“INTO THE SENSUAL WORLD”:
Gender Subversion in the Work of Kate Bush

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Abstract

Kate Bush remains one of the most successful and original British female music artists and is often perceived as a female pioneer. This thesis analyses a selection of her earlier work in order to establish how she represents issues of gender and sexuality in her lyrics and performances. Her work is evaluated through the lens of two feminist theories: écriture féminine and gender performativity. Écriture féminine is employed to determine how Bush writes and reclaims female sexuality, while gender performativity subsequently shows how she transcends her position as a woman by taking on and representing characters of the opposite gender. This thesis argues that Bush constructs narratives in her lyrics to represent experiences which transcend the boundaries of binary gender and challenge social sexual norms.

Keywords: Kate Bush, gender performativity, écriture féminine, song lyrics, popular music studies
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Introduction

Kate Bush took the world by storm when she released her first single “Wuthering Heights” in 1978. She became the first female artist to have a self-written song topping the charts in the United Kingdom. What followed was an extensive career as a singer, songwriter and producer, generating ten studio albums so far. Bush’s experimental approach to composing and singing have made her music difficult to define, as it seems to transcend the boundaries of pop music and other art forms: critics have tried to label her music with terms such as avant-garde and art-pop.¹ She has left a visible mark on the music business, as can be seen in the variety of artists who have covered her songs: from symphonic metal band Within Temptation to post-punk band The Futureheads. Contemporary female artists such as Florence Welsh and Bat For Lashes cannot seem to escape endless comparisons to Bush by the media and they themselves often name her as their influence.²

Bush’s cultural impact has not only left a trace in the field of music, but also in the field of literature. Her lyrics are of a literary nature in the sense that they incorporate devices such as complex metaphors and extensive narratives as well as intertextual references to literary works such as Ulysses and Wuthering Heights. A collection of her lyrics was published by independent publishing house Faber & Faber in 2018, which shows that she is not only acknowledged as a composer of music, but also as a literary writer. The book, entitled How To Be Invisible, contains an introduction by renowned British author David Mitchell, who describes how Bush’s work and lyrics have inspired him both professionally and personally. Mitchell connects Bush’s lyrics to themes of gender and sexuality as he gives a striking interpretation of Bush’s hit single “Running Up That Hill”, which, according to him, “validates female sexual pleasure.”³ He extends this argument to the album Hounds Of Love (1985), which the single was a part of, and argues this was “a first encounter with a new gender

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³ David Mitchell, introduction to How To Be Invisible by Kate Bush (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), xviii.
consciousness for many.” Mitchell believes that Bush’s female autonomy was a source of inspiration for many young women, a sentiment which is echoed in Laura Vroomen’s dissertation on female Kate Bush fans, as the interviewed fans expressed a unanimous appreciation for the fact that Bush is “a feminine woman and not ashamed of it.” Given the independent position Bush has claimed for herself in the music industry, it makes sense that she is considered a female pioneer. This raises the question to what extent this feminist sentiment is actually reflected in her work. In order to define this, the literary nature of her work needs to be taken into account. Rather than writing autobiographical works, Bush tends to construct stories within her lyrics, which allows her to explore a vast array of experiences. The narrative quality of her lyrics thus enables her not only to reflect different aspects of the female perspective, but also to step out of her female role and inhabit male characters. In an interview in 2016, Bush stated “I don't really think of myself of writing as a woman. I just think of writing as me, as a person, if that makes sense.” An astute example of the way she transcends her position as a woman is “This Woman’s Work,” in which she gives an account of giving birth. Although she is describing what is perhaps the most female experience possible, the story is told from a man’s perspective. This storytelling approach to song writing also allows Bush to explore more taboo sides of sexuality: a song like “Kashka From Baghdad,” for instance, offers an outsider’s view into a homosexual relationship, while “The Infant’s Kiss” is an inner narrative of a woman with paedophilic thoughts.

This thesis aims to answer the following question: How does Kate Bush transcend the boundaries of binary gender notions and challenge social sexual norms in her lyrics? The methodology used to answer this question is essentially a synthesis between textual analysis and gender studies: a selection of Bush’s songs will be analysed by performing a close reading of the lyrics and linking their content to concepts of feminist criticism such as Judith Butler’s performativity theory and Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. The corpus consists of lyrics from several of Bush’s albums, all of them dealing with gender and sexuality in various ways. Although Bush’s lyrics as texts will be the main focus of this research, other elements of her work, such as visual representations, will also be taken into account. Bush’s depiction of gender in videos, for instance, will be considered as an extension of the narratives of her lyrics. By

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4 Mitchell, introduction to *How To Be Invisible*, xviii.
using these methods to analyse her work, this thesis will argue that Bush employs narratives in her lyrics to represent experiences which transcend the boundaries of binary gender and to challenge social sexual norms.

Lyrics are increasingly being evaluated as literature in the twenty-first century, as can be seen from singer-songwriter Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. Lyrics have received academic attention in both the field of literature and popular music, and quite a few sources have been written on how to approach this art form, with Lars Eckstein’s book *Reading Song Lyrics* (2010) providing a fundamental outline. Articles published in music journals such as *Journal of Popular Music Studies* often consider both musical structures and lyrics, especially when investigating social themes such as sexuality and gender. Gender performativity and transcending the gender binary through music and performance are no unfamiliar concepts in the field of popular music studies, but they have most prominently been researched in connection to male artists. An example of this is Thomas Geyrhalter’s “Effeminacy, Camp and Sexual Subversion in Rock: The Cure and Suede” (1996), in which he combines notions of gender and sexuality to argue that cult bands such as The Cure and Suede are able to challenge existing stereotypes by engaging with a style of performance where “traditional heterosexual masculinity is questioned and left aside for a more experimental approach.” In applying such theories to the work of Kate Bush, it makes sense to focus on questioning traditional femininity rather than masculinity. Feminist popular music scholars have been concerned with the position of women in the industry and the way female artists reflect their femininity in their work. Some of these articles deal with more general subjects, such as representations of female sexual pleasure, a concept that is very relevant to Bush’s work. Others consist of case studies of specific artists and themes, such as motherhood in the work of Tori Amos. Only a handful of articles have been written about Kate Bush, one of them focusing on gender and sexuality specifically: in “Kate Bush: Performing and Creating Queer Subjectivities on *Lionheart*” (2006), Deborah Withers argues that Bush’s second album, *Lionheart* (1978), deploys camp performance in order to break free from “the narrow position

that she, as a woman singer, was confined to.”¹⁰ This thesis will extend this argument by focusing not just on one album but drawing on Bush’s entire body of work to paint a more complete picture of representations of gender and sexuality in her work.

This thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter aims to construct a theoretical framework to create a lens through which Bush’s work will be approached. This will include a description of the current state of discussions on studying lyrics in order to establish a way to approach the primary sources as texts. The remainder of this chapter serves to frame the gender studies aspect of the research. A theoretical background will be developed by assembling concepts of feminist criticism that can be applied to the lyrics, focussing particularly on Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Cixous’s écriture féminine. The second chapter explores the way Bush employs écriture féminine in order to write the female body, by analysing a selection of lyrics which explicitly refer to female sexuality. The third chapter then demonstrates how Bush transcends her position as a woman by applying Butler’s theory of gender performativity to evaluate a selection of lyrics and videos where Bush performs and represents characters of the opposite gender. By taking on this dual perspective, this thesis will shed light on both the way she represents women and her methods of breaking out of her position as a woman, thus presenting a comprehensive analysis of the way Bush navigates issues of gender and sexuality in her work.

1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter sets out to create a lens through which the work of Kate Bush will be studied. As the main source for this research consists of song lyrics, it is crucial to have an understanding of what this format entails. By focusing on the performative quality of lyrics, the first section of this chapter will highlight the differences between studying lyrics and studying poetry and establish a way to approach the main source. The performative nature of lyrics will then be connected to issues of gender through an evaluation of the notion of gender performativity. In order to be able to analyse the way Bush reflects the female experience in her work, this chapter will also give a brief overview of the concept of *écriture féminine.*

In *Reading Song Lyrics* (2010), Lars Eckstein sets out to create a “cultural rhetoric” on how to approach lyrics academically. He notes that first and foremost it should be acknowledged that “like few art forms, lyrics fall between disciplinary chairs.”[^11] In order to study lyrics, one must thus break out of the boundaries of literary and cultural studies and branch out into fields such as musicology, linguistics and theatre and performance studies.[^12] David Mitchell sets up his introduction to *How To Be Invisible* by considering the format of lyrics, noting that “readers who know the songs become ‘hearers’ as the brain belts out a speed-up version of the familiar recording, while those readers unfamiliar with the lyrics are confronted by text presented in poetry format, which is avowedly not poetry.”[^13] He brings up a central question in studying lyrics, namely whether these texts can and should be evaluated in the same way as poetry. As Mitchell suggests, lyrics as texts are often presented in poetry format, and therefore the first instinct is to analyse them as such. In *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (1996), Simon Frith describes the phenomenon of “rock poetry books,” which emerged during the 1970s. These books showed that “the highest critical compliment – the way to take lyrics seriously – was to treat them as poetry, as print text.”[^14] In other words, these rock lyrics were judged by the same standards as written poetry. Firth’s issue with these rock poetry books is that, in doing so, they did not take contemporary literary criticism into account, but rather stuck to the “middlebrow criteria that New Criticism

[^12]: Ibid.
[^13]: David Mitchell, introduction to *How To Be Invisible* by Kate Bush (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), xi.
successfully drove out of the academy in the 1930s.”  

More modern approaches to lyrics, analysing purely textual elements such as puns and allusions, did not prove themselves sufficient, either. What is lacking in such analyses is the recognition that lyrics and poetry rely on entirely different formats. Although poetry finds its origin in song, it is written to be read as a text, either silently or out loud in a spoken word performance, and thus it needs to be able to hold on to its own metric and rhythm. Song lyrics, however, do not have to stand on their own and instead rely on other musical elements, such as instrumentation and a singing voice. According to Frith, “good lyrics are not poems because they don’t need to be.”  

What determines the quality and meaning of song lyrics are not simply the words themselves, but rather the way they cooperate with the sound of the music and the context in which they are performed. When studying the meaning of a song, the focus should thus not only lie on the lyrics but also, for instance, on the accent in which these lyrics are sung and which words are being emphasized. Lyrics are substantially part of a bigger picture: a comprehensive performance. This inevitably relates this art form to the notion of performativity. Performativity is a concept that has been applied to a wide range of fields but finds its origin in linguistic theory, and more specifically in John L. Austin’s How To Do Things With Words (1962). Austin proposes that certain utterances, such as “I now pronounce you man and wife,” are not merely stating something, but rather performing an action. These utterances are called performatives. This concept is complicated by the fact that such utterances do not always perform a valid action: when two actors are pronounced husband and wife on a stage, the act of marriage is not actually performed. Such uses of language are labelled “parasitic” by Austin.  

With this issue in mind, Jacques Derrida unites Austin’s concept of performativity with the notion of iterability, arguing that an utterance can be “infinitely quoted in other contexts without losing its basic functionality.”  

Language use thus always relies on mechanisms of repetition, with utterances being repeated in the appropriate manner in certain contexts. All language use can thus be considered performative. Eckstein applies this notion of performative language to reading song lyrics, to establish that these, too, rely on the concept of “iterability” to account for pragmatic effects. As with all utterances, lyrics tend to operate within the conventions of a particular context. When studying the meaning of lyrics, one should

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15 Frith, Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music, 177.
16 Ibid, 181.
18 Eckstein, Reading Song Lyrics, 34.
19 Ibid.
thus take broader contexts, such as musical genres, into account. Derrida’s theory does not fully account for the semantic properties of lyrics, however, as it lacks recognition of the body behind the utterance: as Derrida favours a disembodied concept of language, he enforces the idea of lyrics being performative, but disregards the fact that they are also part of actual performance. It is this “intersubjectivity of interaction between singer and audience” that is vital in transferring the meaning of lyrics, and so the body, or rather the voice, of the singer is of great importance for interpretation. Performativity is enabled by the context of a performance, while at the same time a performance “relies on performative input to keep up or establish a theatrical or ritual frame.” This sense of performativity is what enables singers to perform in a theatrical sense: by iterating utterances in a particular context, artists are able to use their own physical voice to inhabit different characters in their performance. Firth illustrates this by describing a trend in British music which he labels the ‘character song,’ which is a song in which narrative structures “are used to portray a character while simultaneously drawing attention to the art of the portrayal.” Frith notably only names male artists, such as Morrissey and Mick Jagger, as examples of artists who employ this song writing strategy. However, narratives and characters are very prominent in the work of Kate Bush. A poignant example of this is her song “Wow,” a song that tells the story of an actor, in which she very explicitly draws attention to “the art of portrayal” in her lyrics as she sings “You know it’s not for real / He just holds his breath.” Such performances make clear that what artists are doing is not simply expressing an introspective voice, but rather staging an act from which listeners derive meaning.

Song is essentially theatre, and lyrics should thus not only be considered for their verbal content, but always be analysed in a broader interpretative frame, taking into account the iterability of language, musical context, social context and the qualities of the performance. When analysing the lyrics of Kate Bush, this research will thus not only consider the words as they appear as printed texts in *How To Be Invisible* and the album booklets. They will be considered in their musical context, as sound effects, intonation, accent and stress are a crucial part of the perception of the lyrics. Not only audible performances will be taken into account,
but visual performances as well, by analysing Bush’s music videos in addition to the texts they represent.

The implications of performativity theory have also had a significant impact on feminist theory. Gender performativity is a notion that was first coined by Judith Butler in the latter half of the twentieth century. She employs performativity theory to argue that gender is constructed through repetitive acts, making a significant impact on current perceptions of binary gender opposition. Traditional feminist discourse often tends to approach women as a univocal category, unifying their shared cultural experiences to create a sense of political solidarity. This strategy reinforces the idea of binary gender oppositions, which Butler argues we should move away from, as there is no such thing as a female essence: female and male identity are assigned through arbitrary characteristics and experiences. Butler quotes Simone de Bouvoir’s claim that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” to illustrate that gender is not something that precedes the gendered subject. She argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time.” The way this identity is constructed, according to Butler, is through “a stylized repetition of acts.” Acts consist of “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs.” These acts are intrinsically linked to linguistic theory, as Sarah Salih argues that “gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language … it is not that an identity “does” discourse or language, but the other way around—language and discourse “do” gender.” Butler therefore draws from Austin’s theory of performative language and Derrida’s argument that utterances are infinitely reiterated while adhering to social context, and applies them to gender: acts, or utterances, are reiterated according to a certain social context, and this is how gendered behaviour is constructed. The phenomenological theory of ‘acts’ uses this term to determine “the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality.” Butler takes a more radical approach:

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
instead of assuming “the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language,” she “takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts.”\(^{31}\) The gendered body is thus not a reflection of some interior essence, but rather “an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities.”\(^{32}\) This means that not only gender, but sex, too is essentially a social construct: “one is not simply a body, but one does one’s body”, and this doing consists of acts which “bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.”\(^{33}\)

Gender operates within a structure of cultural conventions, which tend to be constructed in order to guarantee the reproduction of a culture. Heterosexual marriage is therefore enforced as being the norm, as this is what ensures sexual reproduction. This system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced through the “cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions.”\(^{34}\) In other words, it is only due to this reproductive inclination that we make a concrete distinction between male and female bodies and genders. Social theorists such as Michel Foucault have pointed out that “the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests.”\(^{35}\) Although the binary gender system can thus be seen as unnatural, those who fail to adhere to these norms tend to face punishment: they might, for example, be harassed or stigmatised, or their kinship may not be recognized by the law. This, too, is considered to be a sign that gender is socially constructed:

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.\(^{36}\)

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 521.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid, 524.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
\(^{36}\) Ibid, 528.
Although society responds negatively to those who deviate from the norm, it is this same sense of social construction that allows for subversion. Since there is no gendered essence, all gender expression can be considered parody. Some forms of gender parody can be employed to undermine heterosexual norms. These parodic acts can be found in theatrical contexts, most conspicuously in drag performances. Just like lyrics, then, gender is not only a matter of performativity but also of performance. Drag may thus also occur within lyrics, as an artist is able to parody gender by iterating utterances typically associated with the opposite gender. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler discusses the properties of drag performance, suggesting that “it may be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual norms.”\(^{37}\) Certain instances of drag can thus be considered subversive, as they expose the anxious state of the heterosexual hegemony: by imitating hegemonic gender, they reveal the arbitrary nature of what we consider to be gendered acts and thus “dispute heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”\(^{38}\)

Although Butler rejects the notion that there is some sort of universal female essence, she does acknowledge that female experiences should be voiced, as she states that “there is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed.”\(^{39}\) The expression of female experiences is an issue that has been prominently discussed by French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous. In her essay “The Laugh of Medusa,” published in 1976, Cixous coined the term *écriture féminine*, or “woman’s writing”. The female voice has long been silenced in discourse, she argues, and she urges women to start writing from their own experiences in order to oppose the phallocentric hegemony:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.\(^{40}\)

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38 Ibid.
Cixous’s strategy of employing writing as a means of opposition to the phallocentrism of the Western culture also occurs in the works of scholars Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. Ann Rosalind Jones evaluates and criticizes their strategies in her essay “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of ‘L'Ecriture Feminine’” (1981). She notes that “symbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else- including women.”

In order to resist this objectification, women are to express jouissance, which can be defined as “the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father.”

In “The Laugh of Medusa”, Cixous describes the way women’s sexuality has been censored. Women have only been described through male, phallocentric discourse, and so they have always been defined as the lacking “Other.” As male discourse has been in charge of the definition of female sexuality, women have been diminished to merely being objects of desire for men. As a result, women have been made to feel guilty and keep quiet about their own bodily desires. This censorship of sexuality exposes the oppressed position of women in a phallocentric culture, for “censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.” Écriture féminine objects this censorship in the patriarchal hegemony as it “displaces the male economy of desire … for the feminine economy of pleasure or jouissance.”

Cixous argues that a woman should write herself on two levels. The first is individually, in order to reclaim her sexuality and “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her.” By writing her experiences, a woman also writes herself on a second level, which is the historical level. History has always been based on the oppression of women, Cixous argues, but by taking up the pen a woman writes herself into history and claims her position as an active initiator.

Bush’s body of work contains songs that include explicit descriptions of female desire,

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42 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
sex, and the female body, and thus it could be argued that she, as a woman, is writing herself in the way Cixous suggests. These songs, and the way they employ écriture féminine, will be discussed in the following chapter. However, Bush does not always restrict herself to this female perspective. In fact, she often seems to consciously aim for what she considers to be a male form of writing, especially in her earlier albums. When talking about her musical inspirations in an interview in 1977, for instance, she proclaimed that “when I'm at the piano I hate to think that I'm a female because I automatically get a preconception … most male music – not all of it, but the good stuff – really lays it on you. It really puts you against the wall … Not many females succeed with that.”47 This comment suggests that Bush had a fairly derogatory view on “female music”, which is rather telling of the position of female musicians in the late seventies. On the one hand, it appears that Bush might be writing from a male perspective because she deems female song writing to be “lesser”, but on the other hand it could be argued that this inclination to take on a male point of view allows her to challenge binary gender norms. Chapter three will therefore, in light of Butler’s performativity theory, focus on the way Bush inhabits and performs characters of the opposite gender, in order to establish whether these performances can be considered subversive.

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2. Stepping Out of the Page: Kate Bush Writing Women

“Wuthering Heights,” Kate Bush’s first single, remains one of her most well-known songs. Based on the book of the same name by Emily Brontë, Bush’s piercing vocals reflect the voice of Catherine Earnshaw’s ghost – a poignant perspective, considering the fact that the novel is narrated by a man and Cathy’s inner thoughts are never represented. By singing “It’s me, Cathy,” Bush was literally giving this female character her own voice and bringing it to the masses. This chapter will analyse female representation in two other songs that are adaptations of works of literature, namely “The Red Shoes” and “The Sensual World.” Bush is also notorious for creating her own narratives, however, and some of these songs present examples of female pleasure and a darker side of female sexuality. A close reading of “Feel It” and “L’Amour Looks Something Like You” will provide insight into the way Bush writes the female sexual experience. “Get Out Of My House”, “The Infant Kiss” and “The Kick Inside” will then be analysed to explore how Bush represents more taboo topics of female sexuality.

The story of “The Red Shoes,” title track of Bush’s album from 1993, is a rewriting of the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Andersen’s tale tells the story of Karen, a vain girl who finds herself enchanted by a pair of red shoes. Karen insists on wearing the red shoes to church, even though she knows this is inappropriate, and is eventually punished for it: the shoes start dancing and Karen, unable to stop them, is forced to carry on dancing until an executioner cuts off her feet at her request. The red shoes in Bush’s song seem to carry the same magical dancing powers but, unlike Karen, Bush’s protagonist is aware of this from the beginning. She is intrigued by the movements of the original owner of the shoes, and wishes she were able to obtain her dancing skills. In contrast to Karen in the original story, Bush’s character thus willingly puts on the shoes in order to obtain this skill.

Oh she move like the Diva do
I said ‘I'd love to dance like you’
She said ‘just take off my red shoes
Put them on and your dream'll come true…”

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50 Kate Bush, “The Red Shoes,” in How To Be Invisible, 81.
This first verse implies that putting on the shoes and learning to dance will have positive effects for the character, as it will make her “dream come true.” This suggests the song has a different approach to the act of dancing than Andersen’s tale, where to dance is to suffer punishment. In order to understand the significance of this difference, the symbolic meaning of the shoes and the dancing needs to be considered. Hilary Davidson argues that red is the colour of passion, and red shoes are culturally understood as a symbol to “denote women who transgress against acceptable feminine norms.”

Dancing, too, reflects a transgression of feminine norms, as “the wild physical movement of her enchanted dancing is a form of uninhibited bodily expression inappropriate for a respectable girl.” The fact that Karen is unable to stop dancing in these shoes is a signification of her struggle to constrain her female sexuality and passion. Both wearing the red shoes and engaging in dance can thus be seen as visible expressions of sexuality. While Andersen’s fairy tale depicts this female sexuality in a very negative way, Bush employs Andersen’s symbolism in order to represent a more nuanced view.

Andersen’s tale is narrated through an omniscient third person narrator, as is typical for fairy tales. Bush’s tale employs a more layered narratological structure. Three narrative voices can be distinguished: firstly, there is the one of the protagonist, who speaks from a first person perspective; secondly there is the original owner of the red shoes, who addresses the girl in second person; and thirdly there is a chorus that functions as a third person narrator. By inhabiting the character of the girl and describing her inner thoughts in the first person, Bush is giving her a voice, as she did with Cathy in “Wuthering Heights.” Although the protagonist initially feels like she has made a mistake by putting on the shoes, saying “Oh the minute I put them on / I knew I had done something wrong,” she eventually comes to terms with her fate and embraces it as she sings “I'm gonna dance the dream / And make the dream come true.”

The chorus reflects on this by singing the following lines:

These shoes do, a kind of voodoo

They're gonna make her dance

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52 Ibid, 277.
55 Ibid, 82.
'Til her legs fall off
Call a doctor, call a priest
They're gonna whip her up like
a helicopter

While the protagonist speaks of dreams coming true, the chorus connects the shoes to the dark magic of voodoo, suggesting they are evil. Furthermore, the chorus calls for a doctor or a priest, which suggests that they do believe the shoes should be removed in order to cure, or, as the reference to a priest suggests, morally purify the girl. Bush’s tale can be read as an account of a woman inevitably coming into her own in terms of sexuality as she grows up, which can be a frightful and dangerous process. The chorus, then, may represent society’s disapproval and lack of understanding. Even though the challenging sides of this process are depicted in “The Red Shoes,” the song is mostly a celebration of female sexuality. Lines such as “Feel your hair come tumbling down / Feel your feet start kissing the ground” paint a positive picture of physical expression without constraints. This physicality of dancing is also emphasized in the line “You can dance the dream with your body on,” which connects positive consequences – the dream coming true – to the body, suggesting once again that bodily expression of sexuality is something to be celebrated instead of punished. Bonnie Gordon notes that this body positive aspect is also represented in the structure of the song, as musically it is a dance track with a thumping rhythm. Gordon argues that “since the song is meant to make everybody who hears it dance, it is no longer a compelled act of one woman but rather a collective experience.” While Karen is simply observed and shamed by the villagers, Bush’s song calls for listeners to share in her experience.

Andersen’s tale is structured like a cautionary tale with a resolution in the end. By cutting off Karen’s feet, both her red shoes and her ability to dance are removed: she is “desexualized.” Only now, Karen can go to heaven. The message of Andersen’s tale, then, is that in order to live a proper life, women should refrain from expressing overt sexuality. Bush’s song does not work towards such a resolution and the protagonist’s shoes are never removed. Instead, the song fades out repeating “You gotta dance.” This once again emphasizes the fact

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid, 81.
59 Gordon, “Kate Bush's Subversive Shoes,” 46.
60 Ibid.
that dancing, and thus expression of sexuality, is not something to be oppressed, but simply an essential part of the female experience. Fairy tales have long been used as a way to convey morals and social norms, and consequently they tend to fit into the traditional phallocentric discourse of men defining and diminishing female sexuality. By rewriting Andersen’s tale, giving Karen a voice and changing her fate, Bush is reclaiming her body and sexuality in the way that Hélène Cixous called for in “The Laugh of Medusa.”

Another take on rewriting female literary characters occurs on “The Sensual World” (1989), which was inspired by Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from the end of Ulysses by James Joyce. After being denied permission to use the text as it appears in the novel by the Joyce estate, Bush attempted to capture the spirit of the piece in her own lyrics.63 While in “The Red Shoes” Bush is reclaiming female sexuality by rewriting the narrative, Bloom’s soliloquy did not call for such fundamental reconstruction, as it is already commonly read as an example of écriture féminine.64 In fact, Cixous refers to this sequence in “The Laugh of Medusa”, as she writes “…And yes,” says Molly, carrying Ulysses off beyond any book and toward the new writing; ‘I said yes, I will.’”65 Cixous reads Bloom’s text as an example of expression of jouissance, and therefore as a model of the new, feminine writing which she aspires to stimulate. She draws specific attention to the word “yes,” which is repeated throughout the sequence, closing the book with the climactic “and yes I said yes I will Yes.”66 “The Sensual World” has incorporated this motive as well: the song starts and ends with “yes” and the word is repeated throughout the refrains. Although some critics may not agree that the repetition of this word in Molly Bloom’s sequence necessarily represents sexual climax,67 Bush utilises her voice to imply that in her song it unmistakably does: each repetition of the word is sung in a breathy, sensual voice, and many times it is accompanied by a preceding “mmh.” The final lines of the song come together in an orgasmic outburst, echoing the affirmative ending of Ulysses:

He loosened it so if it slipped between my breasts
He’d rescue it, mmh, yes
And his spark took life in my hand and, mmh, yes
I said, mmh, yes
But not yet, mmh, yes
Mmh, yes

Although aural representation of female ecstasy has been a staple in popular music since the 1960s, these sounds are often pushed to the background to accompany a lead male singer, with the woman “oohing and aahing nonsensically behind the lead's meaningful words.”69 By voicing pleasure in “The Sensual World”, a song entirely sung by herself, Bush is proving that female sexuality does not need to be a compliment to a male voice, but that it can stand on its own. Her sexuality is thus not defined by phallocentric discourse, but by herself writing her body, in accordance with Cixous’s assertion of *écriture féminine*.

Although the song in essence seems to describe a sexual experience, there is another layer to the lyrics. Bush is making the characters “roll off of Howth Head and into the flesh,”70 Howth Head being the place the characters reside in the novel. Bush is taking them out of the pages of the novel and writing them into the real world: Molly is “Stepping out of the page into the sensual world / Stepping out, off the page, into the sensual world.”71 The sensuality of the world refers not necessarily merely to sexuality, but also to a world of touch, smell and sound. This extension of the story of Bloom’s soliloquy makes the song a perfect example of what *écriture féminine* strives to achieve by “writing the body”. By taking on this already sexually expressive female character and writing her into the real world, Bush is literally writing a woman into life – a woman with sexual desires, who wishes to experience the sensuality of the world, and whose body is her own. This last point is evident in the lines “He said I was a flower of the mountain, yes / But now I've powers o'er a woman's body, yes.”72 Although the first line defines her through the eyes of her male partner, the second line confirms that she is the one in control of her female body.

Examples of descriptions of sex that are not related to literary works are most apparent

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
on Bush’s earlier albums. This did not go unnoticed by the public, as can be seen from a review of her first album, *The Kick Inside* (1978), by Peter Reilly in *Stereo Review*:

Bush’s females are fully as hungry as males are – not in the angry, doomed, and rather dreary way off the romantic-gone-wrong of LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR, but simply as healthy, alive human beings with sensual and sexual appetites to satisfy. And they are as guiltless about expressing their hunger as most males have been for years.73

As the review suggests, the album contains various songs with references to sexual desire. The most obvious one is “Feel It,” which lyrics consist entirely of an account of a sexual experience. A playful mood is set in the first few lines: “After the party, you took me back to your parlour / A little nervous laughter, locking the door.”74 Bush emphasizes the casual nature of the situation, as she sings “Well, it could be love / Or it could be just lust but it will be fun.”75 This shows that she, like the review noted, is simply expressing her sexual “hunger”76, without necessary looking for a romantic relationship.

The entire song is narrated in second person, as Bush, or rather the character she has created in this song, is directly addressing her partner. The intimate atmosphere created by the lyrics is enhanced by the instrumentation as, in contrast to the rest of the album, the song relies merely on piano and vocals. Listeners may even project themselves into the song and feel like they are the one being addressed. This effect is especially apparent in the chorus, which, rather than being a description of sexual acts, consists of words voicing the experience as if it is happening at that moment:

Oh feel it, oh, oh, feel it, feel it my love
Oh feel it, oh, oh, feel it, feel it my love
Oh I need it, oh, oh, feel it, feel it my love
Feel it! See what you're doing to me77

At other moments, the song is more descriptive of the physical acts that are taking place. “Feel your warm hand walking around”78 suggests that her partner is pleasing her, while “So keep

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75 Ibid.
76 Reilly, “Kate Bush: Uncaged Bird.”
77 Bush, “Feel It.”
78 Ibid.
on a-moving in, keep on a-tuning in / Synchronize rhythm now” is an obvious reference to intercourse. This shows that Bush does not shy away from writing the female body in its most intimate state. A similar account of the body appears on “L’Amour Looks Something You.” Although this song reads more like a traditional love song, it does emphasize the sexual nature of a romantic relationship:

I'm dying for you just to touch me
And feel all the energy
Rushing right up-a-me

These lines once again show the “hunger” described by Reilly: she is longing for physical contact. This song also draws attention to the experience of the female body as she references “that feeling of sticky love inside.” Both songs show that Bush does not shy away from writing the female body in its most intimate state. In expressing her sexual desire, Bush was taking a position in her writing that was striking for a woman in the 1970, as Reilly noted: “they are as guiltless about expressing their hunger as most males have been for years.” This review thus suggests that by writing her sexuality, Bush is simultaneously employing strategies of écriture feminine and performing a male role, in accordance to Judith Butler’s perception of drag. The Kick Inside could consequently be considered a subversive album in light of both theories.

While both “Feel It” and “L’Amour” describe positive, consensual sexual experiences, Bush portrays a very different story on “Get Out Of My House” from her album The Dreaming (1982). The lyrics describe a woman’s frantic attempts to keep an intruder out of her house, by bolting the doors and installing a concierge at the entrance. “This house is as old as I am / This house knows all I have done” suggests that the “house” is actually a representation of the woman’s body. This intrusion of the house, and thus of the body, can be read as an account of rape. The woman is trying to close herself off in order to prevent this from happening, to make sure “No stranger’s feet / Will enter me,” “feet” referring to sexual organs.

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
82 Kate Bush, “Get Out Of My House”, How To Be Invisible, 135.
83 Ibid, 136.
In contrast to “The Sensual World”, where Bush employed vocal techniques to express pleasure, on “Get Out Of My House” she uses her voice to convey a sense of sheer horror and despair. The woman’s panic can be felt as she stutters her way through the verses:

This house is full of m-m-my mess
This house is full of m-m-mistakes
This house is full of m-m-madness

Even more striking is the screaming. All throughout the chorus Bush repeats “Get out of my house!” in a piercing voice in the background. The screaming vocals are not only used to show the woman’s despair, however, but also her strength, as she emphasizes that “[they] can’t knock my door down!” and “this house is full of, full of, full of fight!” In the end, screaming turns out to be her ultimate defence mechanism as she is confronted with the intruder face-to-face:

‘Woman let me in!
I turn into the wind.
I blow you a cold kiss,
Stronger than the song's hit’

I will not let you in
I face towards the wind
I change into the Mule…

This section of the song reflects dialogue between the woman and the intruder, with the first part being sung by a male speaker whereas the second part is sung by Bush. After un成功fully changing into a bird in an attempt to escape, the woman here changes into a mule, a creature known for its stubbornness. This stubbornness is reflected in the fact that she “faces towards the wind”, the wind being the intruder: now that she has found she is unable to escape, she has to face her fear. The woman then screams “hee-haw.” Although she is imitating the sound of a mule, it sounds strikingly like a woman facing great danger, and so besides voicing the sounds of female sexual pleasure in other songs, Bush is here voicing the

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid, 137.
88 Ibid.
sounds of distress caused by rape. Although this makes the screaming sound vulnerable, it is at the same time an act of defiance, as the woman is screaming her intruder in the face to scare him off. The mule imagery also shows resistance, for mules are infertile animals and so changing into one suggests a sense of closing off her sexuality. Whereas “Feel It” and “L’Amour” show the pleasure of having agency over one’s own sexuality, “Get Out” depicts the distress that comes with not being in control over one’s own body. However, even though Bush is not voicing female sexual pleasure in this song, she is showing the power of using the voice as an instrument in order to reclaim a woman’s body.

“Get Out Of My House” depicts a dark side of sexuality, with the woman in the song being a victim of a man’s desire. By tackling taboo topics in other songs, Bush also touches on darker aspects of female sexual desire. Judith Butler has emphasized that taboos are a tool to regulate social norms, as she argues that “cultures are governed by conventions that not only regulate and guarantee the production, exchange, and consumption of material goods, but also reproduce the bonds of kinship itself, which require taboos and a punitive regulation of reproduction to effect that end.”

Bush’s body of work contains songs that demonstrate this interrelation between deviant sexual desire and social norms. A poignant example is “The Infant Kiss” from Never For Ever (1980), which depicts the inner conflict of a woman who finds herself attracted to a young boy. “What is this? An infant kiss / That sends my body tingling” expresses the woman’s bewilderment at her own sudden physical reaction to the boy. Although this can be seen as another instance of Bush writing the female sexual body, the disturbing context makes it quite different from previous instances: female sexuality is not celebrated this time, but rather depicted as a cause for anxiety. This anxiety is induced by the fact that the woman is well aware of the fact that her paedophilic urges are indecent and would be condemned by society, as she says “Just a kid and just at school / Back home they'd call me dirty.”

She is torn between turning away and giving in to her desires.

You know how to work me
All my barriers are going
It's starting to show
Let’s go, let’s go,

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90 Kate Bush, “The Infant Kiss”, How To Be Invisible, 77.
91 Ibid.
Let go
I cannot sit and let
Something happen I'll regret
Ooh, he scares me

The woman talks of “barriers”, acknowledging that giving in to her desire would be an unacceptable act of sexual transgression. At the same time, the attraction she feels towards the boy is out of her control, and this is what scares her. She cannot escape her own thoughts, but she must overcome them before she does something she will regret. Bush creates suspense as she captures this moment of inner struggle without offering a resolution: at the end of the song, it remains unclear whether the woman has been able to take control over her desire or indeed crossed her barriers.

Bush depicts the repercussions of transgressing the boundaries of sexual taboos in another song: “The Kick Inside” from The Kick Inside (1978). The lyrics consist of a pregnant woman’s suicide note, addressing the father of her child. As she says “Your sister I was born” it becomes clear that the father is also her brother. The woman in the song shows obvious affection towards her brother, suggesting that their relationship was consummated through her own desire. However, this sexual transgression is the reason she must commit suicide, as is suggested in the lines “This kicking here inside / makes me leave you behind” – the “kicking inside” referring to the baby in her stomach. Although the pregnancy is a result of a voluntary sexual act, the woman knows this incestuous relationship would be condemned by society, and as her body is carrying the evidence of their conduct she must make it disappear.

Bush took inspiration for this story from the traditional folk ballad “Lizie Wan,” which is also about a woman impregnated by her brother. In the ballad, Lizie Wan is murdered by her brother once he finds out she has revealed their relationship to others, while the woman in “The Kick Inside” notably takes her own life. Although the woman must pay the price for her conduct in both versions of the story, Bush has given her a sense of agency over her life that was not apparent in the original ballad.

By addressing these sexual taboos, Bush is in no way justifying or celebrating these
aspects of female sexuality, in contrast to her songs describing female sexual pleasure. Both “The Kick Inside” and “The Infant Kiss” depict the anxiety of sexual transgression, reinstating the narrative that those who give in to taboo desires will be punished. The narratives in these songs thus demonstrate the way society is governed by social norms, as Butler suggested. At the same time, Bush is once again reclaiming female sexuality through writing, even though the songs do not depict this sexuality in a positive light. Such narratives emphasize the fact that female sexuality does not only exist, but that it is also as complex and diverse as male sexuality.

As this chapter has shown, Kate Bush constructs narratives to reflect all aspects of sexual experiences by women in her work. She writes the female body in accordance with écriture féminine by reclaiming the voices of female literary characters, but also by writing her own accounts of sexual experiences and female desire. It could be argued that Bush’s explicit descriptions of sexual desire are a normatively male act, and thus in writing the female body, she is simultaneously subversively breaking out of her position as a woman and taking on a male perspective. The next chapter will consist of a more in-depth analysis of the way Bush inhabits and performs different genders.
3. He’s a Woman at Heart: Kate Bush and Gender Performativity

We know all our lines so well, uh-huh
We’ve said them so many times
Time and time again
Line and line again

This quote from Kate Bush’s song “Wow” aptly illustrates the way Judith Butler claims gender is constructed: through a stylized repetition of acts, similar to a theatrical performance. While the previous chapter explored the way Bush reflects female experiences, this chapter will show how she transcends her position as a woman by writing and performing as characters of the opposite gender. Both lyrics and visual performances will be analysed through the lens of gender performativity, in order to define in what way Bush is challenging hegemonic heterosexuality.

First and foremost, it should be noted that Bush’s tendency to write from a male point of view does not necessarily always result in a subversive performance. When talking about “In the Warm Room” from Lionheart (1978), for example, Bush stated “[the song] is written for men because there are so many songs for women about wonderful men that come up and chat you up when you’re in the disco and I thought it would be nice to write a song for men about this amazing female.” While this song is thus consciously written for a male perspective, it does not comply to Butler’s criteria for a subversive drag performance as it does not challenge the heterosexual hegemony’s claim on naturalness. The lyrics of “In the Warm Room” describe a sexual encounter with a woman, written in the second person so male listeners can easily insert themselves into the fantasy scenario:

In the warm room
Her perfume reaches you
Eventually, you'll fall for her

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Down you'll go
To where the mellow wallows

The woman’s body is sexualized, with descriptions of “red lips” and “thighs are soft as marshmallows”. In contrast to songs where Bush employs écriture féminine, the woman’s sexuality is now not defined by herself, but through the eyes of a man. Bush is thus taking on what Laura Mulvey has described as the “male gaze”, where a woman is depicted as an object of heterosexual male desire. Rather than challenging heterosexual norms, Bush is reinstating them in this song.

Other songs nevertheless draw attention to the gender binary in a more subversive way. In “Running Up That Hill” from Hounds of Love (1985), Bush describes a desire to make a deal with God in order to “swap places” with her partner. In his introduction to How To Be Invisible, David Mitchell connects the lyrics of the song to sex, claiming that God “allows a woman and her male lover to swap places during sex and ‘exchange the experience’.” Lines such as “It doesn't hurt me / Do you want to feel how it feels” do not seem to refer merely to a physical exchange, however, but rather a desire to be able to walk in the other’s shoes in order to understand them on an emotional level. In a way, the lyrics thus seem to imply that men and women are fundamentally different, as they are unable to fully understand each other. This would mean that the song is making a claim against Butler’s argument that there is no such thing as a female or male essence. The accompanying music video poses a different reading, however, as it very much draws attention to the performative aspect of gender.

The video mainly consists of an interpretive dance choreography performed by Bush and a male dancer. Bush and her partner are wearing the exact same clothes: a tight purple top with wide trousers resembling a skirt, creating a sense of gender neutrality. This neutrality is also reflected in the dominant presence of the colour purple throughout the video, as purple is a mix of pink and blue, the two colours heavily associated with the binary genders. The choreography features many synchronized movements (see fig. 1), and as Bush and the dancer twist and turn around each other it is sometimes unclear which body is in focus. By blurring

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101 Kate Bush, “In the Warm Room”, Lionheart (2018 Remaster).
102 Ibid.
104 David Mitchell, introduction to How To Be Invisible by Kate Bush (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), xviii.
105 Kate Bush, “Running Up That Hill”, How To Be Invisible, 43.
the lines between male and female bodies, this video emphasizes the fact that the man and woman are essentially the same, rather than suggesting that there is a fundamental difference. What is especially striking in the light of Butler’s theory is the way Bush illustrates the “swapping places” between the man and woman towards the end of the video. The dancing is intercepted by shots of a group of people walking towards the camera with masks on. These masks depict the face of the male dancer, as can be seen in figure 2. Later scenes show a similar shot of the same people walking, but this time wearing masks with Bush’s face on them. The group of people is wearing the same neutral outfits worn by Bush and the dancer. Inhabiting the opposite gender is thus portrayed as putting on a mask, suggesting that gender is indeed nothing more than putting on a performance. Bush's desire to “exchange the experience” thus does not refer to the experience of a gendered essence, but rather to the experience of living within a structure of gender norms. In “Running Up That Hill”, Bush is exposing the heterosexual hegemony and breaking out of her female role by literally putting on a male mask.

Another prominent example of the way Bush plays with gender performativity in visual performances is “Army Dreamers” from Never For Ever (1980). The lyrics of this song are written from the point of view of a soldier's mother. After her son has passed away in battle, the woman is mourning his loss and reflecting on the pointlessness of military casualties. Bush performs the role of the mother in a live appearance on German television show Rock Pop in 1980. In this performance, the mother is depicted as a stereotypical housewife: she is wearing pink rubber gloves, a long floral dress, an apron, and a scarf in her hair, and is carrying a mop (see fig. 3). Bush is performing alongside three men in military uniform. There is a stark contrast between the mother and the soldiers both in clothing and in behaviour: the soldiers are moving statically as they follow orders, their faces devoid of expression, while the mother is skipping around and showing facial expressions full of emotion. Bush is portraying this woman
in such a stereotypical and theatrical way that it can be seen as a parody of traditional gender roles. By taking the stereotypically feminine image of a housewife and putting it next to the stereotypically masculine image of the soldiers, this performance is highlighting the stark contrast between society’s expectations of gender performance. These expectations are also apparent in the lyrics of the chorus:

‘What could he do?
Should have been a rock star’
But he didn't have the money for a guitar
‘What could he do?
Should have been a politician’
But he never had a proper education
‘What could he do?
Should have been a father’
But he never even made it to his twenties
What a waste
Army Dreamers¹⁰⁶

These lines reflect society’s ideas of what a man should be, but out of all the roles a man could potentially fulfil, becoming a soldier was the son’s only option. There is a sense of irony in the mother lamenting her son’s inevitable fate while she, too, seems unhappily trapped in her gender role.

The official music video shows a different take on this, however, as it depicts Bush breaking out of that traditional female role. Here she appears dressed in a military uniform,

¹⁰⁶ Kate Bush, “Army Dreamers,” How To Be Invisible, 57.
presenting a striking deviance from the highly feminine outfits she was known for wearing in her earlier videos, such as the fitted dress in “Hammer Horror” or the glittery catsuit in “The Man With The Child In His Eyes,” which led her to be heavily sexualized by the media. Although she strays away from that image in “Army Dreamers”, part of her feminine appearance is retained as she is wearing heavy makeup, although the blush has been replaced by sweeps of dirt. She is still playing the role of the mother in this video, but this time in a way that blurs binary gender roles. The video commences with a shot focussing closely on Bush's face and then slowly zooming out, revealing a wider frame. As the camera zooms out, it becomes clear that Bush has a child on her lap, while she is carrying a rifle in her left hand (see fig. 4). Presenting what resembles a twisted image of Madonna and child, this shot shows the duality of the role Bush is performing here, as she is simultaneously portraying the typically female role of mother and typically male role of soldier. While the Rock Pop performance showed a great contrast between her and the soldiers, here she blends in with them both in looks and behaviour as she fights alongside them. This is striking because female soldiers were not actually allowed to serve in ground close combat roles in the British armed forces until 2018.107 Bush is thus performing a role that she, as a woman, would not legally be allowed to take on in 1980. In “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics”, Butler describes a situation where people challenged hegemonic structures by “asserting a right they did not have in order to make the case, publicly, that they should have that very right.”108 In performing the role of a close combat soldier, Bush is doing the same thing: she is publicly drawing attention to hegemonic gender inequality. She is thus not only challenging societal gender norms, but also the oppressive laws facilitated by these norms.

Bush explores the military theme further on her next album The Dreaming (1982), in “Pull Out the Pin.” While the video of “Army Dreamers” already depicts Bush as a soldier, the lyrics reflect the very female experience of a mother. In the lyrics of “Pull Out the Pin”, on the other hand, Bush inhabits the character of a Vietcong soldier. The lyrics portray a vivid narration of the soldier’s experience as he is stalking an American opponent in order to ambush him: “I'll track him 'til he drops / Then I'll pop him one he won't see.”109 In tackling such

109 Kate Bush, “Pulling Out the Pin”, How To Be Invisible, 60.
narratives, Bush is showing that rather than restricting herself to reflecting the experiences of women, she is able to perform characters of the opposite gender just as well.

This is even more apparent on “Cloudbusting” from *Hounds of Love* (1985). The lyrics of this song were inspired by the autobiography *A Book Of Dreams* (1973) by Peter Reich. Reich wrote an account of his childhood as the son of Wilhelm Reich, the controversial Austrian psychoanalyst, who Peter describes as “the father of body therapy and the sexual revolution.”

Wilhelm Reich strongly believed that orgasms could cure mental health and societal ills, as it generates so-called “orgone energy”. This led to the invention of the cloudbuster, a device which supposedly used this “orgone energy” to change the weather. Wilhelm Reich was eventually arrested for making fraudulent claims and sentenced to two years in prison, where he died. Bush adapted the story of Peter Reich’s book into “Cloudbusting”, with the lyrics being written from the point of view of Peter as a young boy. The line “your son's coming out” emphasizes the fact that the lyrics are sung from a male character’s point of view, so Bush is clearly performing as a character of the opposite gender as she did in “Pull Out the Pin.” The lyrics of “Cloudbusting” describe the aftermath of Wilhelm Reich’s arrest, with the main focus being on his son’s feelings of nostalgia as he mourns and celebrates his father. The music video, which takes on the format of a short film, first depicts the father and son sharing happy moments as they operate the cloudbuster together, and then shows Reich being taken away from his son as he is arrested.

Bush not only represents the voice of the boy in the lyrics, but also takes on his role in the music video, where she takes on a male appearance by crossdressing. In order to play Peter, she wore overalls, a short wig and seemingly no makeup (see figure 5). She also inhabits his character in her behaviour, as she is seen running around and rolling off hills in a childlike manner. Butler asserted that by imitating hegemonic gender roles, drag performances can challenge heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness. In this video, Bush is imitating male norms, as she dresses and acts in a way that society typically associated with boys. This shows that gender is a matter of performance, constructed through a repetition of seemingly arbitrary

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112 Kate Bush, “Cloudbusting”, *How To Be Invisible*, 20.

acts. “Cloudbusting” can thus be seen as a subversive drag performance in accordance with Butler’s theory, as it “reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced.”

Another subversive layer is added to the song by the line “your son's coming out”, suggesting that the son is homosexual. This seems rather fitting to the general philosophy of Wilhelm Reich, and especially his belief in the power of sexual liberation – Reich himself actually strived for the decriminalization of homosexuality as part of “the European sex-reform movement.” It can be argued that by portraying a male character who falls outside of the heterosexual hegemony, Bush is challenging heterosexual norms, especially in light of Reich’s endeavour for sexual freedom.

The theme of homosexuality is explored in more detail on “Kashka from Baghdad”, a song from Lionheart (1978). The song opens with the following lines:

Kashka from Baghdad
Lives in sin, they say
With another man
But no-one knows who

Here it is established that Kashka is in a homosexual relationship with a man, while immediately focusing on society’s response to this non-normative partnership: they seem to be talked about quite often, and in a negative sense, as they are living “in sin”. The lyrics are told

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117 Kate Bush, Kashka from Baghdad, How To Be Invisible, 32.
from the point of view of someone living in the neighbourhood, who bases their knowledge of the couple on rumours and her own observations as they “watch their shadows”. Kashka and his partner retain an air of mystery throughout the song. On the one hand, the couple seems to be scrutinized by society as they are the proverbial talk of the town, but at the same time nobody really knows them. Kashka is very much portrayed as “Other”, as he is explicitly referred to as “Kashka from Baghdad [emphasis added].” His partner remains even more of a mystery, as no one knows who he is. The couple’s life seems rather isolated, as “old friends never call there” and they only leave the house at night. Butler stated that “culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism,” and Kashka and his partner indeed seem to be heavily marginalized. The twist, however, is that they are at the same time portrayed as an ideal, happy couple:

At night
They’re seen
Laughing
Loving
They know
The way
To be
Happy

The narrator is not merely fascinated by the couple from a distance but expresses a desire to be part of their experience, as he or she says “I long to be with them” and “Let me in on your love.” Although the song depicts society’s negative reaction to the couple, it essentially paints a very positive picture of the relationship itself. As the narrator wants to be part of their love, their relationship is even portrayed as a standard to live up to. While Bush is not necessarily performing another gender in this song, she is representing a non-normative relationship in a way that is challenging heterosexual norms.

As this chapter has shown, Bush not only utilizes the storytelling quality of her lyrics to represent typically female experiences, but also to break out of her position as a woman. This is accomplished by inhabiting male characters in such a way that she exposes the arbitrary

118 Bush, “Kashka from Baghdad,” 32.
120 Bush, “Kashka from Baghdad,” 33.
121 Ibid.
nature of heterosexual norms. However, some songs where she is not necessarily performing as a man, such as “Army Dreamers” and “Running Up That Hill,” can also be considered subversive performances, as the former draws attention to gender stereotypes, whereas the latter brings to light the performativity of gender. Furthermore, Bush challenges heterosexual norms by representing non-normative characters and relationships in a positive light.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to establish how Kate Bush transcends the boundaries of binary gender and challenges social sexual norms in her lyrics, while also taking into account the accompanying music and visual performances. The corpus selected for this case study ended up consisting solely of material from the first half of her career, drawing from the debut album *The Kick Inside* (1978) up until *The Red Shoes* (1993), as this era seems to have generated the most prominent examples of the way Bush tackles gender and sexuality in her work. A close analysis of these songs has shown that Bush seems to both utilize and transcend her experiences as a woman in her songwriting, by writing some songs from a female perspective and performing a male role on others. In both cases, it appears that the narrative quality of her songs is key, as it is this storytelling aspect that enables her to inhabit and portray various different characters and thus represent a wide range of perspectives.

Chapter two established that Bush writes the female body in accordance with Hélène Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine*. Three different methods of reclaiming female sexuality can be distinguished in her lyrics. The first is rewriting well-known literary works: by inhabiting female characters from texts such as Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Red Shoes” and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Bush is able to rewrite their narratives and give them a voice, which is then projected to her listeners. She is thus reconstructing the phallocentric discourse and turning these stories into anthems of female empowerment. Another way Bush reclaims female sexuality is by writing explicit accounts of female sexual desire and the female sexual body, as was shown through an analysis of “Feel It” and “L’Amour Looks Something Like You”, two songs which very particularly describe the female character’s “lust”. Bush also depicts darker, more taboo sides of both male and female sexuality, as this chapter has shown: “Get Out Of My House” portrays a woman falling victim to rape, whereas the women in “The Kick Inside” and “The Infant Kiss” are victims of their own deviant sexual desire.

In the twenty-first century, the expression of female sexual desire might not appear as striking, since overt expression of sexuality seems to have become a staple in performances by female popular artists such as Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé today. As the review by Peter Reilly in this chapter showed, however, Bush was taking on a role that was quite extraordinary for a woman in the late seventies – a time where the world was still coming to terms with the aftermath of the second sexual revolution and second wave feminism was still in full force. In fact, contrary to female artists today, Bush very strongly rejected the label of “feminist” at this time in her career as, according to her, it was associated with “extremist persons” and “radical
behaviour.”

But despite her aversion to the label, Bush’s way of writing the female body provides an apt example of subversive feminism which paved the way for female artists to follow.

Chapter three explored the way Bush transcends her position as a woman by representing and inhabiting characters of the opposite gender. These performances were analysed in light of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity in order to establish to what extent they could be considered subversive. On the one hand, this chapter showed that Bush does indeed challenge heterosexual norms by performing in “full drag” as a male character, both in her lyrics (as in “Pull Out the Pin”) and in visual performances, most prominently the “Cloudbusting” video. On the other hand, it emphasized that inhabiting male characters is not Bush’s only way of drawing attention to the performative quality of gender. In the video for “Running Up That Hill” she portrayed gender performativity by suggesting that man and woman are essentially the same and gender is merely a mask we put on. In “Army Dreamers” she highlighted the stark contrast between male and female gender roles and then blurred this line by performing as both a mother and a soldier, thus simultaneously taking on a stereotypically male and female role. And as can be seen in “Kashka from Baghdad”, Bush also challenges heterosexual norms by representing characters of non-normative sexualities.

As Bush has often emphasized that she aimed to take on a male perspective in her work and even distanced herself from what she considered to be a female form of writing in the early years of her career, one would expect the chapter on gender performativity to have been far more extensive than the one on her writing women. This did not prove to be the case, however, for although she certainly does take on a male perspective on a number of songs, it is most striking how well her songs reflect all aspects of the female experience, most notably female sexuality. Her publicly placing emphasis on the male aspect of her music can perhaps be perceived as a tactic to associate her own work with that of male artists, in an attempt to escape preconceptions and be taken seriously in the still very male-dominated world of popular music at the time.

Although some musical and visual elements of Bush’s work were covered, a more extensive musicological analysis was beyond the scope of this thesis. Further research may explore the way Bush incorporates “male” composing into her music, looking for instance at the way she has taken inspiration from the male-oriented genre of progressive rock. At the

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same time, there is more to be said about the way she reflects femininity within her music, and in particular in her vocal style – especially when it comes to the strikingly high vocals she was known for using on her first few albums. In terms of lyrics, this thesis has shown how Bush writes the female body by representing female sexual desire, but further research could be done on the way other aspects of the female body are reflected in her work, such as the pregnant body in “Room For The Life” and “This Woman’s Work” and references to menstruation in “Strange Phenomena.” If anything, this thesis has shown that Bush’s multi-faceted body of work serves as an excellent starting point for an evaluation of representations of gender and femininity in popular music, a topic which could be extended by conducting a comparative analysis on contemporary female artists.
Bibliography


Discography


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