

Macalester College

From the Selected Works of Mark Mazullo

October, 2001

Revisiting the Wreck: PJ Harvey and the Drowned Virgin-Whore

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Revisiting the wreck: PJ Harvey's *Dry* and the drowned virgin-whore

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This is the place
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armoured body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold
I am she: I am he . . .

(‘Diving into the Wreck’: Rich 1973, p. 24)

Were Adrienne Rich to dive again today into the wreck – of history, of collective memory, of identity – she might be surprised to find Polly Jean Harvey already there, feasting in the depths on plots and symbols, greedily stuffing her storytelling sack. Like Rich, with her dual-sexed narrator (‘I am she: I am he’), Harvey enjoys playing at multiple selves, and in doing so, she tells stories that are fuelled equally by the fires of female and male, hetero- and homosexual desire. In the final stanza of her celebrated poem, Rich creates another memorable conundrum of syntax: ‘We are, I am, you are/by cowardice or courage/the one who find our way/back to this scene’ (Rich 1973, p. 24). With her suggestive pronoun games, Rich calls for a uniting of forces in the excavation of a troubled past. This seems to be Harvey’s conviction as well. Hers is a musical dramatic stage upon which multiple characters, in combined voices and disparate musical styles, act out disorienting and sometimes disturbing tales of identity, sexuality and power.

In her remarkable debut album, *Dry* (1992), Harvey put her repertory of stories to imaginative use in the making of a concept album, a narrative song cycle that offers a thorough meditation on the subjects of desire and creativity. Barbara O’Dair describes *Dry* as ‘eleven hard-headed songs about a girl [that] comprise a visceral, living diary writ large of growing up female’ (O’Dair 1997, p. 544). The idea of a living diary suggests narrative in general, but such a characterisation can be taken a step further, beyond the solipsistic level. Indeed, O’Dair may have such a step in mind when she refers later to Harvey’s work as a ‘sensual mythology’ (p. 547). As O’Dair suggests, it is the mythic, epic quality of Harvey’s storytelling that provides *Dry* with its particular force.

Providing the skeletal frame for *Dry* is one of the more ubiquitous stories in art by and about women: that of the woman who, once chaste (or regarded as such), experiences sexual desire and, as a result of acting upon this desire, is drowned, by

a man or by herself. This story represents a conflation of several interrelated artistic themes. To begin, there is its use of water symbolism, which pervades stories by and about women in general for obvious reasons – among them an association with the womb and birth. More pointedly, among stories using water imagery, many feature drowning as a central narrative element. Finally, there is the figure of the virgin-whore in general, a figure who need not be drowned, nor even killed, in order to function properly as a symbol.¹ And while some women who drown or are drowned are best characterised as representing one side of the virgin-whore dichotomy or the other (for instance, in the traditional American ballad, 'My Darling Clementine', we have the accidental drowning of an innocent female child), there is clearly a group of tales in which the woman meets a watery fate specifically as a result of her transformation into a sexually experienced being.

With its inherent moral ambivalence and a symbolic-thematic range spanning from nature to religion, sexuality to creative autonomy, the drowned virgin-whore model has been serving storytellers for centuries. One of my aims in this article is to contextualise Harvey's *Dry* within this artistic tradition. Another aim is to offer some commentary of Harvey's musical depiction of the tale, for the ambivalence that characterises Harvey's work on a thematic level is matched by a musical style equally difficult to pin down. Sheila Whiteley has recently commented on this relationship:

[U]nlike the upfront vocals of riot grrrl, Harvey's songs are more often characterised by a sense of ambiguity. Her lyrics, for example, often lie low in the mix and are not provided on the album sleeves, while the sex/gender of the 'you' in her songs is never specified. Combined with her idiosyncratic speech-based singing style and the extremes of her timbral range, individual words and phrases are often hard to pick out. Such ambiguity is further obscured by the extreme deliberation of her guitar style with its hacking riffs. (Whiteley 2000, p. 210)

I want to elaborate on Whiteley's perceptive comments and suggest that Harvey's music-stylistic signature – a style diverse enough to compel critics to invent their own conflations of music-stylistic traditions in order to characterise it, as in Barbara O'Dair's apt phrase, 'progressive punk blues' (O'Dair 1997, p. 548) – is inherently tied to both specifically narrative and more abstract thematic concerns.

Finally, I aim in this article to propose some avenues for the interpretation of *Dry*. In particular, two issues concern me. The first involves Harvey's much discussed relationship with sexuality. Harvey's work is patently feminist, and while critics have disagreed at times on the particular appeals of her work, there has been little dissent as to her general perspective. But while some would state that 'Harvey's perspective translates consistently into metaphors and symbols that are uniquely female' (Santoro 1993, p. 716), others regard her work as more ambiguous in its symbolism. Indeed, more than anything, Harvey's work seems to foreground the untidiness of gender and sexuality. Her androgynous persona – captured in her evocative album art (which I will address presently) and her use of PJ in place of her given name – lends her work a pointedly revisionist character, as does her penchant for obscuring facile categories of sexuality in her depiction of human relationships.

This, of course, is nothing new. As Simon Frith has pointed out, '[s]ince David Bowie and early 1970s glam-rock, the aesthetics of British popular music have changed. Pop stars became valuable for their plasticity and so their sexuality too

became a matter of artifice and play, self-invention and self-deceit' (Frith 1985, p. 165). In tapping into this tradition, Harvey's output as a whole can be understood as an attempt to envision ways of transcending a long-standing system of gender dichotomies. The woman's encounter with water at the end of *Dry*, then, may be understood in terms of a rebirth – out of the world of dichotomised gender and into a realm, as yet unrealised, free of such restraints. (And given this interpretation, it is worth noting here that the first hermaphrodite was born in water, in the union of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.)

My second avenue of interpretation concerns the subject of creativity, particularly the issue of women's creative autonomy in popular music. Musicologist Peter Mercer-Taylor has recently examined this subject with respect to the all-female pop-rock band, the Bangles. He demonstrates that the patriarchal machinations of the music business functioned as obstacles to the creative energies of the band, and that the band's ultimate demise was a direct result of a 'forfeit of autonomy [that] seemed to emerge as a precondition for the Bangles' entry into the centre of the industry mainstream' (Mercer-Taylor 1998, p. 189). Mercer-Taylor's thesis *vis-à-vis* the all-female band is provocative. He argues that the work of such bands constitutes 'a musical fabric which is, so to speak, female in every dimension', and thus raises 'issues quite distinct from those of the solo artist' (p. 189). The more women making music, in other words, the more trouble.

It is a fascinating suggestion, and Mercer-Taylor's analysis of the Bangles is illuminating and convincing. But the subject of women's creativity is not limited, of course, to such bands. Harvey, for instance, has made it clear that her music functions in the same way that Mercer-Taylor envisions that of the Bangles: as 'a forum for articulating issues relating to their creative experience as women' (Mercer-Taylor 1998, p. 189). Moreover, insofar as she always functions as the leading creative entity within the sphere of an otherwise largely male-dominated collaborative artistry, one might understand her work as an even more heightened example of a woman trying to forge a musical self in the music business. Not only is she a woman asking predominantly male executives to listen to her artistic voice, but she is a band leader asking the men in her band to trust her musical skills and instincts and to subordinate their own.

All of this is to say that *Dry* constitutes a startling act of representation, one replete with a confident musical vision and, given that Harvey was only in her early twenties when she made it, an unusually mature sensitivity toward constructions of gender. And one senses beneath the narrative façade of *Dry* a real voice aiming to alert us to the efforts of women artists in excavating the wreck of women's identity. From this perspective, Harvey's task is analogous to that of the narrator in Adrienne Rich's poem, who muses on the distinction between representation and reality:

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth. (Rich 1973, p. 23)

Dry functions both as a self-consciously byzantine act of storytelling and a pointed commentary on the real conditions of women in rock. It provides simultaneously both the myth and the thing itself. But it obscures both behind a raucous and imaginative musical surface. Indeed, Harvey's slipperiness as an artist, both on technical and metaphorical levels, has frustrated critics as she has developed since *Dry*.

Stuck on punk: Harvey and her critics

With the release of *Dry* in 1992 on the Indigo label, and an accompanying tour, Harvey quickly gained notoriety in both British and American independent rock. A major-label contract and mainstream success were not far behind. Critics across the board acclaimed her debut as one of the best albums of the year, regarding it as one of the most powerful statements by a woman in the punk tradition since the early work of Patti Smith. Indeed, comparisons between Harvey and Smith were common during the period when Harvey's first several albums were released. Lucy O'Brien, for instance, describes Harvey as 'the nearest thing in the '90s to Patti Smith's authoritative androgyny' (O'Brien 1996, p. 168). But while the reception of Harvey's early, more overtly punk-inspired work was highly favourable, the critical reaction to Harvey's more recent work, in particular her 1998 release, *Is This Desire?*, presents the flip side to the story of Harvey's early success.

Upon the release of *Is This Desire?*, critics who had grown to expect a more 'authentically' hard-hitting style from Harvey complained that she was moving toward a more self-consciously artistic approach, in which the preponderance of up-tempo and loud songs was abandoned in favour of slower tempos, softer dynamics, and more experimental studio sound manipulations. Gina Arnold, for instance, whose writing on Nirvana (Arnold 1993) demonstrates her own allegiance to a more 'pure' punk aesthetic, found the music of *Is This Desire?* to be 'less provocative' than Harvey's previous work. The subtlety of its emotional messages forced Harvey to betray her punk roots, and the album, Arnold complained, was pretentious as a result: 'At one place in the CD booklet (which has printed Harvey's own handwritten remarks on it), she notes to herself "soften and beautify": forget it: catharsis and uplift are not part of the paradigm here' (Arnold 1998, p. 63).

Arnold has not been alone in her opinion that punk's spirit of catharsis is to be found only in more visceral punk idioms. Reviewing one of Harvey's live appearances during the *Is This Desire?* tour, critic Eric Weisbard wrote in *Spin* magazine that '*Is This Desire?* offers subtle character sketches that require headphones and a close reading of her first-ever lyric sheet. But "mature" art song is a lesser genre than Harvey's earlier, undefinable punk' (Weisbard 1999). Here, again, Harvey is accused of the age-old charge of contaminating an otherwise potent rock tradition (in this case, punk) with its eternal kryptonite, 'art'. Moreover, in singling out the album's reliance on headphones and lyric sheets – two strong signifiers in rock historiography that speak to the tradition of what Wilfrid Mellers once called 'listening music' (Mellers 1973, p. 86), a movement linked to the beginning of the 'concept album' tradition with the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) – Weisbard is tapping into a long tradition of criticism that has deplored the idea of art-rock and, by association, the concept album (see, for instance, Rockwell 1976).² While there has been a strong movement in recent years, on the part of both journalists and academics, to re-legitimise the art-rock tradition (Covach 1997; Macan 1997; Stump 1997; Martin 1998), the problem of 'art' remains central to the problematics of rock reception.

There is a significant irony in all the fuss surrounding Harvey's alleged transformation into an artist, and Weisbard's comment brings it out best. The 'art' elements he singles out for criticism – the added studio sound effects, the mixing up of tempi and dynamics, the *composerly* sensibility, as opposed to the resolutely amateurish aesthetic more commonly attributed to punk – are precisely those

elements that made Harvey's earlier work 'undefinable'. From the beginning, her music has used a certain punk-inflected style only as one element of her compositional palette (a tool, in the same way that Sting, for instance, consistently uses country, reggae, blues and gospel as expressive devices in his inventive songs). Indeed, *Dry* satisfies as sensitive a listening experience as *Is This Desire?* By excluding her lyrics from the CD booklet for *Dry*, Harvey maintained some distance from the art-rock tradition and kept the critics' faith.³ They responded by lauding *Dry's* rancour, its in-your-face potency, and Harvey was shuffled quickly into the ranks of the 1990s most high-profile musical protest group: the angry women rockers. As such, her experiments on *Is This Desire?* were seen by many fans and critics as inappropriate.

Harvey's stance toward art has been of concern not only to mainstream critics. Musicologist Judith Peraino, for instance, has recently argued that in the song 'Man-Size Sextet' (*Rid of Me*, 1993), Harvey combines 'a critical stance toward masculinity' and 'a spoof of classical or, rather, "elite" twentieth-century chamber music, and rock artists who turn to the idiom of "elite" music as a means of elevating the genre of rock or making claims for their own erudition' (Peraino 1998, pp. 47–8). Peraino interprets the song as an 'intrusion of elite music' in an otherwise hard-hitting rock medium. But while 'Man-Size Sextet' does stand out among the others on this album, the song is not an anomaly: 'Plants and Rags' on *Dry*, for example, includes similar string arrangements (also by drummer Robert Ellis), which are used in quite another context than those of 'Man-Size Sextet'. While I think Peraino is right in reading more into the specific terms of artistry alluded to in 'Man-Size Sextet', then, I would also want to stress that Harvey seems in general to embrace her role as composer and artist. Many elements of her work – the sound effects (for instance, the whale's call in *Is This Desire?'s* 'The Wind'), the end-of-track noise that concludes several of the songs on *Dry*, even the guitar revs that punctuate so many of her more aggressive songs – show her to be thinking about text painting and other expressive compositional strategies.

All speculation about Harvey's stance toward 'elite' culture aside (and speculation is really all it is, though we do know that she is the daughter of a sculptor and that she herself attended art school in England), the whole of her work, even when it is ferociously rocking out, is imbued with an artistic sensibility that places it far closer to those 'artistically inclined' rock artists – Elvis Costello, for example – whose work Peraino envisions as the antithesis of Harvey's. From another perspective, then, Harvey appears not at all to abhor art-inflected rock. Indeed, given the narrative offered in her debut album, it seems she would die for the cause of creativity – if only symbolically.

***Dry's* inheritance: the wet history of good women gone bad**

Before moving on to a detailed discussion of *Dry*, it will be useful to survey some other treatments of the drowned virgin-whore in literature, film and music, if only to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the tale and to suggest that Harvey's music can be more thoroughly appreciated and understood with this tradition in mind. One of the more obvious examples is Shakespeare's Ophelia, a character who continues to hold great fascination in the popular culture of our time. For one thing, Ophelia has become a symbolic figurehead for the tribulations of contemporary adolescent girls: to wit, Mary Bray Pipher's 1995 bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving*

the *Selves of Adolescent Girls* and Sara Shandler's more recent *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About their Search for Self* (1999). We find Ophelia equally hard at work in contemporary popular music as well, lending her themes of gender and madness to such mainstream recording artists as the Indigo Girls (*Swamp Ophelia*, 1994) and Natalie Merchant (*Ophelia*, 1998). While these albums are not necessarily thematically unified in the way a more self-conscious concept album would be, still the presence of Ophelia imbues the storytelling of these artists with a mythical, melancholy and literate sensibility in general.

If these female recording artists attempt to draw on one fictional drowned woman's symbolic power, the perspective of one contemporary male recording artist, Eminem, is quite another story. On his critically acclaimed *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), two songs, 'Stan' and 'Kim', play out a horrifying scenario of murder and self-destruction. The two songs, separated by twelve tracks, form a mini drama played in postmodern reverse. The chronological beginning of the tale is the second song, 'Kim', in which Mathers angrily confronts his wife about her act of adultery, tortures her psychologically, slashes her throat in the woods and drags her body to the trunk of the car. In the song's sequel, 'Stan' (which comes earlier on the CD), an obsessed fan writes numerous letters to his idol, the rapper Slim Shady (Mathers' alterego), but, gaining no response, decides to 'honour' Shady by tying up his own pregnant wife, locking her in the trunk, and driving the car off a bridge into the water.⁴ To add to the warped chronology, the cover of the rapper's previous recording, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), depicts a scene evocative of both songs: two feet jut out of an open car trunk; the car is parked at an angle on a dock; Mathers and a small child (the child plays an important role in 'Kim') stand a few yards away, leaning over the dock's white railing, contemplating the distance between them and the water below.

Eminem's brutal drama has its own precedents in two examples from American film. The first is Hitchcock's most famous 'good-woman-turned-bad', Marion Crane from *Psycho* (1960). While everyone knows that Marion is stabbed by Norman Bates, we also must remember that after the fact he wraps her naked, mutilated body in the plastic shower curtain, places it in the trunk of her car, and sinks the car in a pond. And while both the car and Marion's body are recovered by the police at the end of the film, the point is still made: women who transgress social norms are severely punished (Marion's transgression involves having sex out of wedlock in the film's opening scene and, shortly thereafter, stealing money from her male boss and fleeing), and water always plays a crucial part. After all, where was Marion brutally murdered but in the shower? (Incidentally, this may go some way in explaining the reference to Bernard Herrmann's music for the shower scene in *Psycho* that both Greg Kot (1993) and Judith Peraino (1998, pp. 60–3) hear in Harvey's 'Man-Size Sextet'.)

Those familiar with David Lynch's extraordinary television programme *Twin Peaks* (1990–1) might notice a connection here. The first episode begins with the dead body of Laura Palmer, wrapped in plastic, being pulled from the river. Laura, too, has made some unwise choices: she is a teenage cheerleader by day and a cocaine-addicted prostitute by night. Laura's problems are the result of her father's having been possessed by a spirit who leads him both to molest her and, ultimately, punish her for her whorish ways. He kills her in an abandoned train car after removing her, unconscious, from the scene of a backwoods orgy in which she had been participating.⁵

Not all male accounts of the drowned virgin-whore are as brutal. Consider, for instance, the story of the Mountain Maid, a cycle of poems by nineteenth-century Norwegian poet Arne Garborg that was set to music in the 1890s by his compatriot Edvard Grieg. Here, the solitary life of the shepherdess is interrupted by the boy, with whom she falls in love. However, after their first passionate meeting, the boy does not return for their planned second meeting, and the distraught maiden finds her only solace by communing with nature, drowning herself in the babbling brook. On the one hand, given that the portrayal of a woman's lovesick grief in this cycle is told from a man's perspective, we can understand this version of the drowned virgin-whore in similar terms as we would those of Hitchcock and Lynch. However, despite the fact that the Mountain Maid is constructed as a woman who cannot go on living without a man whom she has known only briefly, the female character's suicide can nevertheless be interpreted as a conscious choice of freedom. At the very least, the cycle's narrative does not involve a man's brutal murder of a woman. The composer's decision to use the final song as a battleground between the major and minor modes – representing transcendence and defeat, respectively – is one of many indications that the implications of this woman's suicidal act go beyond the surface of the lyrics.⁶

Indeed, when we turn to versions of the tale written by women, we see that murder is commonly replaced by suicide, and these suicides are meant to be taken in quite a different light. For instance, there's the 'No Name Woman' in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975). Here, a woman in a Chinese agricultural village has an affair while her husband is away, becomes pregnant, and drowns both herself and the hours-old (presumably female) infant in the family well in order to free herself and the child from the inevitable backlash of her community. This comes close to Harvey's version of the tale, but it is the memorable story of Edna Pontellier, the main character of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, that appears to be most central to a richer understanding of *Dry*. Chopin's novella, something of an anti-*Bildungsroman*, relates the spiritual transformation of a repressed wife and mother in late nineteenth-century New Orleans, whose ultimate decision to act upon her desire for a younger man leads to a suicidal *dénouement* in the same style as Garborg and Grieg's Mountain Maid. Foreseeing the many disgraces that her actions will elicit, Edna embraces her fate – that the only way her sensual desire can truly be fulfilled without undue social repercussions is through communion with nature – and, in the haunting final scene, frees herself of patriarchal binds by immersing herself in the cold waters of the Gulf of Mexico, where she had only recently been taught to swim by her young lover. (As we shall see, there is a striking similarity between the concluding passage from Chopin's novella and the final song on *Dry*.)

The distinction between murder and suicide, of course, is central to the way in which we interpret the act of representation. The many creators of such tales have demonstrated an array of positions on their female protagonist's character and the implications of her death. In stories in which a woman is murdered at the hand of a man, for instance, we see the tale told according to the male gaze: his virgin, tainted by the sexual activity that he demands of her, is now seen as whorish, and her punishment becomes the means necessary for him to erase her from his experience. A woman's suicide, however, can be understood as a transcendent appropriation of the virgin-whore archetype. Here, the woman's death might be regarded as an act of freedom from both the immediate backlash of her community and

more long-standing social constraints. Alternately, a woman's suicide might still be understood in terms of traditional power structures: in Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* (1843), for instance, a pure and devoted woman's leap into water is the act that deems possible a male character's redemption.

Dry: title and image

In order to situate Harvey's *Dry* in this context, let us now take a closer look at it. Beyond the music and lyrics, two further elements of Harvey's work, the album's title and the CD packaging art, are integrated into the narrative structure of the drowned virgin-whore. Given the theme, the title itself of *Dry* is provocative. Initially, 'dry' brings to mind the subject that so many commentators on Harvey's work have touched upon: her propensity toward degrading the female body. As Reynolds and Press have put it: 'If some female artists dream of escaping the cage of the body, others stage a kind of prison riot, a carnal insurrection' (Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 337). The single word 'dry' conjures up images of discomfiting physical features: the cracked lips and chapped skin on the CD's cover (made so in part, we assume, by the lipstick on the back, the phallic object, one powerful symbol of women's subservience to male standards of beauty) and, by association, the dry vagina. But 'dry' also refers to the album's narrative. The dry woman *needs* water, and her fate is thus set from the beginning: she is doomed to find it. On the other hand, without knowing the narrative outcome, the title also may suggest the woman's ultimate transcendence over her predicament: she *remains* dry despite the repeated attempts of patriarchal society to subsume her. The point here is that both the album's cover and its title raise narrative questions and lead the listener to recognise that a multiplicity of meanings is a central aspect of Harvey's aesthetic.

In terms of her CD packaging art, Harvey's reference to the drowned woman is far more explicit. Indeed, over the course of her first five albums, she recounts visually the progression of the woman's fate, suggesting a thematic unity to her work as a whole, beyond *Dry*. While various commentators have discussed some of these images in turn (see, for instance, Reynolds and Press 1995, pp. 337–8; Peraino 1998, p. 50), no one has linked the images with our particular theme. As I mentioned above, the front cover of *Dry* shows a close-up of cracked lips and, perhaps, a cold-sore nose. (I might also venture to suggest that the image raises the spectre of physical abuse.) It is the back cover, however, that contains the first inkling of her tale. Here, while the image is far from clear, Harvey herself is photographed lying naked, breasts exposed, in water. But she is certainly not dead: instead, she has a complacent, if perhaps slightly mischievous, look on her face. A challenge?

The cover of her second album, *Rid of Me* (1993), features Harvey once again wet – only this time she is standing, her hair flung dramatically, with something of a more bored or tired look on her face. Defying the fate of Marion Crane, she has made it out of the shower alive. But the defiance represented both visually and musically on *Rid of Me* leads, inevitably, to punishment – just as Harvey's move toward a more overtly artistic music led to critical contempt. On the back of the next album, *4-Track Demos* (1993), Harvey is wrapped in plastic, à la Hitchcock's Marion Crane and Lynch's Laura Palmer. And on the cover of *To Bring You My Love* (1995), she is floating – in colour for the first time, like a transformed Dorothy finally landed in Oz – eyes closed, lips slightly parted, perhaps with a dying breath.

(From the perspective of Harvey's concern for themes of sexuality, one might imagine that she is alluding here, with her first colour cover photo, to the centrality of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* in queer culture. In a related vein, this photo also evokes Adrienne Rich's 'mermaid whose dark hair/streams black'.)

The CD art of *Is This Desire?* – an album that also features water in its narrative scheme (as does her most recent release, *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea* [2000], whose final song is entitled 'We Float') – shows Harvey further transformed: split into two, standing next to the river. On the left side, she faces the water, while on the right she is turning away. This split image represents both the ultimate transcendence of the woman (and the woman creator, for as we have seen, *Is This Desire?* marks Harvey's most unabashedly artistic creation) and the inevitable disorienting effects of patriarchal society on women's consciousness. Moreover, on the back of the CD booklet, we see a photograph of a fallen white-grey bird, another twist on the fallen woman theme, one that recalls her confession, as reported in Reynolds and Press (1995, p. 340), that she has been obsessed with flying from a young age. (Perhaps the fallen bird also subtly evokes Hitchcock's Marion Crane as well.)

These images span Harvey's compositional career over eight years, but it is on her first album that she most explicitly delves into the themes of gender, sexuality and power. What follows is a play-by-play of *Dry*, a discussion of each song in terms of the album's narrative structure. The album, originally released in the UK as an LP (on the Indigo label) breaks down clearly into two sides. The track listing on the back of the CD jewel box retains the LP's two-sided structure. Side 1 begins with 'Oh My Lover' and side 2 with 'Sheela-Na-Gig'.

Dry: side 1

'Oh My Lover' begins with a sonic burst of guitar – a flowering, a dramatic curtain raiser that leads directly into a thinly accompanied vocal line in which a woman appeals to her lover: 'Oh my lover/Don't you know that it's alright/You can love her/You can love me at the same time'. From the beginning, the issue of sexuality is foregrounded. Neither the singer's nor the lover's gender is clearly expressed. The singer's motivation is also unclear: perhaps s/he is subservient, perhaps a believer in love without ties. Moreover, we cannot discern whether this relationship is hetero- or homosexual. Such ambiguities remain throughout the album. While at times we are led to assume that the relationship is between a man and a woman (for instance, in 'Dress', 'Sheela-na-gig' and 'Hair'), other times may easily be heard otherwise. Harvey is especially coy in 'Joe': when Stella Marie's lover gains an identity, the name is potentially androgynous. Here, however, 'Joe' is likely to be taken as the male corollary to 'Stella': the biblical Joseph and Mary, who are alluded to later in the album, and whose images grace the packaging art of her fifth studio album, *Is This Desire?*

'Oh My Lover' also establishes Harvey's musical-stylistic signature as a self-conscious 'artist'. The effect is subtle (it is best heard on headphones), and it comes only at the end of the song. After a cadenza-like finale rich with vocal counterpoint, we hear the faint sounds of the musicians putting their instruments down. Harvey employs this gesture several times on *Dry* (on 'Dress', for instance, and 'Plants and Rags') and each time it serves to underscore her identity as a recording artist. With these sounds, on the boundaries of the song itself, we are asked to remember that

these are musicians labouring to create their art. The disembodied music comes to a halt, and the musicians, as they would in a live performance, re-gear for the next track.

In 'O Stella', the partner, in Harvey's voice, provides us with the first narrative clue to the virgin-whore theme: his/her lover's name, 'Stella Marie'. Just as the narrator of 'Oh My Lover' had placed his/her lover on a pedestal, so too does the lover have a hyper-romanticised image of his/her own object of desire. She is constructed as a chaste virgin, 'Ave Maria Stella', the Virgin Mary. Harvey plays with pronouns in the song's first two lines: 'Stella Marie you're my star/Stand on ground look up at her'. The change from second- to third-person pronouns marks the woman's identity as elusive; the narrator is forced to shift perspective uncomfortably in the effort of corralling the woman as an object of desire.

In terms of its musical characteristics, 'O Stella' features one significant element of Harvey's work: the abrupt shift from soft to loud dynamic that, at least since the work of the Boston-based Pixies in the mid-late 1980s, has been a common feature of post-punk rock.⁷ Here, Harvey puts her own twist on the manoeuvre, prioritising the voice and text with a single *a cappella* line, 'Stella Marie you're my star', before the entrance of the underplayed guitar riff. When the guitar sound finally opens up, the narrative is set into motion. Indeed, 'O Stella' clearly establishes the album as a narrative, not only with its shifts of perspective from one character to another, but with Harvey's confident text painting, her musical representations of 'scenes' depicting the evolving relationship. The line 'pin you to my chest', for instance, is accompanied by a violent guitar punch, and as the guitar wails we imagine the two lovers in a car, on their way to the date that is the scene for the following song.

In 'Dress' (track 3), we again inhabit the imagination of the album's first singer.⁸ By now, the two lovers are on their date, and we witness a woman's physically and emotionally discomfiting experience of dressing to please. 'Dress' features one of Harvey's more overt gestures of text painting. In the song's instrumental introduction, the guitar and snare drum are placed into rhythmic juxtaposition, each with syncopations whose combined effect perfectly illustrate the woman's awkward entrance. When the steady drum beats kick in, we can imagine her man stealing up behind her (perhaps he's been parking the car) and ushering her forcefully onto the dance floor.

In terms of narrative development, the woman's imminent 'fall' is prefigured in the final verse of 'Dress', which again demonstrates Harvey's penchant for using pronouns to highlight the unsure status of the woman's identity. Here, the first-person narrator ultimately gives up her confident sense of identity ('I') in favour of a depersonalised, objectified sense of self ('it'), and provides the first hint that she may ultimately succumb to her lover's attempts to destroy her:

Filthy tight, the dress is filthy
I'm falling flat and my arms are empty
Clear the way, better get it out of this room
A fallen woman in dancing costume

The title alone of the next track, 'Victory', leaves us with no doubt as to the subsequent development of plot: the night on the town leads, as many potential lovers would expect, to sexual activity, and the chaste woman is thereby degraded. Though we may perhaps interpret the reference to the 'fallen woman' in the pre-

vious track as an indication that the sexual act has taken place (this, for instance, is Peraino's interpretation), it seems to me only a foreshadowing – a supposition on the part of the woman that she will inevitably fall. 'Victory' is also interesting in that the woman is equated with a ship in the lyrics ('Get it at sea/Take a ship/I'd christen her victory she'd make it') a metaphor that leads us to wonder whether she will float or sink as her imminent encounter with water draws near.

Side 1 concludes with 'Happy and Bleeding', one of the album's most self-consciously artistic songs, a composition that takes us definitively out of the realm of punk and places us in the sonic world of such contemporary women recording artists as Tori Amos. Indeed, the song's polyphonic vocal coda is highly reminiscent of Amos's frequent use of multiple vocal lines in her own songs. Given the nature of the song's theme – the title can refer, at least, either to the woman's realisation that she is bleeding from the sexual encounter during which she lost her virginity, or from her relief that she is menstruating (and not pregnant) – it would not be going too far to suggest that these multiple female voices represent a larger community of women for whom Harvey speaks. Indeed, her stature as a solo artist may have something to do with her wish here to allow the community of women, otherwise absent in her work, to share their voices. In any case, the effect is startling. That Harvey places all of this at the end of the album's first side, directly after the woman's fall, is purposefully dramatic: it provides a musical-narrative question mark as to this female character's fate.

Dry: side 2

The frank exposure of the woman's biology expressed in 'Happy and Bleeding' is carried to an almost unbearable level in 'Sheela-na-gig', the first song on Side 2. 'Sheela-na-gig' is the high point of the album, containing its richest fund of imagery and associations, and forming the beginning of a high-octane, three-song set – a sonic plateau representing the heightened emotions of the two lead characters. Here the woman's transformation in her lover's eyes from virgin to whore is complete: no longer called 'Stella Marie', she is instead equated, in the most violent of terms, with the Celtic fertility icon of Sheela-na-gig, a figure who squats and pulls open her vagina.⁹ Not only is the woman given a forceful dramatic character in this song, but her lover – in this song, unmistakably male – takes on a ferocious tone. Harvey's sense of musical drama is highlighted again by her inventive use of the Pixies-style dynamic gesture: here, the shift occurs at the entrance of the villainous male character, who recoils in disgust from the woman. Given the context of the previous song, 'Happy and Bleeding', we are led to understand that she has not yet 'cleaned up' after the sexual act. He calls her an 'exhibitionist' and commands her to 'Wash those breasts, I don't want to be unclean'. (I interpret the photograph of Harvey on the back of *Dry* in part as a reference to this song. We also find Harvey in a modified Sheela-na-gig pose on the front of Barbara O'Dair's *Trouble Girls: the Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*.)

It is not merely the presence of two distinct characters that provides 'Sheela-na-gig' its special richness: the woman's conscience also makes an appearance, and in the same manner as the vocal polyphony that concludes 'Happy and Bleeding', the woman and her conscience sing a duet as she grapples with her degraded situation:

Gonna wash that man right out of my hair
 Just like the first time, said he didn't care
 Gonna wash that man right out of my hair
 Heard it before, no more
 Gonna take my hips to a man who cares
 Turn the corner, another one there
 Gonna take my hips to a man who cares
 Heard it before

Few listeners should miss Harvey's evocation of the character of Nellie Forbush in Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. Harvey's appropriation of this line in the context of post-punk rock, with the running commentary of her split subject interjecting at every turn, lends the lyric a sinister tone that distances it notably from the blithe context of the American post-war Broadway musical.

There is another, more subtle, subtext in this song as well, made evident in a reference to Shakespeare's most complete villain, *Othello's* Iago. When the male character (portrayed by Harvey herself) sings the line 'Put money in your idle hole' to a sinister melodic line with a descending minor seventh, we might recall Iago's repeated line, 'Put money in thy purse' from the famous extended monologue that concludes Act I of Shakespeare's play. In this scene, Iago senses that his friend Roderigo, because he desires Othello's wife Desdemona, might be instrumental in Iago's plot to destroy the Moor. Harvey's version is all the more sinister for its reversal: while Desdemona had no clue, at least at this early stage, of the plotting against her (she, incidentally, is a *smothered* virgin-whore), *Dry's* Stella Marie is being told to her face that she is a whore. Thus, Harvey's 'idle hole' is the thing itself, the vagina, for which the 'purse' serves as Shakespeare's symbol.¹⁰ Most striking of all is the fact that Iago's soliloquy is a reprimand to Roderigo for being cowardly: in the lines leading up to the 'put money in thy purse' speech, Roderigo threatens to *drown himself* if Desdemona does not return his favours. Iago assures Roderigo in this scene, then, that drowning is a fate suitable for 'cats and blind puppies', but not for men.

Harold Bloom offers a clue suggestive of why Harvey's Shakespearean reference holds particular power. Iago, according to Bloom, represents 'Shakespeare's largest story of ontotheological absence . . . His war is against ontology'. Because he is defined in terms of his military rank – which functions as the essence of his identity – by destroying his superior, who holds the rank that he himself covets, he is destroying his own very essence (Bloom 1998, p. 435). By employing Iago here, then, Harvey offers the suggestion that by degrading women, as the male character does so violently in 'Sheela-na-gig', men are only destroying part of themselves.

Indeed, in the next song, 'Hair', a woman acts to teach a man just this lesson. The man's violent reaction to the woman is reversed, with the powerful, but ultimately duped, Iago transformed into the equally powerful, yet foiled, Samson, and the Sheela-na-gig brought to life as a vengeful Delilah. In the unusually short silence between 'Sheela-na-gig' and 'Hair' (the CD masterer, possibly on the instruction of Harvey herself, left little time in between these two tracks – to commanding musico-dramatic effect), the style moves from sinister to seductive in an exhilarating flash. The scorned woman strikes back swiftly, in a buoyant 5/4 groove, and the effect is jubilant. Harvey's evocation of the archetypal story of a woman's retaliation is matched by equally epic-sounding music – the rhythm section working hard to lay down one of the album's most driving grooves. But the effect is disorienting.

The music is *not quite* danceable: the woman's musical identity plays foil to the more normative 4/4.

The fever pitch of 'Hair' continues in 'Joe', a tour-de-force of speed punk, syncopated kicks, and metrical manoeuvring – a lamentable cry of desperation, in which our ill-fated heroine reinforces the unbreakable bond between herself and the man: 'Joe in you, my buddy be/Stay with me when I fall and die'. Squeals of guitar feedback unmistakably represent male rage – the result of the woman's extraordinary burst of violence in 'Hair'. Most interesting here is the presence of drummer Rob Ellis's voice, singing deep in the mix, as if overwhelmed by the warlike cacophony. (This gesture is given a twist on Harvey's next album, *Rid of Me*: in the song 'Hook', Harvey's voice is completely overwhelmed by the mix, and at one point she sings, 'Daddy, your maid, she can't sing/She can't feel, she's no queen', suggesting that the patriarchal noise has threatened, if not destroyed, her artistic talents.)

'Plants and Rags' is the album's most unabashed 'art song', with its dissonant cello part (composed by Ellis), its acoustic guitar, and its evocation of the domestic sphere. Indeed, from the opening sound of someone keeping time by tapping on a table, we are made aware that the male-dominated world of the side's first three songs is now being left behind. We are entering the home, the woman's world (and perhaps, given the themes of artistry and creativity, the salon). The title alone of 'Plants and Rags' gives us some indication of her conflicted self-image: she is useful in her reproductivity but ultimately disposable. And this leads her to begin the difficult yet ecstatic journey toward reconnection with nature. She dreams, 'Ease myself into a bodybag', evoking such fictional women as Verdi's Gilda, Hitchcock's Marion Crane, and David Lynch's Laura Palmer, all of whom find their ways into bodybags of one sort or another.

The final two songs lead us toward the conclusion that, by now, we expect. 'Fountain' opens with our narrator still trying to rid herself of the man and yet obeying his earlier command to wash herself ('Stand under/Fountain/Cool skin/Washed clean/Wash him from me'). But she is soon left to take fate into her own hands ('Completely naked/What to do/When everything's/Left you'). In 'Water' she takes the plunge, and in one of the most pointed references in the lyrics, finds her solace in the same manner as Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in the last pages of *The Awakening*. Harvey's lyric reads: 'Leave my clothes on the beach/I'm walking down into the sea . . . Now the water to my ankles/Now the water to my knees'. Now consider the following from Chopin's 1899 novella, in which several of the same images – the naked body, the whiteness of the virgin's skin, the water's gradual enveloping of the body – are present:

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

She went on and on. (Chopin 1985, p. 1,102)

At the end of *Dry*, as in *The Awakening*, we are left wondering about the woman's fate: has she survived, been reborn, resurrected, transformed? She continuously remarks that she is 'walking on water', suggesting again the character's androgyny: both Stella Marie and her son share this miracle. Moreover, the lyrics of the final verse, recalling by name the woman's 'pre-awakening' identity as Stella Marie, sug-

gest simultaneously that the woman has drowned and survived: 'Mary, Mary hold on tightly/Over water/Under the sea'. Finally, it is not only in the lyrics that such questions are raised: the song is in 5/4 time, the same metre used to portray Delilah's vengeance in 'Hair'. These are the only two songs on the album in this metre, which is at least somewhat unusual in rock in general and certainly even less common in punk-inspired rock. The 5/4 metre, then, acts as a musical symbol for both woman's otherness and her power. It is in these two songs that the woman acts most freely.

On 'wanting not to be': Harvey and her artistic forebears

I have saved a discussion of one version of the drowned virgin-whore for last, because it leads back to the central issues of this essay – those of women's sexuality and creativity. This version concerns Sappho, the poet of Lesbos, and a lesser-known strand of her history. The primary means of this legend's transmission has been through Ovid's *Heroides*, whose fifteenth book contains an imaginary epistle written by Sappho to an absent lover. Sappho, the story goes, fell in love with a youth, Phaon, who had been transformed by Aphrodite from a common ferryman on Lesbos into a state of youthful perfection. While at first Phaon was responsive to Sappho's advances, and their love was consummated, he was quick to abandon his lover and move on to greener pastures (so to speak) in Sicily. Humiliated by the rejection, Sappho sought solace (and, perhaps, redemption) in the sea by leaping to her death, on the advice of a Naiad, off the cliff at Leucas.

It becomes clear from discussions of Ovid's poem that Harvey and Sappho (or, better, Ovid) certainly share one thing: a fondness for the sexually explicit. Howard Jacobson notes that of all the epistles that comprise Ovid's *Heroides* (all written by mythical or legendary women to their absent lovers), Sappho's is the most laden with sexuality (Jacobson 1974, p. 292). And Margaret Williamson, interpreting scenes depicting Sappho and Phaon on painted vases, suggests that these images show Sappho 'breaching the social codes governing gender roles' (Williamson 1995, p. 10). Sappho plays the pursuer, and a feminised Phaon (a little plump, beardless, and younger than Sappho) is depicted as the object of desire. In this way, Sappho inappropriately inhabits the space reserved for men: in similar depictions of homosexual relationships, it was always the older man who lusted after the young boy.

Beyond the issue of sexuality, one notices an equally telling connection between Harvey and Sappho in terms of creativity. Again, Sappho's suicidal leap has been discussed in this regard. Ovid's account of Sappho's crisis tends to focus, according to Jacobson, on her failed artistic ambitions, to such an extent that 'the chief damage done Sappho by her relationship with Phaon' seems to be neither a broken heart nor a wounded ego, but rather 'the paralyzing effect it has had on her art' (Jacobson 1974, p. 288). Jacobson goes so far as to interpret Sappho's story in terms of the dictum that 'poetry demands "leisure"'. And it is with this idea that the connections between Sappho and Harvey become especially important, for here is where the latter's appropriation of the drowned virgin-whore theme may be linked to creative autonomy. To be truly free as an artist, the argument goes, one is destined to be alone, and even death, if necessary, is a worthy price to pay for such freedom.

One cannot help but think here of Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One's Own* explored, in part, this theme. Moreover, it is difficult *not* to believe that Woolf's chosen method of suicide – by drowning – was somehow in reference, even in homage, to the many fictional women whose stories she had spent a career pondering. Indeed, in a provocative essay in her book *About Chinese Women* (originally published in French in 1974), Julia Kristeva has discussed such a connection. Considering the suicides of Woolf and two other female literary figures, Sylvia Plath and Maria Tsvetaeva, Kristeva comments on the pressures of women artists, writers who, 'disillusioned with meanings and words', decided to take 'refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds' and depart 'wordlessly' from the world (Kristeva 1986, p. 157).

For Kristeva, the suicides of these women are best understood not as acts of dying, but (and here she borrows a phrase from Tsvetaeva) acts of 'wanting not to be' in a man's world. Such a reading raises provocative questions with respect to Polly Jean Harvey, who grew up as a rebellious tomboy. The primary influences that she has acknowledged with respect to her music-making have been almost exclusively male: 'Captain Beefheart, Tom Waits, William Burroughs, Nick Cave, the Pixies, Big Black's Steve Albini' (Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 242). Kristeva argues that female role models are not only near impossible for the woman artist to imagine, but even if they were to materialise, they would not be able to offer any true and lasting safety in the face of deep-seated forces of paternally organised society. And the result of both the absence of female role models and the inescapable grasp of the patriarchal model is a world in which the woman (and, for our specific purposes, the woman creator) is left with little choice but to cave in or to flee:

[A] man can imagine an all-powerful, though always insignificant, mother in order to 'legitimise' himself: to make himself known, to lean on her and be guided by her through the social labyrinth, though not without his own occasional ironic commentary . . . For a woman, as soon as the father is not calling the tune and language is being torn apart by rhythm, no mother can serve as an axis for the sacred or for farce. If she tries to provide it herself, the result is so-called female homosexuality [or] identification with virility . . . And if no paternal legitimation comes along to dam up the inexhaustible non-symbolized drive, she collapses into psychosis or suicide. (Kristeva 1986, p. 158)¹¹

Despite the undeniable facts that Harvey has maintained a high level of creative control in her work and that, over the course of several solo albums, it shows evidence of a distinct and purposeful artistic progression, her choice of subject matter demonstrates that she does not consider the subject of women's creativity closed. And all of this goes beyond the routine loathing of 'selling out' that so many popular recording artists have expressed as a priority in their public personae – including Harvey, who once made the remark, 'I'll never give the people what they want' (Frost 1993, p. 55). For, at least in *Dry*, Harvey transforms these commonplace complaints into powerful artistic themes of threatened artistry and troubled sexual identification.

As a career artist working in the music business, Harvey surely worries about the same thing that all creative, talented musicians do: having as much autonomy as they need to create the music that they want to. Her debut album reminds us that the question is still open as to what price women continue to pay, if only symbolically, for such freedom.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several colleagues and friends who have led me in many fascinating directions while working on this essay: Beth Severy, Tanya Pollard, Kate Kane and Merie Kirby. I am especially grateful to Susan Cook and the Editors of this special issue, Barbara Bradby and Dave Laing, for their extremely useful comments on earlier drafts.

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'Diving into the Wreck', from *The Fact of a Doorframe, Poems Selected and New, 1950–1984*, by Adrienne Rich, 1984. Reprinted with permission from W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps one of the most famous virgin-whore depictions in the visual arts is Caravaggio's 'The Death of the Virgin' (1605–6), in which the Madonna is painted with an enlarged stomach, suggesting that she is pregnant. Indeed, a scandal erupted over Caravaggio's painting when it was discovered that he had used a prostitute as his model (see De Logu 1964, p. 156).
2. For a brief discussion of the art-rock problem in rock historiography and criticism, see Mazullo (2000).
3. Harvey's lyrics can be found on the Internet at <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~bigdog/PJHarvey/openpage.htm>
4. The woman's voice plays a central role in each song's *musique concrète* background. In 'Kim', among the murmurings of the forest, we have the sound of the woman's throat being slit and her body being dragged along the road. In 'Stan', as the car careens along the road, the listener, positioned with Stan inside the car, hears the muffled screams of his wife in the trunk.
5. Hitchcock does not give Marion Crane such an excuse. Indeed, it is almost as if her misguided actions are the result of a death wish. The connection between Hitchcock and Eminem/Mathers is illuminating on a number of levels. In particular, the issue of the rap artist's homophobia might be addressed in terms laid out by the ongoing debate about Hitchcock's own homophobia. On this, see Creekmur and Doty (1995). I would like to thank Barbara Bradby for pointing out the Eminem example to me.
6. One also thinks here of Schubert and Müller's drowned miller, and of that composer's own representations of gender and sexuality in the song cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823). The list can be expanded easily. Another important version that merits mentioning is Hans Christian Anderson's (and Disney's) Ariel, the Little Mermaid – a figure who does not drown, technically, but rather dissolves into the ocean's foam after deciding, against her father's strict orders, to pursue her attraction for a human. The realm of nineteenth-century opera also provides a number of important examples, among them Wagner's Senta (*Der fliegende Holländer*, 1843), Verdi's Gilda (*Rigoletto*, 1851) and Tchaikovsky's Lisa (*Pique Dame*, 1890).
7. This musical effect was a primary feature, for instance, of Nirvana's music in the early 1990s. Both Cobain and Harvey acknowledged the Pixies as a strong influence on their work (see Mazullo 2000, p. 721).
8. For a more detailed discussion of this song – its lyrics, music and culture-critical message – see Dibben (1999, pp. 337–41).
9. For information on the Sheela-na-gig, see Walker (1983, pp. 931–2). We might also read Harvey as aligning herself here with such female artists as Sinead O'Connor, in whose work we also find similar representations of the virgin-whore.
10. Hitchcock had his hand in this tradition as well: Marion Crane is always hiding her envelope of money, stolen from a man, in the symbolic 'wombs' of drawers and purses.
11. Such a passage helps to elaborate upon the situation described by Sheila Whiteley in the introduction to her book, *Women and Popular Music*. Whiteley quotes Elaine Showalter: 'each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to discover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex' (Whiteley 2000, p. 8).

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