. To Odysseus, whose journey is full of toils and an attempt at a particular mode of return (the *nostos*), the Sirens offer both the comfort of story and its own unique mode of return (in the comfort of repetition; in its atemporal re-entry into the past). In the realm of the Sirens, we can feel the threat of the possible triumph of the past over the present and future, as these former glories tempt Odysseus into oblivion. The Sirens' song also threatens a triumph of artifice (in song and story-telling) over 'reality' (Odysseus' return home). We can feel this move into a different temporal sphere—moving from 'real' time into the temporality of song - as the ship approaches the Sirens' isle:

τόφρα δὲ καρπαλίμως ἐξίκετο νηὺς ἑυεργῆς  
νῆσον Σειρήνοιν· ἔπειγε γὰρ οὖρος ἀπήμων.  
αὐτίκ' ἔπειτ' ἄνεμος μὲν ἐπαύσατο ἡδὲ γαλήνη  
ἔπλετο νηνεμία, κοίμησε δὲ κύματα δαίμων. (Od. XII.166-70)<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, as Odysseus' ship leaves the Sirens, a curtain of chaos and smoke closes the scene (12. 201-202). Throughout the episode, there is a strangeness to the realm of the Sirens, which indicates that they reside in a temporal and atmospheric realm that is incompatible with 'normal' or 'real' time, and this is one of the key elements of their disruption and their threat.

In addition to the Sirens' temporal danger, the Sirens also pose a spatial and

social danger, as they lure men into a space that is the exact opposite of the domestic sphere. It is uncultivated: half-paradisal, half a cemetery. Its landscape implies surrender to pleasure and immediate death, whereas the domestic patriarchy of *oikos*, or home, implies hard work to ensure longevity and happiness in familial and social life. Linda Phyllis Austern describes the dwelling place of the Sirens, the sea, as “an ancient metaphor for the pleasures, the dangers, and the mystery of the feminine realm... It is substantially of nature, unceasingly threatening male artifice. The fatal embrace of the siren has been explained similarly as a childhood fantasy return to the dark waters of the womb, the ‘primal incest’” (Austern 57-58). In one sense, going to the Sirens is the opposite gesture to going home, in that they offer pleasures and surrenders that are entirely incompatible with success within the Homeric patriarchy and what Austern terms “male artifice”; but at the same time, the two journeys share a strong parallel because they are both modes of return.

Thus we cannot establish a binary opposition between the Sirens and the *nostos*, and should instead note that it is the similarity between the two experiences that heightens the threat of the Sirens' voices. Despite the fact that both journeys are a manner of return, they signify very different kinds of return. This opposition is a particularly dangerous one in the *Odyssey*, because it is a story of *nostos*, or home-coming, and the Sirens eliminate all possibility of home-coming for the sailors who visit their isle. The opposition is dangerous also because it implies a possible surrender of masculine structures to feminine chaos, disorder and pleasure. Where Odysseus must return to his domestic and structured home-space, the Sirens invite him to an anti-social, labor-free zone of pleasure; and so, their song is dangerous in both its seductive capacities and the threats that it contains. Odysseus' investment in his *kleos* (along with his love for Penelope) seduces him to pursue a triumphant *nostos*, a home-coming within a patriarchal sphere, and the Sirens issue an opposite seduction to what Austern calls “the pleasures, the dangers, and the mystery of the feminine realm.”

The Sirens' manipulative performance of the song is the source of much of

their danger. Austern traces the trope of the Siren voice in later literary contexts, and describes it as “a hypnotic thing of mist and memory” that creeps into “the work and the reader’s consciousness,” much like the stealthy and engulfing entrance of the Siren song into Book XII of the *Odyssey*. She describes the song’s sound and effect through various literary traditions: the Siren “is but a sound upon the water, whispering secrets from some distant place. There is little room aboard the tiny ship for privacy or contemplation. Yet the siren’s voice addressed each man alone... By the time the listeners recognize the true source of this wondrous song, it is too late. Total destruction seems imminent” (Austern 53). Here Austern emphasizes the malleability of the Siren performance. She reads the Sirens not only as singers, but as vocal actresses, who manipulate their voices to capitalize on the specific desires of the listener; their song is dangerous in that it acts as a supernatural and mysterious manifestation of the hearer’s desires. In addition to the engulfing presence of its sound, the song also possesses a penetrative quality in the way that it enters the ears and the intellect of the listener.

### *Dangerous Divas*

In my analysis of ancient Sirens, I have primarily focused on the way the Siren voice was described and what dangers it presents. As I move now into the realm of music video analysis, I plan to investigate the Siren poetics of Lady Gaga’s “Telephone” video using the interactions and iterations of the visual, cinematic, acoustic, and lyrical gestures present in the video’s landscape. The song itself was written by Lady Gaga, Rodney Jerkins, LaShawn Daniels, and Beyonce Knowles in 2009, and the video—directed by Jonas Akerlund—was released in March 2010. The video challenges many of the norms of the medium, and so has received a huge amount of critical attention for some of its more superficial features, including its length (9:30), its nudity, its hints at lesbianism, its cinematic references (*Thelma and Louise*, *Pulp Fiction*, the entire genre of lesbian prison films), and its mysterious narrative, among others. Critical responses have varied widely. Some have called it an ‘event’ and a ‘landmark’ in music video history, naming it the most important film of the year; others have seen in “Telephone” the decline of

popular culture and sexuality, arguing that the video should be banned (Railton-Watson 141-42).

In their 2011 text, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, Diane Railton and Paul Watson explore the wide array of responses to the video; they note that “the emergence of Lady Gaga would have presented a golden opportunity for Butler-inspired scholars,” but “there is little evidence that this opportunity is being seized” (Railton-Watson 147). At the time of writing, I must add that Gaga studies are materializing at colleges and universities across the United States in a variety of disciplines and formats.<sup>3</sup> Current Lady Gaga scholars pursue a range of avenues of inquiry—issues of fame and culture, performance of gender and sexuality, the disabled body, among others—and here, I’d like to draw her into the world of classical literature. I wish to argue that the video for “Telephone” engages with the themes and imagery of the classical Sirens, such as the depiction of mediated voice/communication, the honeyed voice, acoustic consumption, and the resistance to a certain mode of communication. In this analysis, I wish to argue that the “Telephone” video employs these different themes in its narrative to counteract an event that first emerges in Homer, wherein the songs of dangerous female singers are controlled, consumed, and thus deprived of their power. The characters played by Lady Gaga and Beyonce cooperate to reclaim and reinstate a powerful feminine voice throughout the video, as they bring an end to a certain mode of consumption. In doing so, they respond to issues of their own reception as texts/authors, and they claim an active role in the building of a potent, dangerous, and new kind of feminine voice.

First I will discuss the various images of mediation, with particular attention to the mediation of the physical setting and the singing voice, to demonstrate the ways in which the video engages certain themes that I have addressed in my analysis of ancient Sirens. The video begins with a soundless visual collage of images of a prison, which functions as the setting for the first half of the video. The camera scans through images of barbed wire, gates, fences and walls: the early visual landscape almost always emphasizes the vivid boundedness of this space, but also depicts the “outside world” through the

mediating bars and gates of the prison. In addition to being figured as a contained, mediated, dangerous space, the attention to the prison's visual environment enforces the idea that the viewer is witnessing a specifically "other" and separate realm. The reader of the *Odyssey* encounters a similar treatment of the Sirens' isle, as an eerie onset of calm signals the arrival into the domain of the Sirens, and a cloud of smoke signifies the departure from this space.

In addition to the physical boundedness of the prison space, vocal mediation becomes a central motif within the video. The way that the voice enters and performs within the video in many ways parallels that of the Homeric Sirens: Gaga's voice creeps into the cinematic scene just as the Sirens' voices do in Homer's scene. As the camera leads the viewer to the exercise yard of the jail, a boombox quietly plays a song ("Paper Gangster") from Lady Gaga's first album, *The Fame*. We do not see a singer; this voice arrives through the medium of the boombox, from a different space, and evokes an earlier body of work (just as the Sirens' song in the *Odyssey* evokes both the style and the story of the *Iliad*). We may locate this pattern of mediated voice within the object of the telephone as well, as this specific technology allows the voice to transcend basic spatial boundaries, bringing distant sounds into nearby spaces, and disjoining the singer from the reception of its song/sound. This mediation of voice also allows the Lady Gaga's voice to enter the visual scene without allowing us to see the diva sing. We do, in fact, watch Lady Gaga enter the yard, but this is obviously a different manifestation of Gaga, or at least not the Gaga who is offering a vocal performance; in other words, we should not necessarily presume that the Gaga whom we see is performing the version of "Paper Gangster" that we hear, especially because it is layered with effects of 'radio fuzz' and makes no attempts to simulate an 'authentic' or 'live' listening experience.<sup>4</sup>

This disjointed and disembodied relationship between singer and voice continues throughout the video: our eyes feast on the very sensual visual incarnations of Lady Gaga and Beyonce, but their voices almost always enter the video from an external space. Most of their vocal performances arrive

while the divas are singing into telephones or not singing at all. They fill the visual landscape with song, yet deny a visual performance of 'singing' itself, just as the Sirens do. There are no claims made to 'real' singing, only to mediated, migratory voice. The video itself seems to self-consciously remind the viewer of its own status as a multi-media text, as the camera cuts to an image of a security camera in the prison yard; we repeatedly 'see' the prison yard or interior as if through the security camera, and as we return to the regular camera, 'real vision,' we must remember that we are still seeing through an equally mediating camera.

I must remain clear that I do not wish to set the Sirens in dialogue with "Telephone" merely to note moments of convergence or homology: instead I will argue that "Telephone" revisits and reclaims many of the ways in which the Sirens are silenced. The Sirens' voices are narrated by Odysseus; they are often described but never with their own voices. "Telephone," on the other hand, self-consciously engages notions of mediation and uses the mediating technology of the telephone, the security camera, and the newscast to allow its divas' voices to ring out: they extend outside of the moment of singing, acting both as an atmospheric soundtrack to scenes of empowerment and allowing them to reject an unwanted communication, as Lady Gaga sings, "Stop calling, stop calling, I don't want to talk anymore." This line works to invert the Sirenic message: where the Sirens offer an invitation—something more like "keep calling, keep calling, I really want to talk to you"—Lady Gaga issues a rejection of communication, a withholding of her voice. The performance of voice in "Telephone" thus employs certain Sirenic behaviors (in the way in which the disembodied voice dominates the landscape), but suggests that Lady Gaga does not wish to continue the tradition of seductive invitation that resides in the feminine voice. She reclaims the use and performance of her voice, making it unavailable so that she might pursue her own pleasures.

A second pregnant image—which also extends from a Sirenic tradition - within the video is that of honey. It appears in various incarnations throughout the video: Beyonce's character is called "Honey B"; she eats a

honey cake when Gaga gets in the car, and feeds it to Gaga erotically and ironically (Figure 1).



Figure 1, “Telephone”

Later, at the diner, bottles of honey (labeled with cartoon bees) sit on the tables. Honey B is dressed in yellow, and her verbally abusive boyfriend figure pours out a whole jar of honey onto his waffle. As the poison dually administered by Gaga and Honey B (Gaga makes poisoned honey and sandwiches for the diner in the kitchen; Beyoncé pours more poison into the boyfriend's coffee, which makes him cough) finally kicks in, Honey B says—ostensibly to the keeled over boyfriend, but looking directly at the camera—“I knew you'd take all of my honey, you selfish mother[BLEEP]er.”

I do not wish to read the honey image as an overt or intentional reference to the Sirens, but this repeated use of honey recalls Book XII of the *Odyssey*, as the Sirens sing out to Odysseus: “οὐ γάρ πώ τις τῆδε παρήλασε νηὶ μελαίνῃ, / πρὶν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπὸ στομάτων ὅπ' ἀκοῦσαι”<sup>5</sup> (Od. 12.185-87). Honey and the voice are thus linked in both of these narratives, and they are both what is taken from the Sirens and divas by their audiences. Odysseus takes honey from the Sirens by listening to their voices, consuming them, and thus circumventing the poison in their honeyed voices; the boyfriend in “Telephone” greedily takes all of the honey from table, where

Honey B sits without any food of her own, and consumes it. But this poisoned honey is not reserved for Honey B's boyfriend alone: all the inhabitants of the diner choke from their food, doused in honey, and even the dog is poisoned. The camera rapidly cuts through images of different people eating, with loud and exaggerated chewing noises, and eventually vomiting and choking.

Both texts posit a dangerously sweet sound that issues from the singers' mouths, but the honey ultimately operates in different ways in the two texts. In the *Odyssey*, the Sirens' mellifluous voices are poison, in the sense that the consumption thereof results in death; furthermore, Odysseus employs Circe's advice in order to "take all of [their] honey" and still escape.<sup>6</sup> In "Telephone," the narrative and imagery produce an environment wherein the divas' honey is taken and consumed mindlessly, but the divas take control of their honey by adding poison to it. This act of poisoning the honey suggests—perhaps obviously—that the poison was not already there to begin with. The Sirens are depicted as innate harbingers of poisonous voices, from whom the poisonous agency is stripped by Odysseus' strategies; the divas of "Telephone," on the other hand, are the bearers of mellifluous yet disempowered/exploited voices, who ultimately take action to infuse their honey with deadly power. Furthermore, the Sirens' voices function as a threat only to sea-faring men, whereas the divas of "Telephone" hold a wider and more diverse audience, both in terms of its demographic range and the wide spectrum of relationships between diva and listener/fan/consumer. Each individual in the diner—and perhaps each individual who views the "Telephone" video—is implicated in the practice of hungry and mindless consumption of the divas' voices, and within this text, Gaga and Honey B revolt against the countless Odysseuses who seek to disempower their vocal agency. At this point, a problem emerges, because Gaga and Honey B enact a punishment to their wide audience, despite the fact that the pop diva's voice is marketed to be heard and consumed on a massive scale. Thus we must read that it is not the act of acoustic consumption itself that leads Gaga and Honey B to their mass honeyed homicide; instead, they warn against a certain kind of listening which dismisses or undermines their power. This performance seems to warn the reader/viewer not to treat certain seductive



images as invitations to a gluttonous visual feast, but that these divas use their bodies for purposes other than seduction. For example, let us examine Gaga's near-nude depiction in her jail cell, when she is wrapped with caution tape (Figure 2):



Figure 2, "Telephone"

This scene depicts a rapid series of similar poses, wherein Gaga positions her body in traditionally alluring or erotic poses. A viewer may consume these images merely as a bouquet of visual pleasure, as pornography; similarly, a viewer may render the images as meaningless attempts at generating shock. R&B singer India.Arie has called Gaga's performance "socially irresponsible" in its use of nudity, as she writes, "Crazy to me that the dark, underbelly, shock at all cost thing is a TREND like asymmetrical [sic] hair and big shoulder jackets. Slippery slope!" (Marquee Blog, 24 March 2010). In her concerns about the video's social responsibility, she interprets Gaga's presentation of her body "as a dish meant to be served for mass consumption" (HuffPost Black Voices, 26 March 2010). Thus Arie rejects the possibility that these scenes might possess communicative power and that Gaga's near-nudity might be read as more than "a dish." We may note, however, that Gaga's

entire “outfit” in this scene is both a warning and a command: “CRIME SCENE —DO NOT CROSS.” What Arie reads as an invitation to shock and pleasure is actually a denial, as Gaga’s costume signifies the inaccessibility of her body, which is doubled by the fact that she poses alone in a cell. The viewer may act as voyeur, gazing through the bars of the cell, but the only pleasure that Gaga invites is her own, as she touches herself and suggestively licks the blade of a knife. If these images are pornographic, then the ‘sexual act’ that takes place here arises from her own erotic and empowering relationship with her own danger and unavailability. Furthermore, this scene is transposed over lyrics that also emphasize the singer’s refusal to make herself available for another, as she sings,

Call all you want, but there's no one home  
And you're not gonna reach my telephone  
'Cause I'm out in the club and I'm sippin' that bubb'  
And you're not gonna reach my telephone  
Lady Gaga, “Telephone”

The images, gestures, and lyrics all cooperate to suggest that the viewer/caller may freely seek access to Gaga, but she offers no availability; the viewer may gaze upon her image, but “there’s no one home” to answer for the pleasure of another, because she’s “out in the club... sippin’ that bubb’,” seeking and generating her own pleasure.

The mass homicide in the diner cautions against Arie’s mode of reading, in which the diva’s employment of her own sexuality is deemed exploitative and irresponsible. Each of the characters in the diner who consume Gaga’s food and steal Honey B’s honey is destroyed because they dismiss the power of the honey/food/voice/imagery that they consume; similarly, Arie dismisses the signifying capacity of Gaga’s body and enforces the notion that, when displayed, the female body can do nothing but be consumed. Having issued this warning against reductive readings—which render these divas either as objects of pure pleasure or of pure shock—the divas do not offer a formula for their reception. Instead, they operate within a framework which J. Jack

Halberstein has termed “Gaga feminism,”<sup>7</sup> which destabilizes traditional and patriarchal models of gender and sexuality in order to reject these attitudes, but does not offer a concrete alternative. Halberstein situates this as a feminism that creates openings and does not prescribe, but instead posits a potent ambiguity. We can see this Gaga feminism at work in the video’s narrative, once the homicide has been committed and the news report of the crime scene has aired on television, in the following exchange:

Gaga: We did it, Honey B. Now let’s go far, far away from here.

Honey B: You promise we’ll never come back?

Gaga: I promise.

“Telephone”

Here, Gaga and Honey B acknowledge their act of destruction and vow to move forward. The viewer has no sense of where they are headed, but they clasp hands in solidarity and text appears on the screen, “To be continued...”

Thus we can trace in the video’s trajectory a migration from fixed boundedness to ambiguous openness: the video begins with Gaga in a “prison for bitches” and ends with Gaga and Honey B out on the open road, headed to an unnamed elsewhere. Thus we can see how much these divas have burst out of the Sirenic tradition: where the Sirens remain on their isle, waiting for sailors to pass and issuing invitations, Gaga and Honey B cooperate to break out of confinement (“Prison for Bitches”), perform a subversive and violent act (the poisoning at the diner), and leave the pieces behind as they migrate onward. In doing so, Gaga and Honey B perform Cixous’ vision female writing in “Telephone”: they soar out of confinement, mock the system that limits expression, use their bodies to speak, and work toward a new openness. The video speaks with Cixous when she asks,

What woman hasn’t flown/stolen? Who hasn’t felt, dreamt,  
performed the gesture that jams sociality? Who hasn’t crumbled,  
held up to ridicule, the bar of separation? Who hasn’t inscribed with  
her body the differential, punctured the system of couples and

opposition? Who, by some act of transgression, hasn't overthrown successiveness, connection, the wall of circumfusion? (Cixous 395)

Lady Gaga's video does all of these things, as she reawakens the dangerous voice of the Sirens, letting it ring out in several tongues—lyrical, musical, visual, cinematic—and creating a world that rejects the limitations that have contained the Sirenic voice.

Now, let us move backward fifteen years in music video history from “Telephone” to Madonna's 1995 video, “Bedtime Story.” Most scholarship on “Bedtime Story” directs its attention to the video's integration of surrealist paintings within the formulation of its own visual scene. In her article, “Where is the female body? Androgyny and other strategies of disappearance in Madonna's music videos,” Corinna Herr suggests that Madonna's visual presence within her videos often embodies and assumes concepts such as “hermeticism, androgyny, surrealism and structures of the so-called New Age” (Herr 36). When Herr's essay arrives at her treatment of “Bedtime Story,” she traces the ubiquitous masquerade of femininity “in the surrealistic realm of signs” (Herr 44), and she locates a magical 'New Age' dream-world that emerges out of the dialogues between Romanek's visual landscape and those in the paintings to which it refers.

While I find many of Herr's observations to be clever and generative, I wish to posit a reading of the video that sets forth a linear theatrical narrative rather than a chaotic realm of meaningless yet aesthetically rich signs. Madonna openly embraces this itinerant narrative mode, admitting a fixation on the temporal element within theater and its association with progress, whether it be plot-based, stylistic, conceptual, or otherwise. In her 1990 article for *The New York Times*, “POP; Video and Theater Shape a New Madonna,” Patricia Brown quotes Madonna's remark, “The thing about theater is that there's a beginning, a middle and an end. You end up somewhere. There's something cathartic about it” (Brown 1). We can certainly locate this kind of narrative traveling within the video of “Bedtime Story,” as the feminine voice migrates from an initial position of suppression and near obsolescence to a feminine

reformulation of its own vocal capacities. In tracing the sound, lyrical content, and performance of the female singer's voice through the video, I will turn away from Herr's set of focal points and argue that the video situates the feminine voice within a framework dictated and narrated by male imagination, or Cixous' "male writing"; as the video progresses, certain of the singer's acts—both verbal and gestural—allow her to begin a formulation of feminine voice that is novel, distinct, and liberated from the limits of traditional textual and vocal expression.

The singer of "Bedtime Story" seems to suggest that the mode of expression available to her has been imposed upon her and has also been limited by patriarchal tradition of women's silence, wherein any literary or artistic formulation of the female voice is actually constructed by male forces of expression.. Upon this realization, the singer works through her own voice by lyrically rejecting the male mode of discourse available and working to carve out a new kind of vocal space in the fashion of Cixous' *écriture féminine*. The pleasure that Madonna-the-figure experiences in the cathartic moment of theatrical narrative, as described above, is certainly resolved in "Bedtime Story": the female singer encounters and ultimately sheds vocal oppression through the video's progression, and the whole social scene within the video collectively rejects the a tradition wherein masculine narrative reigns. In what follows, I will walk through some of the video's moments according to the video's linear time, as I suggest that Madonna's singing persona in this video rises up from the tradition of female ventriloquism—in which the Sirens are implicated—and posits and performs an intriguing new mode of feminine song.

Our video begins and ends with a set of twin book-ends, which invite us to consider the video as a transformative and theatrical space. The film's first visual moment presents a strange shape that might be a digital pillow or a television screen, with an eye-like symbol on it; the viewer exits the film with this image, too. The only difference between the two stills is the text that appears across the surface. The word "WELCOME" emerges across the first pillow-space (Figure 3), and it is this greeting that allows the video to identify

itself as some kind of performance space that the viewer must enter. Later, as the video comes to a close, the words “THANK YOU” emerge on the second pillow image, which imbues the viewing experience with the physically interactive sense of entrance, occupation, and exit. But why does the film print “THANK YOU” for the viewer as the scene ends? What has the viewer deposited within the video-watching experience that warrants an expression of gratitude from the video itself? Are these really pillows, or are they the pseudo-futuristic 'stage curtains' of the music video? As I navigate through some of “Bedtime Story,” I wish to argue that the video presents itself as a space of metamorphosis: the “WELCOME” and “THANK YOU” messages that bookend the viewer's experience function not only as indicators of the video's self-aware theatricality, but also require that an encounter occur between viewer and video. As the singer in the video develops from a nearly voiceless figure into a dynamic and powerful performer, the video elicits that the viewer to consider itself part of this transformation through the viewing experience.



Figure 3, “Bedtime Story”

In addition to these instances of written text, more words appear in the very

next cut of the video. For just a flash, the camera shows a kind of mystical television set with different channels, which seem to 'read' different elements of the sleeping singer (who is not yet present in the frame). In that split second of video, though, the third panel of the screen changes: the symbol/letter "V" arises, followed by some smaller type that reads, "VOICE ACTIVITY," which is in turn followed by white hand-writing that prints the first four lyrics that the Madonna sings. The text precedes the actual singing of these lyrics, and once we realize this, we can see that the song has already been written either into or by this blue mechanism; this means that the performance of the song and its lyrics should be understood as the activation of a prescribed text rather than an extemporaneous or candid instance of expression. This overlapping text ("V"; "VOICE ACTIVITY"; song lyrics; see Figure 4) intersects with the vocal performance of the printed words, generating a sort of multi-media palimpsest before the video is fifteen seconds in.

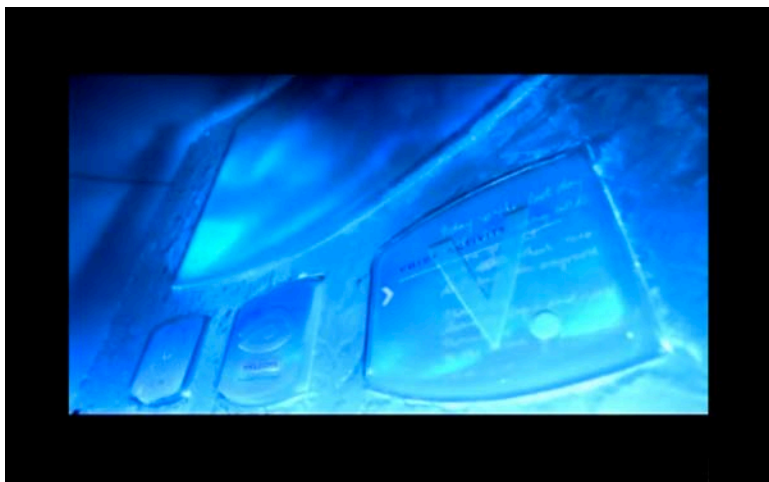


Figure 4, "Bedtime Story"

After the introduction of this text matrix, a series of interactions emerge between the singer and the video's scenery, which instantiate a familiar relationship between honey and the female singing voice. Before Madonna

begins singing, she utters a rough and strained “ah.” This sound functions as a non-verbal vocalization rather than an attempt at speech or song. The camera makes a few cuts after the singer’s “ah” and settles on a dripping, viscous blue fluid. We see a drop of the fluid fall, after which our singer tries again to voice her syllable. One more drop falls in the scene, and suddenly the pillow emerges with the message, “LUCID.” It is the last drop of blue honey that seems to act as a catalyst from the singer’s raspy groaning into a clear female singing voice. Herr’s analyses of the video does little to explore the singer’s “ah’s”, and makes no mention of the word “LUCID” or the blue honey. If our singer’s voice is dry—from a tradition of silencing the female voice—a few drops of honey could be exactly the cure: the second drop of the blue goo instigates the change between strained, groaning “ah” sounds and the beginning of the sung verse.

Though the vocal line does indeed emerge here, after the honey flows, the singer does not immediately perform the illusion of ‘real, live’ singing yet, and so we begin with a singer who is detached in some ways from her own song. She only lip-syncs to the last word of a given line, and keeps her mouth motionless as the other notes move through the soundscape. Her body and voice are disconnected in this performance, and in this way she still operates in the tradition of “male writing,” having not yet moved into a bodied mode of speech. The singer’s performance indicates that the video’s initial network of texts functions as an unsuitable expressive environment for her, wherein we can see that her voice is not truly her own. She elaborates on this point in the lyrics, “words have gone out, lost their meaning, don’t function anymore.” Here she suggests that a particular expressive tradition has fallen into inadequacy; according to the singer, words may have once had “their meaning,” but not “anymore.” The singer admittedly employs a system of verbal language to deliver this message, but she does so with the caveat that this kind of communication is a one-time offer, as she warns, “Today is the last day that I’m using words.”

While the blue honey serves as an image that assists vocal expression, images of text and typography seem to counteract the honey and stifle the



voice; most of the text that emerges through the rest of the video is in some way oppressive or limiting to the singing voice and/or the singer. For example, the illegible scrawl that surrounds her face on each side of the rotating black cube seems to constrain and engulf her without offering any 'meaning' to the text (Figure 4). Here we see a version of the singer whose image is flattened on the face of a cube, framed and constrained by texts, detached from her body. She moves away from this lyrically, "leaving logic and meaning"—presumably incarnated in the texts that enclose her—"to the arms of unconsciousness." The singer continues to work against these frames of text: in a later scene, a foot stands atop the Arabic text that is carved into the ground and crushes grapes into the letters. This image transforms the text from a site of reading to one of drink and gesture. The singer ridicules the text with a pun as she sings, "Words / are useless / especially / sentences / They don't stand for anything." (Figure 7)

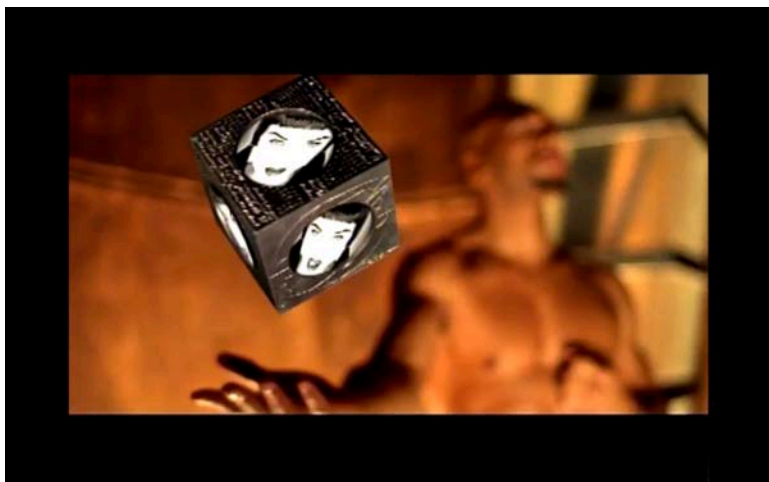


Figure 5, "Bedtime Story"



Figure 6, “Bedtime Story”

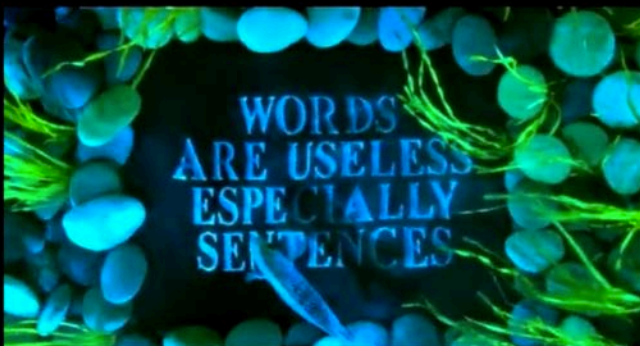


Figure 7, “Bedtime Story”

She lifts her foot at the utterance of the word “stand”, implying that her body is a site of more expressive meaning (it can actually stand and gesture, while

the text just sits flat and illegible to most of her English-speaking audience) because it literally stands on the text. Thus, in these particular scenes, the video seems to marginalize “male writing,” just as written accounts of the Sirens marginalize and prevent expressions of female writing; just as these texts silence the Sirens, Madonna's video steps on written language, pushing it to the ground and to the bottom of pools (Figure 6).

As the video progresses, the singer's voice grows more convincing, especially when she is situated within kinetic, fluid scenes. She seems to finally enact a self-aware performance of the singing act when in the oceanic flush of the sunflower (Figure 8). Where the appearances of text seem distinct from, and often set in opposition to, the singer's expressive capacities, these more 'bodied' scenes both allow and engender her performative potency.

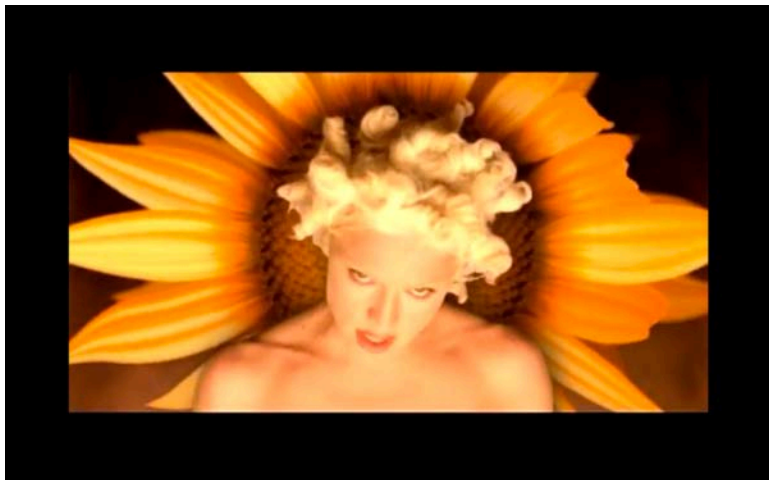


Figure 8, “Bedtime Story”

And similarly, in this temporal progression, we see an increase in her sense of bodily agency as a means to destabilize written language as the only legitimate means to voice, whether male or female. The video's progression in time activates the body's progression in expressive power, starting from this

expressive and performative sunflower dance; she then moves to the desecration of the Arabic text with her foot and the grapes.

Our singer expresses a visible disenfranchisement with the mode of language offered to her when she is depicted as a maternal figure. Emphasizing her feminine body, she points at her pregnant stomach and asks, “How could *they* explain how I feel?” Through a dynamic and multimedia interplay, she enacts a new mode of expression: she speaks through the discourse generated between her verbal question, her knowing vocal tone, and her bodily gestures, and she does all of this without operating within the confines of “sentences” that don’t “stand for anything.” (Figure 6)

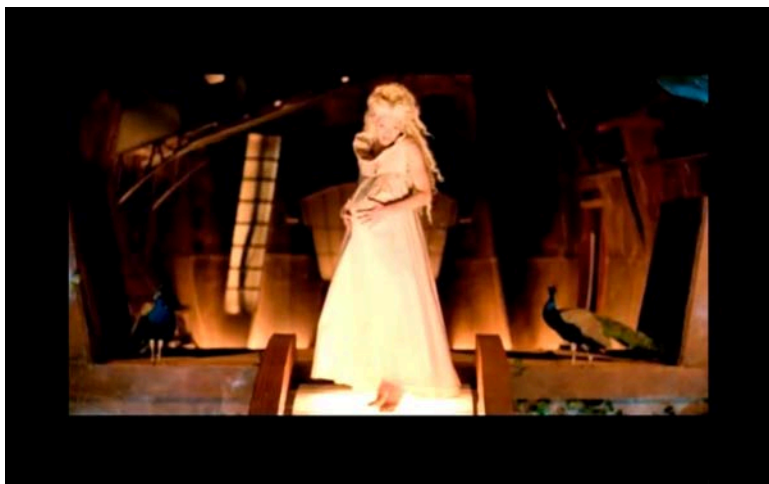


Figure 9, “Bedtime Story”

The nearly final realization of a new method of non-textual expression occurs in the birth scene. As the red glass upon the table bursts, her water breaks, and she releases birds from her stomach. In this moment, the female body is figured as ejaculatory in its expressive visual and kinetic capacity, matching Cixous’ claims about the body: “A woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing the yokes and censors, she lets it

articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction" (Cixous 394). Cixous situates the female body as a multifarious vessel of "overflowing" (Cixous 388) voice, which propels and pours out meaning.

As the body begins to overflow and speak in *écriture féminine*, it begins to work against not only male writing, but also male narration of the feminine voice. We can trace this rejection through the figure of the old man who stalks in and out of the visual scenes, watching her and talking into a voice recorder. The old man transmits his narrated version of Madonna's song through dead brown poppies—symbols of forgetting—to a young man, who is visibly enraptured with the smell of the poppies and the male fantasy of the female voice. At this point, the younger man does in fact consume the old man's *narration* of Madonna's singing rather than *her voice* as unmediated by male narrative, and this is exactly the problem that our singer wishes to address in questions like, "How could they explain how I feel?" How could "they" translate the uniquely feminine experiences of pregnancy and birth through male writing? Furthermore, how can "they" narrate the female body in a mode of discourse which denies its embodiment? The old man's recording participates in the long and pervasive tradition of the male claim to female voice that we see in the ancient accounts of the Sirens; by sending the messages to the younger male generation through *poppies*, he transmits a version of the female voice through a vehicle of forgetting. The poppies indicate all of the "forgetting" of the female voice that happens in this kind of exchange, and the entire transmission process has been infused with an obliteration of the possibility of a woman speaking in her own voice.

Later on in the video, the singer sits in a pool of still water surrounded by skulls: Herr notes the self-conscious visual homology between this scene and surrealist painting, but what interests me here is the adapted image of the Sirens' isle (Figure 10) that also complements the lyrical lure into oblivion: "Let's get unconscious, honey." This scene finds the singer in the center of the frame, surrounded by avian skulls in a reflective black pool. This image captures the dual seduction and monstrosity of the Sirens' isle, though the

seduction present here is a bodily, visual seduction rather than a vocal or narrative lure. Homer's Sirens are never actually visualized in Odysseus' narrative account—they only emerge as voices—in this video, the singer's nude form—bathed in warm light—functions as the centerpiece of the frame. We may recall the Sirens through the seductive, water-dwelling singer, the avian figures, and the locale that seems to invite both pleasure (in the nude form) and death (in the skulls).



Figure 10, "Bedtime Story"

The vocal line that the singer performs, "Let's get unconscious, honey," functions as an open call to collective unconsciousness; and as such, it recalls the Sirens' death call, though the singer here does not seduce the listener with deceptive promises, as Homer's Sirens do to Odysseus. In this scene, each time the performer of "Bedtime Story" sings the word "honey," the image of her singing face is turned upside down and reflected in the pool of water. This reversal only lasts while she sings the word "honey." If the visual or verbal representation of honey enacts a literal reversal of images each time it arises, the video must be trying to visually demonstrate something about the status of honey and the female voice. This scene functions as a

subversive moment within the tradition of Sirenic voice, as it calls for a reversal through the invocation of honey, and conjures the Sirens in a complex way: though the image shares certain features with descriptions of the Sirens—seductive water-dwelling woman; skulls; bird features—it seems to nonetheless tell us that the Sirens are dead. As the old man looks down upon the pool and records Madonna's voice, it seems that she alone has survived, which both sets her in relation with and difference to the Sirens: she is part of this tradition, but the tradition is dead in her world.

The chain of expressive imagery in "Bedtime Story" creates a dialogic visual narrative within the video, wherein images can become just as vocal and expressive as verbal expressions. Operating within this new bodied mode of expression, our singer is able to tell the video's characters and its viewers that she will exhume the possibility of female self-expression from the field of poppies. In this new zone of expression, the male will no longer act as the exclusive writer of the female voice, because the female voice is willing and ready to pour out of eye sockets, roll out of punctured cheeks, and flow from wherever its speaker chooses. Instead of explaining this, Madonna shows it in the final fantastical image (Figure 11), using her face as the site of feminine reclaiming of vocal possibility. While a totally reorganized face seems like it should be monstrous, the image of Madonna's new face carries no actual horror. It exudes power and possibility, instead; new orifices of expression are opened in the eyes, and her heads bobs back and forth in imitation of the tragedy and comedy masks, as she imitates one after the other. The face itself performs well in this new organization: it does not present itself as deformed, but rather as willfully and elastically manipulated. What seems at first like an image of deformity becomes a site of new vocality, and so any threat of horror is replaced by the thrill of possibility. This is precisely what Cixous means when she writes, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous 393).



Figure 11, "Bedtime Story"

Herr claims that the song's lyrics act as a frustrated expression of the urge to retreat from a meaningless language into the unconscious mental state; however, I must argue that Madonna's vocal utterances in this song indicate more than just anxiety or dissatisfaction about the difficulties of conveying meaning in discourse. The video does not render the journey to unconsciousness as a mind-numbing escape from meaninglessness. The unconsciousness she describes does not refer to a 'real' psychological state, but rather, a realm of un-thinking and an undoing of the faulty politics of expression. She wants her audience to come to unconsciousness with her, not because it might offer a much-needed *respite* from male claims to female vocality, but rather because it offers a new and open site that lacks a history of silencing. The unconsciousness that Madonna beckons us into functions as a space in which new modes of expression can be opened, and wiped of their gendered statuses; she images a space where texts, images, gestures, voices, and performances sit on equal expressive footing and lose the gender identities that falsely attach themselves to modes of expression.

Where "getting unconscious" with Madonna has been critically analyzed as a



closing off of the expressive capacity and a retreat from the voice, instead it is an opening up of previously inaccessible performative zones. And while Madonna's reorganized face illuminates new sites of expressive performance and new organs for reading, it recalls both the face of the Medusa and the most famous masks of all, tragedy and comedy. As she rolls her head from the tragedy position into the comedy position, she is never limited to remain within the absolutely tragic mode, nor the absolutely comic, but embodies both masks with the twitch of a lip or the turn of an eye. Of course, Madonna is the performer who can create a song and video that leads all its listeners and critics to consider images of disappearance and emptiness, when in turn, the multi-media unit works inversely to expectation, toward emergence and excessive fullness.

But Madonna can never tell us how to read her performance, and what's threatening about her art is that she does not actively participate in its reception. In the last line of the song, she promises gravely and slowly, "I'll never explain again." This once again seems like a negation of expression and voice, but this is Madonna talking, so really, it's a promise of *more* performance, *more* novelty, and *new* voices. Where the song of the Sirens' assures death with the reception of their song, the performance of Madonna does not assure its listeners of anything; because her song does not ensure literal death, Madonna is obviously a less physically threatening singer than the Sirens are. On the other hand, the Sirens are generally consistent in their tricks, which is how Circe can help Odysseus hear them and still survive. Madonna's listener, on the other hand, receives no immortal guidance, no guarantees, no stability, thus the difficulty of readerly orientation makes her a trickier and more alarming performative beast than even the Sirens themselves.

Thus one of the dangers of divas is that they are metamorphic creatures whose songs, videos, and identities resist essentialist or universal critique. And while this sets them apart from the Sirens—whose song yields a consistent result—this chameleonic voice also aligns them with the Sirens, whose song adapts it promises and temptations to its listener. As much as

one might wish that Madonna had put the Sirens to sleep with her “Bedtime Story,” these divas seem to perpetually awaken the Sirens, as they operate within a Sirenic tradition and employ the enticing and dangerous voices of their precursors. In this essay, I hope that I have demonstrated the ways in which divas like Lady Gaga and Madonna create worlds in which they call out to their singing sisters, and move into a new and ambiguous elsewhere, both by means of and for the purpose of Cixous' *écriture féminine*. So while these divas do not offer a lullaby to put the Sirens to sleep, they do leave the Sirens behind, as Lady Gaga promises to Beyonce that she'll “never go back there” again, and Madonna warns, “All that you've ever learned, try to forget.”

- - -

### Works Cited

- Akerlund, Jonas, Lady Gaga, Beyonce Knowles. (2010, March 15). “Telephone.” Retrieved from <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQ95z6ywcBY&ob=av2e>>.
- Apollonius Rhodius, R.C. Seaton. *The Argonautica*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1912. Print.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Selected Poems: 1966-1984*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Austern, Linda P, and Inna Naroditskaya. *Music of the Sirens*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Print.
- Barthes, Roland, Richard Miller. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. Print.
- Bland, Bridget. “Around the Web: India.Arie's ‘Telephone’ Call, Homophobic Lil Mo?, Kanye Gets Animated.” *HuffPost Black Voices*. 26 March 2010. <<http://www.bvnewswire.com/2010/03/26/india-aries-telephone-homophobic-lil-mo/>>. Online.
- Brown, Patricia. “POP; Video and Theater Shape a New Madonna.” *NYTimes.com*. 17 June 1990. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/17/arts/pop-video-and-theater-shape-a-new-madonna.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>. Online.
- Carson, Anne. *Glass, Irony, and God*. New York: New Directions Book, 1995. Print.
- Fouz-Hernández, Santiago, and Freya Jarman-Ivens. *Madonna's Drowned Worlds: New*

*Approaches to Her Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004. Print.

Homer, A T. Murray, and George Dimock. *The Odyssey*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995. Print.

"Is Lady Gaga's 'Telephone' video socially irresponsible?" Marquee Blog. 24 March 2010. <<http://marquee.blogs.cnn.com/2010/03/24/is-lady-gagas-telephone-video-socially-irresponsible/>>. Online.

Kearney, Richard, and David M. Rasmussen. *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism : an Anthology*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. Print.

Leonardi, Susan J, and Rebecca A. Pope. *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1996. Print.

Martindale, Charles, and Richard F. Thomas. *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2006. Print.

Martindale, Charles. *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Print.

Nolan, Joy. "Madonna, Feminist; A Reach Too Far." NYTimes.com. 6 January 1991. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/06/arts/l-madonna-feminist-a-reach-too-far-942191.html>>. Online.

Paglia, Camille. "Madonna – Finally, a Real Feminist." NYTimes.com. 14 December 1990. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/14/opinion/madonna-finally-a-real-feminist.html>>. Online.

Pucci, Pietro. *The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. Print.

Railton, Diane, and Paul Watson. *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Print.

Romanek, Mark, Madonna. (1995, March 10). "Bedtime Story." Retrieved from <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSaFgAwnRSc&ob=av2e>>.

Sargeant, Winthrop. *Divas*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973. Print.

---

<sup>1</sup> “For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth” (Augustus Taber Murray, 1919).

<sup>2</sup> “Meanwhile the well-built ship speedily came to the isle of the two Sirens, for a fair and gentle wind bore her on. Then presently the wind ceased and there was a windless calm, and a god lulled the waves to sleep” (Murray).

<sup>3</sup> See J. Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism*; the online journal *Gaga Stigmata*; Mathieu Deflem's course, “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame”; Christa Romanosky's course, “GaGa for Gaga: Sex, Gender, and Identity”; Allison Adrian and Amy Hamlin's course, “The Music and Image Monster: Lady Gaga in Context,” among others.

<sup>4</sup> See Philip Auslander's *Liveness*.

<sup>5</sup> “Stay thy ship that thou mayest listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past this isle in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips” (Murray).

<sup>6</sup> It seems that Odysseus' strategy functions as a kind of theft, for Odysseus sails by with his ears plugged; in doing so, something from the Sirens without “paying for it” according to the typical literary ‘contract’ between sailors and Sirens. He does not pay with his death, and thus, he takes the Siren's honey.

<sup>7</sup> Halberstam elaborates on this mode of feminism in her upcoming book, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*.

## **The Mermaid Eftalya**

*Gail Holst-Warhaft*

Summer nights on the Bosphorus  
she and her father, a Greek  
officer in the Ottoman army  
liked to hire a caique  
and catch the breeze off the water.

She would sing while he,  
fanned by her song, drank raki.

Hearing her voice from banks  
they called her “mermaid,” a name  
she would keep as she made her debut,  
a teenager still. Her fame  
increasing year by year  
she sang in the Galata cafés  
recording her songs for Pathé.

A hybrid beauty, beloved  
from Istanbul to Izmir and Ankara,  
she sang light songs and classic  
tunes from the Ottoman repertoire.  
They say that even Atatürk  
admired the Greek-born mermaid.  
One moonlit night—her birthday  
in nineteen thirty-six,  
she sailed the Bosphorus again,  
a flotilla of fans in her wake.  
All who heard her claimed  
the fantastic price worth paying –  
her voice was never more  
enchanting : “Mermaid, encore!”

they cried and she sang on,  
charming them till the moon set.  
She shivered in the damp air;  
a muezzin called from a minaret  
but the mermaid couldn't answer:  
her voice was gone. She never  
recovered but died of a fever.

Was it the damp air that robbed her  
or a fish-tailed sister's outrage?  
Lucky for us her voice  
was saved for a later age  
on cylinders and vinyl disks  
so that siren is not lost to us  
who sang, summer nights, on the Bosphorus.

## Reasons I Don't Use the Word Diva, #1 and #14

Jane Holloway

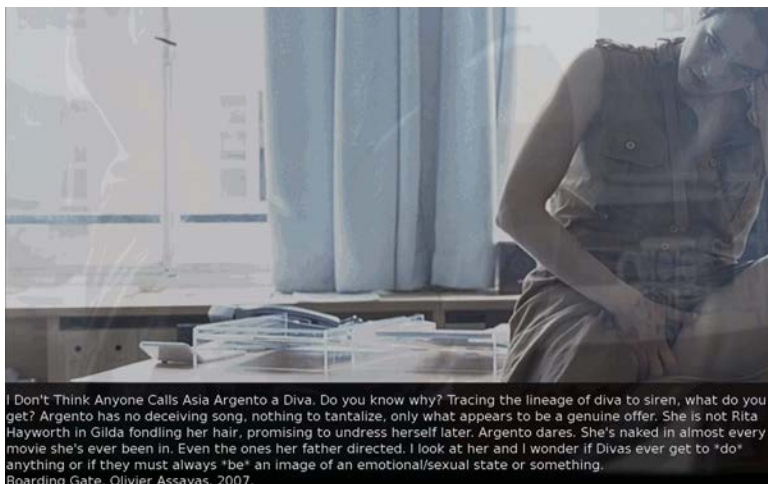


**TEXT:** I have been listening to the 12" mixes of Mariah Carey's "Emotions" into eternity. I've got these nails that you can't even understand there are so many layers I've stuck on them. I know what you're gonna say: I listen to my vocal house, that very romantic music and I whip my hair to these diva songs and after I do that I become her, that future version of me lost in this perpetual desire to be something different from what I am right now in this moment - after all that hustle I get to be the diva, an image of desire. You think that's what happens when I'm in in full face. When you look at me like this you have this very contradictory thought that I love, I have to say: I'm the one I'll never get to be. I'm in a newspaper, I'm in your dreams, I'm in this picture or Jane's screenshot and here in this picture I'm the one I'll need get to be. I remind you, so you think, of what it looks like to be lost, to be empty—you wonder what's behind the full face, some fat young girl, some desperate young girl. When I think about it, that's just so ironic to me.

All divas are images of frustrated desire, never free. They are the ones on the ships who tie themselves, to masts and to themselves. So yeah, I know what you're gonna say: Against all odds, this one became a diva. People have said this maybe because I am dead and I killed myself. Retrospective types, the ones that read the newspaper with religious fervor. They see a nobility in what I ma, what I look like, the potency of my transformations. So yeah, I know what you're going to say: she has shown us the diva to come, the one who has against all odes she has become a diva even though she's what they call fat, brown, and or not a woman, and I know very well but she's just so embodied, so spirited, really even this photographic image of her tells us that she was the life of the party. Is that me? I know you dream about me. So when you poor assholes dreamt about me, who was I in your dream?? Which mast were you tied to?

Look me up on Youtube. xEmoBoy1987x. I'm the one who shows you what it looks like when I do my face contour. Hi guys, it's me Mark...





*TEXT:* I Don't Think Anyone Calls Asia Argento a Diva. Do you know why? Tracing the lineage of diva to siren, what do you get? Argento has no deceiving song, nothing to tantalize, only what appears to be a genuine offer. She is not Rita Hayworth in Gilda fondling her hair, promising to undress herself later. Argento dares. She's naked in almost every movie she's ever been in. Even the ones her father directed. I look at her and I wonder if Divas ever get to \*do\* anything or if they must always \*be\* an image of an emotional/sexual state or something.

Boarding Gate, Olivier Assayas. 2007.

## **The Presentation of Fame in Everyday Life: The Case of Lady Gaga**

*Mathieu Deflem*

It would be unbelievable to all readers of this paper, I have no doubt, to tell the tale of a university administrator who did not know who Lady Gaga was when, in November of 2010, I told her I was going to organize a sociology course on the fame of the performer and when thousands of media sources in every continent of the world were reporting about my course. Yet, that tale would be true. Perhaps this event is too idiosyncratic to develop a more encompassing explanation, but it nonetheless strengthened, rather than undermined, the notion on my part that a sociological perspective of fame is needed and that such a perspective would need to ponder on the dynamic interplay between society and self. It is as part of a broader ongoing research project focused on the social conditions of the fame of Lady Gaga that I here offer some thoughts on this interplay in the construction and reception of fame.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this paper invokes a book of the sociologist Erving Goffman, who developed a dramaturgical approach to the analysis of face-to-face interaction on the basis of a conception of social life as a theatrical performance.<sup>2</sup> In our everyday life today, the “obvious inadequacies”<sup>3</sup> of the dramaturgical model are far fewer than when Goffman was writing as the lines between public and private selves are blurred more than ever before. In the case of Lady Gaga, moreover, the art of fame as a performance is deliberately and resolutely pursued and embraced by her and also received as such by her audience. I hope to provide a framework for the understanding of this distinctly sociological aspect of Lady Gaga’s fame.

### *Fame: Towards a Sociological Perspective*

Etymologically derived from the Latin goddess Fama, the phenomenon of fame was historically related to a quality of ill repute, of being spoken about through public gossip, a negative connotation which today is associated with infamy as one modality of a more neutrally understood fame. Today, in fact, it

is more typical to celebrate fame to create celebrities whose fame is explicitly acknowledged, whether for good or bad. A new species of famous people has thereby emerged who embrace the practice of fame itself as an art. In the world of popular entertainment today, Lady Gaga may count as one of the most exemplary cases among these artists of fame.

Although the phenomenon of fame today, in general, and Lady Gaga's fame in the world of popular music, more particularly, are of a contemporary nature, it is more than useful to bring out that the active pursuit and embrace of fame in the arts is not without history. In the world of classical music, for instance, the Hungarian-born pianist Franz Liszt (1811-1886) had acquired a status of fame in the middle to late 19th century which in many ways was comparable to that of Lady Gaga today.<sup>4</sup> Both musicians, whose primary instrument is the piano, are well-known not only for their music but also, and particularly, for their fame and for having gained favor among a wide international audience, including many of the political and other cultural dignitaries of their respective days. Like Lady Gaga, Liszt was both artistically admired and commercially successful, leading to a level of devotion that was so staggering that it was uniquely described, by the famous German poet Heinrich Heine, as 'Lisztomania.' Biographies of Liszt routinely describe him as a rock star of the 19th century or the Michael Jackson of his days. On the occasion of the bicentennial celebration of Liszt's birthday in 2011, the newspaper *The Telegraph* devoted an article to the pianist's special sense of mixing entertainment with art, an ambition that is often also attributed to Lady Gaga.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, both performers have at times also been denounced as flashy or superficial.

Whether in contemporary society or in the past, many pertinent questions can be asked about fame. At the most basic level, a sociological perspective conceives of fame in relational terms as pertaining to the quality of an interaction between the person to whom fame is attributed, on the one hand, and the audience who participates in such attribution, on the other. As such, fame is essentially social as no person can be famous, by definition, without a society within which that fame is practiced. Applied to the case of Lady Gaga,

therefore, the sociological questions that need to be asked about fame are at least twofold: 1) What are the societal conditions that have propelled Lady Gaga to her current status of a global pop superstar?; and 2) What are Lady Gaga's own perceptions and visions of fame, in general, and of her fame, in particular? A sociological examination of fame is thus essentially an inquiry of society and self in the presentation of fame.

### *Society: The Social Conditions of Fame*

Sociologically, it can be taken as a given that the fame of Lady Gaga rests, to some or even large extent, on an artistic talent that is aesthetically expressed in musical and other related forms (songs, videos, fashion, shows). What is at the heart of a sociology of fame in the world of music are all those forces and mechanisms which exist socially within the environment of music. In my teaching and research, I have identified at least eight social conditions which have contributed to Lady Gaga's fame. I can here not offer an in-depth analysis of these conditions but do wish to explain their relevance.

#### 1) Business and Marketing

To be successful, musicians like all other artists need to rely on an infrastructure and organization to connect the aesthetically valuable with the commercially viable. Although it is sometimes wrongly identified as the singular or most important aspect of Lady Gaga's fame, there is no doubt that a well-functioning business machinery has been at work to bring the performer to a global audience.<sup>6</sup> Yet, whether there are marketing lessons to be learned from the case of Lady Gaga's fame for other artists remains questionable as it is also the case that Lady Gaga is rarely gifted as a musician, composer, and performer.

#### 2) Entertainment Law

All societies are structured by means of a variety of more and less formal norms. It is a mark of modernity that such normative integration is also

accomplished through highly formalized legal means, even when something as deceptively frivolous as pop culture is concerned. When it comes to legalities, indeed, pop music is anything but low brow. On the contrary, intricate laws pertaining to such matters as contract, copyright, and trademark are pertinent to a career in music. Not surprisingly in view of the scope of her success, Lady Gaga has been involved in almost a dozen lawsuits since her rise to fame.

### 3) Media Exposure

The manager of Lady Gaga once referred to his star as a “digital baby,”<sup>7</sup> a qualification that accurately describes the manner in which she rose to fame, from an initial discovery on MySpace to her currently dominating presence in social networking, especially on Facebook and Twitter. But it is not true that the internet alone or even primarily has been responsible for Lady Gaga’s success. Instead, what is most special about her fame in this respect is that she has used the new media while at the same time also successfully relying on the traditional media of radio, television, and print.

### 4) Fans and Live Shows

The strong identification of the fans of Lady Gaga as ‘little monsters’ is a characteristic so peculiar that one can surely speak by now of a subcultural phenomenon. Perhaps it was precisely because there was a vacuum in the world of pop and rock centered around trends and stars that the rise Lady Gaga was a most fortuitous event. Lady Gaga’s live shows, in addition, offer a place of intense interaction, both of the fan (in the singular) with his/her favorite artist and of the fans (in the plural) with one another. The dedication of Lady Gaga to offer a true spectacle additionally adds to her fame because it reaches beyond her hardcore fans to a wider audience of listeners and spectators.

### 5) Gay Culture

The gay community entertains an exceptional place in the fame of Lady Gaga as a special sub-set of her fans. The gay community in the United States, in particular, was among the first to embrace the music of Lady Gaga, especially because of its gay-friendly stylistic qualities in the realm of techno, dance, and pop. Additionally, Lady Gaga has explicitly recognized this support and has made it an explicit theme of her music, most notably in her 2011 song "Born This Way."

## 6) Political Activism and Religion

Lady Gaga's embrace of gay culture has also inspired her to be very vocal in her support for gay rights. Most concretely she has taken a variety of efforts to rally against the treatment of gays in the U.S. military by means of the so-called policy of Don't Ask Don't Tell<sup>8</sup>. Most recently, Lady Gaga has extended her activism to anti-bullying initiatives, for which she has co-founded with her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, the Born This Way Foundation in collaboration with Harvard University and a number of other groups and celebrities. What is exceptional about this resolute adoption of activism by a pop star is that it involves an intrusion of ethical values in the world of popular aesthetics when the course of history has gone distinctly in the direction of a differentiation of these cultural spheres. The same holds true for religion, perhaps even more so because of its inevitably special place among believers. But about religion, too, Lady Gaga has spoken out in public, both as a person openly committed to certain religious beliefs and as an artist relying on religious symbols. Needless to say, these issues have not gone without public notice and debate, with all due consequences for her fame.<sup>9</sup>

## 7) Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

During the Spring and Summer of 2006, Stefani Germanotta transformed herself from an indie-rock musician to the self-proclaimed techno-pop performance artist Lady Gaga. This transformation was at least in part motivated by the expectation that success for a female artist is more likely in pop than in rock. At the same time, Lady Gaga did not want to be seen as

just another blond in the world of pop. But the lady is a female nonetheless and has been exposed to a number of issues that are gendered and, at times, sexist, to wit the ludicrous speculations over her sex and the incessant comparisons with other female artists.<sup>10</sup>

In keeping with the theme of this journal, the use of the term 'diva' deserves some consideration in this context for it has occasionally been used to describe Lady Gaga and other performers somehow thought to be like her. As the term is predominantly used and understood today, diva must be recognized as a distinctly gendered word that often lapses, intentionally or not, into sexism. After all, there is no equivalent term to diva for successful males, and any male so labeled is distinctly denigrated precisely because the term is reserved for females. Of course, meanings need not be stable over time or across communities, and females have, to some extent, begun to embrace the term. Even then, this adoption only makes sense in the background of its predominant meaning.

## 8) New York

Stefani Germanotta grew up in a rather privileged environment in New York's Upper West side. Moving to the Lower East side district when she was 19 would eventually enable the creation of Lady Gaga as she was exposed to the full artistic range New York has to offer as a unique mix of high and low art, of Broadway plays and rock 'n' roll, of a classical piano training and the electronic sounds of the dance clubs.

### *Self: Lady Gaga on Fame and the Fame*

Lady Gaga is not only an object of the fame bestowed upon her by her audience, but also actively embraces and pursues her fame. Both in her artistic work and in interviews, she has explicitly dealt with fame.<sup>11</sup> Her first album, *The Fame* (2008), deals in a number of songs with what Lady Gaga refers to as the difference between 'fame,' which is largely understood as recognized fame or celebrity, and 'the fame,' which she understands as a

more positive quality that is not necessarily associated with being well-known.

“I think there’s different kinds of fame. I think there’s ‘fame,’ which is plastic and you can buy it on the street, and paparazzi and money and being rich, and then there’s ‘the fame’ which is when no one knows who you are, but everybody wants to know who you are.”<sup>12</sup>

Speaking on the conception of the fame, Lady Gaga most distinctly expresses the idea that it is a quality that can be shared among her and those who join her as her fans and, more generally, her audience.

“The Fame is about how anyone can feel famous... it’s a sharable fame. I want to invite you all to the party.”<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, however, as Lady Gaga became more famous over the course of her growing career, she also had to acknowledge that she was more exposed to fame (in the sense in which she understands it more negatively), something she would again deal with explicitly in her work. Most striking perhaps in this respect was the live rendition of her song “Paparazzi” at the Video Music Awards (VMA) in New York City’s Radio Music Hall in September 2009, when (unrelated to the actual lyrical theme of the song) she was inspired by the death of Princess Diana to deliver a blood-soaked portrayal of the price of fame as a form of dying.<sup>14</sup> In her follow-up album *The Fame Monster*, Lady Gaga further addressed different negative aspects of having acquired fame in several songs in the form of various fears, including the fear of her fame itself.

“Of never being able to enjoy myself, because I love my work so much, I find it really hard to go out and have a good time.”<sup>15</sup>

Dealing with the many dangers that come with fame, Lady Gaga sees a special role reserved for the people she surrounds herself with for organizational as well as artistic purposes. Lady Gaga is a solo artist who, as a



successful star, is accompanied by producers, managers, musicians, dancers, and others, whom she also considers to have a protective function.

“I think that with fame comes a lot of people that are jealous, and with success comes people that want things from you. The key to having both is surrounding yourself with people that want good things from you.”<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to her work, importantly, Lady Gaga claims her fame to be based on a variety of artistic accomplishments, including music, videos, fashion, and performances. As she mixes musical sounds with particular ways of performing, Lady Gaga thereby understands that art always needs to be communicated to an audience. Commercial success, as Lady Gaga herself sees it, is not to be equated with the fame, but is merely one of its effects. Instead, she claims authenticity by emphasizing that she writes and co-produces her songs, plays piano as well as sings (and claims to never lip-sync), and is generally involved in every aspect of her work. Rather than displaying arrogance or selfishness, Lady Gaga conceives of this sense of control as a necessary condition for a long-lasting career.

“Because that’s your fame. That’s where your fame lives... my luminosity, my constant flashing light. It’s in my ability to know what I make is great. I know it is: I know it’s great, and it’s that sureness-- that sureness is infectious.”<sup>17</sup>

In relation to this understanding of her own accomplishments, Lady Gaga pursues her work full-time as her life. As such, she sees no difference between herself as a person and the persona of Lady Gaga. In this day and age when the distinction between private and public is blurred in so many ways, Lady Gaga seeks to be Lady Gaga full-time. Whether this ideal is attainable and/or ultimately tragic, it is too soon to say, but it is clear that Lady Gaga sees it as her mission to embrace the fame as a student of its sociology.

On the television program *60 Minutes* that aired on the day of the Grammys in February 2011, Lady Gaga explicitly addressed the sociology of fame in response to a question by Anderson Cooper regarding my course at USC which was discussed widely in the media at the time the interview was conducted. She thereby affirmed that her pursuit of the fame was an essential part of her work, not one of its mere side-effects.

“I’m a true academic when it comes to music and when it comes to my style, my fashion... [I studied] the sociology of fame and how to maintain a certain privacy... When you asked me about the sociology of fame and what artists do wrong, what artists do wrong is they lie, and I don’t lie.”

The ongoing sociological analysis of the fame of Lady Gaga in terms of the interplay between its social conditions and the self-perceptions on the part of the performer should lead to make sense of the most peculiar aspect of Lady Gaga’s fame, which is surely not its scope, for fame in pop and rock music is typically not regionally confined. For whatever else it is, pop music is after all popular, by definition. Instead, what is remarkable about, and what begs for an analysis of, the fame of Lady Gaga is the fact that it has taken place now, over the past couple of years, at a time when the popular music industry is in shambles, especially in economic terms. In contrast, an analysis of the fame of the likes of Madonna or Michael Jackson would inevitably be restricted to a historical exercise.

- - -

### *Acknowledgement*

A previous version of this paper was presented at a panel, “On the Nature of Celebrity: Franz Liszt, Niccolò Paganini, and Lady Gaga,” that was held at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, October 19, 2011. I am grateful to the organizer and participants of the panel for their feedback. I warmly thank Hannah Silverblank ’12 for her kind suggestion to submit this writing.

## *About the Author*

Mathieu Deflem is Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina, where he teaches courses on sociology of law, social control, theory, and popular culture. In the area of culture, he has written about Lady Gaga, Alfred Hitchcock, music censorship, and ritual. Deflem's undergraduate course "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame" attracted worldwide attention and bestowed him his own modicum of celebrity. A long-time fan of pop and rock music, Deflem privately maintains the fan site [gagafrontrow.net](http://gagafrontrow.net) and was the basis for the character of 'Alphonse' on a 2011 episode of *Saturday Night Live* starring Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake.

---

<sup>1</sup> The blog I maintain about my course, "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame," includes readings, sources, news articles, and related videos: [www.gagacourse.net](http://www.gagacourse.net).

<sup>2</sup> Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Goffman, xi.

<sup>4</sup> See Walker, Alan. *Franz Liszt, The Virtuoso Years (1811–1847)*. Revised edition. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Hewett, Ivan. "Why Franz Liszt is Infuriating... and Irresistible." *The Telegraph*, July 20, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/8650474/Why-Franz-Liszt-is-infuriating...-and-irresistible.html>

<sup>6</sup> For a brief preliminary analysis of the marketing of Lady Gaga's fame, see Deflem, Mathieu. "Marketing Monster: Selling the Fame of Lady Gaga." *The Wicked Twins: Fame & Notoriety*. Exhibition catalogue, Paul Robeson Galleries, a program of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2012, pp. 30-35.

<sup>7</sup> Drao, Leena. "Lady Gaga's Manager: We Make Music Videos for YouTube." *TechCrunch*, May 26, 2010. <http://techcrunch.com/2010/05/26/lady-gagas-manager-we-make-music-videos-for-youtube/>

<sup>8</sup> Parker, Suzi. "Lady Gaga's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Activism Is Getting Results." *Politics Daily*, September 16, 2010. <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/09/16/lady-gagas-dont-ask-dont-tell-activism-is-getting-results/>

<sup>9</sup> Williams, Mary E. "Lady Gaga's Religion-Baiting Controversy." *Salon.com*, April 12, 2011. [http://www.salon.com/2011/04/12/lady\\_gaga\\_judas\\_video\\_controversy/](http://www.salon.com/2011/04/12/lady_gaga_judas_video_controversy/)

<sup>10</sup> See Deflem, Mathieu. "The Sex of Lady Gaga." *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*. Ed. Richard J. Gray. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2012, in press.

<sup>11</sup> Necessarily selective, this brief analysis of Lady Gaga's self-understanding of fame relies primarily on two published biographies and the interviews included therein. See Lester, Paul. *Looking For Fame: The Life of Pop Princess Lady Gaga*. London: Omnibus Press, 2010; Herbert, Emily. *Lady Gaga: Behind the Fame*. New York: The Overlook Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Lester, 104, 105.

<sup>14</sup> A video of Lady Gaga's 2009 VMA performance can be viewed online on the MTV website: <http://www.mtv.com/videos/shows/vma-09/435679/paparazzi-live.jhtml>

<sup>15</sup> Lester, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert, 177.

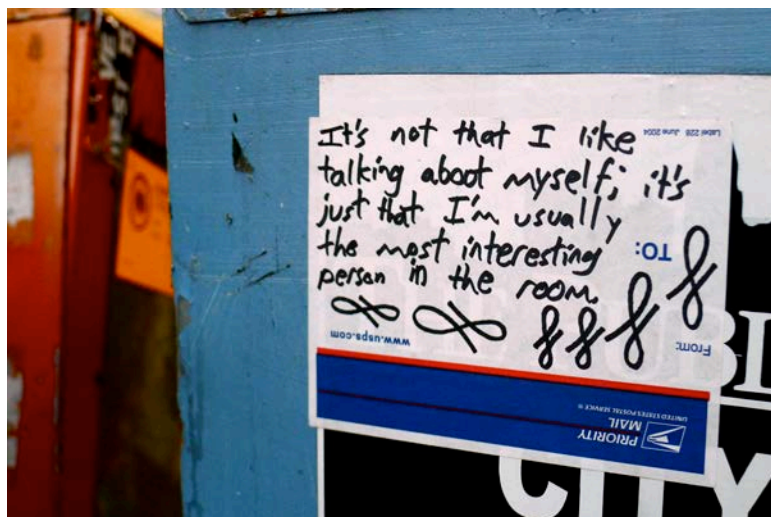
<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

## Curly Is a Diva

Curly







## Portrait of the Abbess as a Pop-Culture Diva: How Hildegard Became a New Age Superstar and Why It Makes Me So Nervous

Maud McLnerney

When I was first beginning to work on Hildegard almost twenty years ago, she was still a relatively obscure figure in this country. Much of her work was just beginning to be available in translation, and reliable editions of the Latin were hard to come by; to read many of her letters, for instance, one had to struggle with the minute print and crumbling pages of the *Patrologia Latina*. I discovered Hildegard through a tiny book, a facing page French translation of the poems from the *Symphonia*, by Laurence Moulinier. I think someone gave it to me, but I'm not sure who; quite possibly it was my mother. They were remarkable poems, in the original Latin, which was unlike anything I'd ever encountered before, loose in syntax and even grammar, but precise in tone and image; the French translation made them sound rather like the work of the late 19th century poet Rimbaud. Here is part of the Sequence for Saint Maximin:

A dove gazed in  
through a latticed window:  
there balm rained down on her face,  
raining from lucent  
Maximin.

The heat of the sun blazed out  
to irradiate the dark:  
a bud burst open, jewel-like  
in the temple of his heart  
(limpid and kind his heart).

A tower of cypress is he,  
And of Lebanon's cedars—  
rubies and sapphires frame his turrets  
a city passing the arts



of all other artisans. (Newman, *Symphonia* 213)

That is the translation of Barbara Newman, who has done by far the best job of capturing Hildegard's unique, synesthetic imagery. The more I worked on Hildegard, the more aware I became of just how complicated and contradictory both the writings and the woman were. How could I reconcile the ecstatic and moving voice of the poems with the hectoring, raging voice of some of the letters? The vocabulary was recognizably similar, of course, but the tone of the poems seemed utterly incompatible with the tone of a letter like the following:

You are the night exhaling darkness, and you are like people who do not work, nor even walk in the light because of your indolence... just as a snake hides in a cave after it has shed its skin, you walk in filth like disgusting beasts...The power of God will crush and destroy your necks which have become stiff with iniquity, for they have been puffed up as with the breath of the wind.... (Baird and Ehrman, *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 56).

The people whom Hildegard here addresses as snakes and windbags were actually admirers of hers, ecclesiastics from Cologne who had written asking for a copy of her sermon against the Cathars; she accuses them of failing in their duty to their flock. Indeed, Hildegard's writing, taken as a whole, is characterized at least as much by rage as by compassion, but this rage, and a host of other attitudes which do not fit the paradigm of political correctness, are elided in the version of Hildegard which has become popular in what, for want of a better term, may be called New Age circles. In this essay I propose to explore the implications of these elisions. First, though, it will be necessary to take a brief look at the history of reactions to Hildegard over the centuries.

Hildegard was a genuine diva, enormously famous during her lifetime and for several decades after her death. She composed extraordinary music, wrote volumes of theology and medicine, corresponded with popes and kings. Her influence upon the later Middle Ages, however, was surprisingly limited. She

was never formally canonized (although there are plans to rectify this in 2012); there were procedural errors in the paperwork, some of which seems actually to have disappeared after reaching the Vatican. The cosmology and theology she developed did not contribute much to the tradition of mystical or visionary thought as it developed into the High Middle Ages.

Hildegard's local cult never lapsed, however, and has in fact grown increasingly important during the course of this century; in 1929 a beautiful reliquary was manufactured to house her relics in the parish church at Eibingen, and it has received a steady stream of pilgrim visits ever since. This reliquary can be seen as marking the beginning of the devotional upswing of interest in Hildegard, one that has developed along paths that the Benedictine community which produced it would no doubt have found difficult to anticipate. The image of this reliquary on the World Wide Web, moreover, testifies to the degree to which Hildegard's cult has moved into cyberspace, a phenomenon to which I will return.<sup>1</sup>

Twentieth-century scholarly attitudes toward Hildegard's various works have been less than unanimous. Although her contemporaries admired her compositions (Odo of Soissons praised them as "songs in a new style" [*Letters* 22]), Joseph Szövérfy, author of the *Concise History of Medieval Latin Hymnody*, disposes of Hildegard in a couple of lines, as "the voice of mysticism in twelfth century hymnody. Her strange songs set to music are often thought to be first drafts" (86)<sup>2</sup>. Writing in the 1920s, F.J.E. Raby was even more offhand in his treatment of "Hildegarde [sic], the famous mystic, whose sequences are in prose" (294). Both of these scholars appear to link their critical judgement of Hildegard with their distrust of her "mysticism" (and quite possibly, although never explicitly, her gender). Charles Singer, looking at Hildegard from the point of view of a historian of science, wrote in 1928 that "we can perceive in Hildegard something of the nature of a complete and coherent philosophy, which separates her from the ages that went before her. Hildegard's works are heralds of the dawn of a new movement" (239). Like Raby and Szövérfy, however, Singer is uncomfortable with Hildegard's visions, which he attributes to "a functional

nervous disorder” (231), perhaps “hystero-epilepsy” (238) or migraine. In fact, like many other women mystics, Hildegard has been the subject of as much medical diagnosis as critical interpretation, becoming one of Oliver Sacks’ most famous case studies in *Migraine*.

Fortunately, the thrust of feminist medieval scholarship over the past decade or so, with its emphasis on depathologizing and recontextualizing the experience of medieval women, encourages us to read Hildegard’s life and her works in increasingly complex and nuanced ways. With this rehabilitation, however, has come what some scholars describe as the “hijacking” of Hildegard by the New Age movement. Hijacking is a strong word, and certainly shouldn’t be used of all popular adaptations of her work; I would except, particularly, the two wonderful novels by Barbara Lachman. There is a continuum of more and less responsible renditions Hildegard and her work. What many of these have in common is a determination to make Hildegard compatible with a particular brand of late 20th century political correctness which inevitably involves a degree of misrepresentation, a determined deracination of the Benedictine abbess from the world view which produced her and which is in many ways opposed to the New Age world view. This deracination is particularly evident in the growth of websites devoted to Hildegard. The artist Fred Casselman’s Earth Echo, for instance, describes itself as “a gallery to help enliven and advance human consciousness” and invites visitors to “enjoy a quiet moment... be in the Light... be at Peace.” He displays a word picture, shaped like a comet and accompanied by mood music, ascribed to Hildegard, which reads as follows (I have not reproduced the comet shape):

Hildegard of Bingen  
God desires that all the world  
Be pure in his sight  
The earth should not be injured  
The earth should not be destroyed  
As often as the elements, the elements of the world  
Are violated by ill-treatment, so God will cleanse them

God will cleanse them thru the sufferings, thru the hardships of humankind (Casselman, "Hildegard of Bingen")

This is not a quotation from Hildegard, but a paraphrase, deriving from Matthew Fox' *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, a work which does not separate Hildegard's text from the 20th century author's interpretation of it. If you read *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, you are getting much more Matthew Fox than Hildegard; Fox is an ex-Dominican (expelled from the order by Benedict XI when he was Cardinal Ratzinger), the founder of the University of Creation Spirituality in California, and a leading figure in the Green movement.

So, what is it that draws baby boomers at the end of the millennium to a 12th century Benedictine? Partly, of course, it is the poetry itself, the concatenations of images, the fact that they translate so well and so easily into almost any language, their immediacy, their focus on what Barbara Newman has called "the feminine divine" (*Sister of Wisdom* 42)— all these things give them a sort of instant appeal. This becomes clear in the San Jose Mercury News interview with Joan Ohanneson, author of *Scarlet Music: Hildegard of Bingen: A Novel*: Hildegard "has come back," Ohanneson says, to warn against ecological destruction ("the fruit shriveling on the tree with poison sweetness," Hildegard wrote, "the air choking the people with filth") and to preach her message about God's feminine aspect. At a time when the cult of the Virgin was rising all around her, Hildegard tapped into the older, feminine personification of the divine, known as wisdom or Sophia, who pervades the Hebrew Scriptures.

These claims about what Hildegard said/did/meant overlap quite neatly with others in the popular press, and they are, I believe, deeply misleading when they are not downright wrong. To imply that Hildegard was somehow in opposition to the cult of the Virgin is to overlook or willfully ignore the paramount place that Hildegard gives to Mary in her songs of praise (sixteen of her poems are addressed directly to the Virgin). To be fair, Ohanneson's novel does not make quite this mistake; I assume this to be a

misunderstanding on the part of the reporter. The point here is that to claim that Hildegard was either an ecologist or a feminist, both claims which have been frequently made, is to dehistoricize Hildegard in a profoundly troubling way.

Perhaps there are as many definitions of the word “ecology” as there are ecologists; in general, however, when most of us talk about ecology, we are talking about ending the exploitation of the natural world and of other species by our own, *homo sapiens*. This is an entirely admirable aim, and it is clearly the one Matthew Fox had in mind when he insisted, in *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* that “Hildegard is deeply ecological in her spirituality. . . . She shouts ‘The earth must not be injured, the earth must not be destroyed!’” (13). It is unclear which of Hildegard’s writings Fox is paraphrasing in this last statement; he goes on to say that “if one is looking for a spiritual guide or a patron saint of the needed ecological awakening of our time, we could do no better in searching the pantheon of Western Christianity than to nominate Hildegard” (14). This sentence reveals Fox’s own agenda most clearly; he needs Hildegard to authorize his own Catholic and then ex-Catholic investment in the ecological. But can we really look at Hildegard and see the kind of ecological role model we need now if we are to reverse global warming?

Hildegard was not the only 12th century writer to see man and the universe as interconnected; her contemporary Peter Abelard, among others, also explored the concept of the *anima mundi* in his great work on Christian Theology. Abelard seems to have wanted to identify the *anima mundi* with the Holy Spirit, an identification Hildegard (who seems not to have known Abelard’s writing on the subject) might well have accepted. She wrote in one of her lyrics that “The Spirit of God/is a life that bestows life/root of the world-tree/and wind in its boughs” (*Symphonia* 141). Neither Abelard or Hildegard, however, saw the interconnectedness between man and universe, or between microcosmos and macrocosmos in the way that late 20th century adherents to the Gaia theory do. Both of them believed, following Genesis I. 27, that the earth and its creatures had been established by God for man’s

use, for him to “have dominion over.” Hildegard consistently represents the relationship of Earth to man as one of servant to master; in the *Book of Life's Merits* she writes that “the earth... preserves humankind in all its bodily needs... and... sustains the rest [i.e. non human creation] which are provided for human use” (*Secrets of God* 52). In the *Scivias* too she makes it quite clear that the earth exists for the benefit of mankind, even if, as a result of the Fall, that benefit is not longer uncomplicated (in the passage that follows, italics indicate Hildegard's vision, normal text her interpretation of that vision):

And so *all the elements of the world, which had previously existed in quietness, were changed to great commotion and displayed horrible terrors*, because that Creation, which had been made to serve mankind and did not feel any opposition in itself, lost that tranquility and became disturbed, bringing extreme and numerous perturbations to mankind when Man turned to disobedience and transgressed against God. Since Man himself had bowed to lower things, so he would be held in check by it. What does this mean? Because Man rebelled in Paradise against God, therefore even Creation, which had been subjected to him, turned against him. (*Secrets of God* 15).

It is quite clear from this that the original, prelapsarian relationship between earth and man is hierarchical: man is the ruler of the earth, just as the soul is the ruler of the body. Because man rebels against God, the earth rebels against man; if humanity were able to heal the breach cause by original sin, then it would be restored to its proper relationship with Nature: Nature would be obedient to man. This kind of hierarchical thinking also characterizes Hildegard's attitude towards gender; such rigidly hierarchical structures are absolutely characteristic of 12th century thought, and almost completely at odds with the self-pronounced democratic and liberal principles enunciated by Matthew Fox and many of the other modern Hildegard enthusiasts. They therefore find themselves forced to pick and choose when they read and quote Hildegard, which is why Fox's *Illuminations* is based upon paraphrase rather than quotation.

Hildegard's attitude towards nature is perhaps most clearly expressed not in her Visionary writings but in the medical writings, in recipes such as the following, which is a cure for lustfulness from the *Physica*:

A man or a woman who burns with lust should take a sparrow hawk and, when it is dead, remove the feathers and throw away the head and viscera. He should place the rest of its body, without water, in a new clay pot perforated with a small hole and heat it over the fire. Under this pot he should place another ... and in it catch the fat... He should then crush calandria and less camphor... and make an unguent. The man should anoint his privy member and loins with it for five days. In a month the ardor of his lust will cease... The woman should anoint herself around the umbilicus... Her ardor will cease with in a month. (187)

This recipe makes it abundantly clear that the creatures of the earth not only can but should be used for the benefit of mankind; in fact, it may only be through the application of such remedies that the moral divide between man and god can be healed. This sparrowhawk is giving its life not to heal chicken pox, that is, but lust, a sin Hildegard took extremely seriously and which she sees as implicated in (although not responsible for) the Fall itself. Practices that we may see as abusive of other species are an essential part of Hildegard's medicine and her attitude towards the created world. Needless to say, recipes such as the one above (and there are plenty of other examples) do not appear in Matthew Fox's vision of Hildegard the Ecological prophet, nor in Ohanneson's *Scarlet Music*, which represents Hildegard's healing as based exclusively upon herbal remedies and the laying on of hands. Nor have I found any mention of this sort of healing in the publications of Dr. Wighard Strezlow on "Hildegard medicine", a holistic method of health care which has been quite successful in Germany where there are Hildegard clinics that treat patients for everything from depression to cancer.

There is a very obvious reason for the exclusion of the sparrowhawk recipe from so many modern versions of Hildegard. It does not fit the ecofeminist image of Hildegard that Fox and others are trying to promote, an image

which is a much truer reflection of our century than of hers. In the 12th century, in Germany, nature was not and could not be imagined as kind or gentle or well-disposed to man. Woods and wild places were dark, dangerous, full of wild beasts such as wolves and bears; they were threatening, and Hildegard had good cause to know this from personal experience, since the first year she spent with her nuns on the site of their new foundation on the Rupertsberg almost killed them. It is no coincidence at all that it is from a wood that Dante, only a century after Hildegard, begins his descent to Hell.

To describe Hildegard as a feminist is equally problematic and ahistorical, a point which responsible scholars make repeatedly, yet people do it all the time. In its review of Ohanneson's *Scarlet Music*, cited on the back cover of the book, the *Library Journal* describes Hildegard as a "feminist heroine for many women today." The *Journal* can do this because Ohanneson's book makes such a description plausible; Ohanneson gives us the story of Hildegard's struggle against male authorities, her foundation of the Rupertsberg monastery, her close relationships with other women, while overlooking Hildegard's firm conservatism on the subject of women's place in the Church:

So too those of female sex should not approach the office of My altar; for thay are an infirm and weak habitation, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture them. A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, as the ground is plowed not by itself but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plow itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the body and blood of my son. (*Scivias* I, 278)

Hildegard's attacks upon individual corruption in the Church did not constitute in any way an attempt to subvert the patriarchal authority of the organism as a whole. She does not believe in the equality of the sexes, but rather that they should be separate but equal - and the term I have chosen is deliberately loaded, of course.



Nor does the undeniable eroticism of Hildegard's writing convey an attitude towards sexuality which squares comfortably with modern ideas of feminism; a few passages from the part of the *Causes and Cures* dealing with the creation of Adam and Eve ought to make this point. Hildegard writes that "God gave form to the love of the man, and thus the woman is the man's love. . . For when Adam looked on Eve, he was filled with wisdom, for he looked on the mother through whom his children should be born. And when Eve looked upon Adam, it was as if she were looking at Heaven, or as the soul reaches upward yearning for heavenly things, since her hope was in the man" (*Secrets of God* 112-13). It is essential to note, also, that, as Frederick Roden has put it, for Hildegard, "any genital practice, including procreative, heterosexual copulation between married couples, is described by the abbess as vile, inferior to her ideal of virginity" ("Two 'Sisters in Wisdom'" 250n14). Another passage from the *Scivias* reinforces this:

And a woman who takes up devilish ways and plays a male role in coupling with another woman is most vile in my sight, and so is she who subjects herself to such a one in this evil deed. For they should have been ashamed of their passion, and instead they impudently usurped a right which was not theirs... And men who touch their own genital organ and emit their semen seriously imperil their souls... and women who imitate them in this unchaste touching, and excite themselves to bodily convulsions by provoking their burning lust, are extremely guilty. . . both women and men who elicit their own seed by touching themselves in the body do a filthy deed and inflict ulcers and wounds on their souls... (*Scivias* II. 6. 78)

This is the Hildegard we rarely hear speak at the beginning of the 21st century, because this is not the message most of us want to hear.

So why does it matter that these aspects of Hildegard are so often left out in popular representations of the abbess? Hildegard has been a forgotten figure, a silenced voice for much of the past 800 years; should we not simply be grateful that she's being rediscovered at all? Perhaps. But to pick and

choose, indeed, to canonize some aspects of Hildegard's thought while repressing others, is a new form of silencing; it stifles the voice of the actual Hildegard which speaks out not only in those seductive and approachable lyrics with which I began, but also in books like the *Scivias* and the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, and in her letters, all of which are difficult, complicated, often angry, and not at all politically correct. It invites us to reimagine the Middle Ages according to what we wish they might have been like, rather than what they really were; the implication of this reimagination is, finally, that we are morally superior; that we have the right to impose our values upon the minds and voices of the twelfth century. This is a kind of temporal colonization which, with its assumption of superiority, makes me deeply uneasy. Most of all, perhaps, what disturbs me about this kind of co-opting of Hildegard and her teachings is that it makes the difficult seem easy. The Hildegard who appears on some websites or in some recent works of fiction or "spirituality" makes it easy not to think, not to confront contradictions such as Hildegard's attitudes towards sexuality or the sanctity of the priesthood. They imply that all we have to do is eat a lot of spelt and we will avoid cancer, listen to the music, and we will have access to spiritual truth. To take Hildegard out of her world, to pretend that she can speak directly to ours, is to reduce and diminish the specificity of her experience, of her struggle, of her passion, of all that is most admirable about her. She was a courageous, difficult, charismatic, and doubtless in many ways deeply objectionable person, but she was herself. Let's not take that away from her.

### Works Cited

*Works by Hildegard:*

Saint Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. I. Trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Louanges: présentation et traduction des poésies complètes de Hildegarde de Bingen*. Trans. Laurence Moulinier. Paris: La Différence, 1990,

\_\_\_\_\_. *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica: the complete English translation of her Classic Work on Health and Healing*. Rochester, VT: Bear and Co., 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*. Trans. Sabina Flanagan. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Scivias*. Trans. C. Hart and J. Bishop. New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum [Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations]*. Ed. and trans. Barbara Newman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.

#### *Works about Hildegard:*

Casselmann, Fred. *Earth Echo Galleries: Art of Harmony, Love and Beauty*. Web. 5 March. 2012 [www.earthecho.com](http://www.earthecho.com).

Fox, Matthew. *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*. Rochester, VT: Bear and Co. 1985.

Lachman, Barbara. *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen: A Novel*. New York: Bell Tower, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Hildegard, the Last Year*. Boston, Shambhala, 1997.

Newman, Barbara. *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Ohanneson, Joan. *Scarlet Music: Hildegard of Bingen: A Novel*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997.

Raby, F.J.E. *History of Christian Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1927 rpt. 1953.

Roden, Frederick S. "Two 'Sisters in Wisdom': Hildegard of Bingen, Christina Rossetti and Feminist Theology". *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Maud Burnett McInerney. New York: Garland, 1998.

Sacks, Oliver. *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Singer, Charles. *From Magic to Science: Essays on the Scientific Twilight*. New York: Boni, 1928.

Strehlow, Wighard and Gottfried Hertzka. *Hildegard of Bingen's Medicine*. Trans. Karen Anderson Strehlow. Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Co. 1998.

Szövérfy, Joseph. *A Concise History of Medieval Latin Hymnody*. Leiden: Classical Folia, 1985.

---

<sup>1</sup> An image of his reliquary can be accessed at <http://www.hildegard.org/wirk/eschrein.html>

<sup>2</sup> Szövérfy's assessment of Hildegard may be contrasted with his comments on her contemporary Gottschalk of Aachen, whom he describes as the author of "strange and original sequences" (60), or Ohlo of St Emmeram who may on Szövérfy's own testimony have composed fewer than 6 hymns but who rates several pages of coverage in the *Concise History* (62-65).

## DR in Human/Pleiadian Form

*K-Fai Steele*



## **Madeline Kahn and a Bottle of Bread**

*Alex Sugiura*

An effortless display  
don't you dare  
ask why they trade  
two week's pay  
to bear witness  
to living, breathing beauty

Who can blame her?  
if she seems conceited  
the press seek concise wit  
or enough vapidty  
to insert sponsors in the midst  
of our collective fawning

In hushed tones  
they ask what next?  
on the road to silence  
will she fill us with regret?  
Empty pockets, empty head  
Late-Capitalism was a  
fine time to upend  
this ancient form of worship

Her shocking frankness  
forcing the hands of  
the timid to reach  
and grab hold of nascent  
sexuality; spirited pleas  
to end an ache, a thirst  
agape our mouths for  
hanging grapes, in good time

Divisive figure, choose sides  
in the ensuing controversy  
graceless debate not so subtly  
implying right and wrong  
prolonging boring conversations  
some people just have to work at it

She is not an object  
To possess nor dissect  
Any linguistic vivisection can  
Hope to be half as cool  
As Debbie Harry was  
Down on the rocky shores where  
Dreamers drown, sucked in by  
Song and the thought of dalliances  
To a place so few will ever know  
Well then!

Does the mystery lie  
Between her thighs  
Or is it right between her eyes?

## About the Contributors

**Samuel Fox** is a Haverford anthropology major from Tucson, AZ. He enjoys music, writing, and some hula hooping here and there.

**Nike Desis** recently moved to New Orleans from Philadelphia and is working on a new bio for herself.

**Hannah Silverblank** is a double major in Comparative Literature and Latin at Haverford College, and she is happily the editor and founder of this journal. Her diva obsession runs from her ears to her brain to her fingernails. When not thinking about divas, Hannah also enjoys brown dogs, black cats, dismemberment (in literature, that is), and country music.

**Gail Holst-Warhaft** is Adjunct Professor in the Departments of Classics, Comparative Literature and Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University. She is also Director of the Mediterranean Studies Initiative (Spring 2004-) and Faculty Associate of the Cornell Center for a Sustainable Future. Gail has worn so many hats she's not sure if any of them fit, but poetry, music and all things Greek have been the main interests of her life. She has the unexpected honor of being Poet Laureate of Tompkins County.

**Jane Holloway** lives and works in Philadelphia. She graduated from Haverford in 2011 with a major in English. All of her current work is being anthologized at [janehhhh.tumblr.com](http://janehhhh.tumblr.com) with plans for a pulp publication in the summer of 2012.

**Mathieu Deflem** is Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina, where he teaches courses on sociology of law, social control, theory, and popular culture. In the area of culture, he has written about Lady Gaga, Alfred Hitchcock, music censorship, and ritual. Deflem's undergraduate course "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame" attracted worldwide attention and bestowed him his own modicum of celebrity. A long-time fan of pop and rock music, Deflem privately maintains the fan site [gagafrontrow.net](http://gagafrontrow.net) and was the



basis for the character of 'Alphonse' on a 2011 episode of *Saturday Night Live* starring Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake. More info via [mathieudeflem.net](http://mathieudeflem.net).

**Curly** has no character. Curly is a character. Most of what Curly says has been lifted off of men's room walls. Curly is the greatest artist alive.

**Maud Burnett McInerney** is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Haverford College. Her interest in the Medieval period arises from having spent much of her childhood living in a small Medieval village in rural France. She is the author of a book about unruly female saints, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*, and is at work on a second book about 12th century versions of the Troy story.

**K-Fai Steele** is a Philadelphia-based Draw-er. She's currently writing and illustrating a book about the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia: [storyofthevillage.tumblr.com](http://storyofthevillage.tumblr.com).

**Alex Sugiura** (Oberlin College '08) oscillates wildly between overenthusiasm and misanthropy for the written word. A love of mate cocido, sparkling water, double espressos (not necessarily in that order) has led to a secret life of jittery prose poetry and a heart aflutter with verve for this cot damn world we live in. Some assembly required...

**sylvie** was born in the loft & grew up in the paradise garage. currently resides in the sky.

**I JUST WANNA B FREE**  
**sylvie**

 **FUJIFILM**

**CD-R**

**650** MB

**COMPACT**  
**disc**  
Recordable

available at

**[haverford.edu/divas/sylvie](http://haverford.edu/divas/sylvie)**

MADE IN JAPAN / FABRIQUE AU JAPON