

PJ Harvey's "Man-Size Sextet" and the Inaccessible, Inescapable Gender

JUDITH A. PERAINO

*"Music... is intuition, a path to knowledge.
A Path? No—a battlefield"*

—Jacques Attali, *Noise*¹

THROUGH FIVE SUCCESSIVE SONGS guitars wail and twang; drums wrestle with irregular meters, polyrhythms, and missed beats; and the thin, flexible alto of PJ Harvey soars above the din. Then, suddenly, a string ensemble backs Harvey's coarse *Sprechstimme* with an atonal musical accompaniment. "Man-Size Sextet," however numerically appropriate as the sixth cut of the album, stands in stark relief from the surrounding

rock-trio soundscape. Why did PJ Harvey include a composition for a string sextet in the middle of her hard-rocking, lyrically caustic album *Rid of Me*? "Man-Size Sextet" is an arrangement by drummer Robert Ellis of PJ Harvey's popular rock single "Man-Size." Both songs appear on her second album *Rid of Me*, which won critical acclaim at the time of its release in 1992.² The title "Man-Size," regardless of the musical idiom, implies a critical stance toward masculinity with its implications of "man" as a standard of measurement. On the surface, "Man-Size Sextet" adds to this critical stance a spoof of classical or, rather, "elite"

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1. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.

2. Island Records, 314 514 696.

twentieth-century chamber music,³ 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.⁴

"Man-Size Sextet," however, presents more than a simple spoof, and in light of PJ Harvey's skyrocketing popularity in 1995, such forthright musical statements about gender and music deserve scrutiny. If, as Jacques Attali proposes, "music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world[,] a tool of understanding,"⁵ then what might the listener understand from this intrusion of elite music, or from the tête-à-tête set up by the two versions of "Man-Size"? An examination of the larger context of PJ Harvey's music and her carefully controlled self-presentation reveals an ongoing discourse about inaccessibility and gender within which the sextet has "man-size" significance.

The Inescapable Gender

"It should go without saying," writes Robert Christgau in *Spin*, "that women as strong as Polly Jean Harvey serve as role models whether they like it or not....Harvey understands that because she's a woman, people will always hear gender in her voice...."⁶ This matter-of-fact statement bears witness to the fact that women in Western culture signify gender—that is, women are "gender-positive" and men are "gender-neutral." The title of the present journal, *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, also bears witness to this

entrenched equation. Here the principal title and the subtitle set up a correspondence between the terms "woman" and "gender," just as the term "music" corresponds to "culture." Thus a journal devoted specifically to women in music necessarily provokes a discussion about gender and culture. Man functions as the normative, genderless background in Western culture—the primary, universal sentient being.

For PJ Harvey, as for every woman in Western culture, the issue of gender is inescapable. In her ground-breaking book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explores this cultural existential crisis of women. For de Beauvoir, woman is historically "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."⁷ Thus woman not only carries the burden of defining gender, but also conveys the cognizance of (hetero)sexuality—that is, woman qua woman leads to the recognition of two genders and their (presumed) sexual attraction. Every woman is a living memo of difference and sex—an epistemology and ontology of gender.

As the Christgau quote illustrates, the tradition of rock criticism that surrounds PJ Harvey has forefronted the issue of gender from the very beginning of her career. Martin Aston writes:

[A]s the debut album, *Dry*, shows, feminine introspection and vulnerability are taken close to the

3. I will use the term "elite" throughout this paper to distinguish a musical idiom that has clear roots in the tradition of Western European art music from popular or vernacular musical genres. Although the terms "classical," "art," and "serious" are more commonly used in generic juxtaposition with "popular" or "vernacular," the history and profusion of rock and jazz styles have complicated their use. "Art rock" and "classic rock" are widely recognized subgenres of popular music, and certainly the longevity and complexity of both jazz and rock attest to the "seriousness" of these genres.

Nevertheless, most people recognize a definite division of music into two fundamental categories. The distinction to be made is the implication of a rarified community of composers, musicians, and audience members who appreciate a musical idiom that has a long history of support by elite institutions such as opera companies, orchestras, conservatories, and universities, as opposed to a musical idiom that developed through "grass-roots" and commercial institutions such as small clubs, dancehalls, and radio.

4. Most of the so-called "progressive rock" or "art rock" groups flourished in the 1970s. Elvis Costello, however, recorded an album with the Brodsky Quartet at the same time that PJ Harvey was recording *Rid of Me*. Both albums were released in 1992, and it is quite possible that the publicity of Costello's project could have informed the conception of "Man-Sized Sextet." Another possible influence might stem from the Kronos Quartet, a string ensemble specializing in performing twentieth-century compositions and performing arrangements of rock songs by Hendrix and others as a part of their concerts.

5. Attali, *Noise*, 4.

6. Robert Christgau, "The Ballad of Polly Jean Harvey," *Spin* 11 (May 1995): 54.

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989; reprint of 1952 ed.), xxii.

bone....[C]ontradictions between head and heart are rarely expressed so tangibly, and no one else—certainly no one male—is mapping this terrain, this way, with this fever.⁸

Another has written that “Harvey’s perspective translates consistently into metaphors and symbols that are uniquely female...she never lets you forget she’s a woman.”⁹

Her second album, *Rid of Me*, added an element of fury to the candid introspection of *Dry*, garnering feminist-essentialist-tinged praises from women critics. Ann Powers, for example, writes that, “Harvey calls forth the mythic power of women using eroticism to move beyond biological constraints.”¹⁰ Thus both male and female critics latch onto gender as the primary—indeed, the defining—indicator for categorizing and comprehending PJ Harvey and her music as cultural phenomena. According to theories of social construction Harvey and her music are already gendered, with no possibility of escaping the preordained system of gender codes that permeate patriarchal society. The critical assurance of inescapable (female) gender, however, brings with it a paradoxical loophole of mystery, for women are at once thoroughly comprehensible as gender, and at the same time, incomprehensible as the unknowable Other.

The Art of Inaccessibility

What does PJ Harvey say? In a word, nothing. Many rock journalists have lamented Harvey’s tightly-closed lips when asked to explain her songs, their inspiration, or her feelings about feminism and gender roles. This inaccessibility has met with mixed reception from the media. In *Record Collector*, Mark Paytress remarks,

Her unwillingness to ally herself to feminism, for example, aroused the anger of many who’d been

favourably disposed towards her as an assertive and unquestionably frank role-model. This is part of a wider reticence that comes dangerously close to “my art says it all” mystification, a faintly precious standpoint that nevertheless does her no harm in public image stakes. She’s *enigmatic*, you see.¹¹

For Paytress, Harvey’s silence translates into a type of utterance—a passive-aggressive manipulation—that provides common ground for feminists and male critics like himself. Even in today’s rock climate of disaffection, irony, and seemingly random mixtures of styles, Harvey’s resolve to disassociate her personal politics, experiences, and emotions from her songs stands out, provoking inquisitive disbelief from interviewers. On the one hand, her identity as an inaccessible enigma follows from her strongly gendered identity within rock; on the other hand, this inaccessibility seems to run counter to the critic’s expectations for a candid feminist explanation. PJ Harvey’s songs are not particularly cryptic, however, in light of over twenty years of critical feminist thinking, and predecessors such as Janis Joplin, Patti Smith, and Chrissie Hynde. Nor is the “my art says it all” mystification by any means a particularly new stance for a composer, whether popular or elite, male or female. For a woman composer, however, such mystification only adds to the “mythification” of the feminine—the unknowable Other.¹² Three male critics, Robert Christgau, Martin Aston, and Mark Paytress, best articulate the provocative disjunction between Harvey’s mystifying speech acts and the transparency of her song lyrics. Christgau writes:

She claims that in the act of creation she’s often not even aware of what sex she is. This stubborn denial drives feminists nuts, [and] they’re sane to feel that way. You don’t have to be a riot grrrl to argue that if

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8. Martin Aston, “Kicking Against the Pricks,” *Spin* 8 (November 1992): 87.

9. Gene Santoro, “50 Foot Queenie,” *The Nation* 256, no. 20 (May 1993): 716.

10. Ann Powers, “Houses of the Holy,” *Village Voice* 38, no. 22 (June 1993): 63.

11. Mark Paytress, “A Secret History of PJ Harvey,” *Record Collector* 188 (April 1995): 32.

12. For a discussion of the patriarchal myth of feminine mystery see de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 256–60.

"Man-Size" ("let it all, let it all hang out") and "50-Ft Queenie" ("Bend over Casanova") aren't calculated genderfucks, nothing is.¹³

Aston similarly comments:

[B]y claiming "artistic immunity," Harvey has been called irresponsible, declining to be drawn by the term "feminism," although "I've come up man-sized, Got my leather boots on," from the unrecorded "Man-Size," can be construed as pointed feminist commentary.¹⁴

And, Paytress remarks:

Body politics is written all over her songs, her sleeves and her carefully-sanctioned self-image (assisted by photographer friend Maria Mochnac).... She nevertheless manages to confound feminists and sexists alike, even more so by her unwillingness to be drawn into a debate.¹⁵

These quotes are ripe with contradictions and telling metaphors that broadcast the central paradox of PJ Harvey. Her art and her very self appear thoroughly inscribed—"written all over" as Paytress puts it—with body politics, and thus prepackaged by gender which obscures if not obliterates any other interpretations. Yet Harvey refuses access to that interpretation; she refuses to be "drawn" by anyone but herself, and in this way she perfectly fills the role of the unknowable Other. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press describe this tension as the essentially erotic component of Harvey's music:

Polly Harvey has perfected a kind of self-exposure in lyrics and self-presentation that uniquely combines seduction and threat, intimacy and estrangement.... There's an echo here of Lydia Lunch-style eroticiza-

tion of disgust, of embarrassment and the blush as a kind of rapture.¹⁶

The eroticization of disgust put forth by her songs goes hand in glove with an eroticization of frustration that informs her self-presentation. Indeed, in her collaboration with photographer Moria Mochnac, PJ Harvey promotes an erotic allure of inscrutability. The cover of *Rid of Me* features Harvey, naked and wet from the shoulders up, captured in the midst of swinging her long waterlogged hair over her head. Her hair creates a wild and ominous aura surrounding her slightly cocked head, evoking a vision of Medusa. Her expression shows no emotion or strain. In fact, the sweep of her hair appears to have no apparent connection to the position of her head and body—a disembodied physical action. High-contrast black-and-white film highlights her dark eyes, bushy eyebrows, and the shadows cast by her large-ish nose and lips, thus exaggerating the connection of these sexually potent facial attributes to the whirling black mass of hair that threatens to decapitate her. The photograph is drained of sexuality despite the abundance of erotic sign posts. On the back cover appears a close-up of Harvey's serene face, but here with eyes closed, again shot in high-contrast film so as to emphasize and exaggerate her facial features: dark eyelids, prominent nose and lips. Wisps of hair blowing across her face suggest a disturbed calm; she appears at once vulnerable and impervious to the viewer. This paradoxical presentation of gendered inscription and erotic inaccessibility forces the audience to relocate their expectations of authenticity from the language of rational speech and visual glosses to the irrational language of music. Thus Harvey effectively provokes and then deflects body politics, and, as I will argue, relegates this body politics to the body of

13. Christgau, "The Ballad of Polly Jean Harvey," 54.

14. Aston, "Kicking Against the Pricks," 88.

15. Paytress, "A Secret History of PJ Harvey," 35.

16. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 337-38.

the listener, and to the sonic translation of inaccessibility that permeates her music.

The Body in *Dis-Dress*

"If some female artists dream of escaping the cage of the body," Reynolds and Press write, "others stage a kind of prison riot, a carnal insurrection."¹⁷ Notwithstanding Harvey's barricade against the media, the words of her songs seem altogether comprehensible. It is the music accompanying those words that consistently frustrates the body with sonic complexities. Nearly every song presents a "battlefield" (to quote Attali) of melodic and rhythmic distortion that effectively prevents a comfortable physical engagement for the listener. Reynolds and Press observe that "the body is almost invariably a source of discomfort and conflict in her songs."¹⁸ Although here Reynolds and Press refer to the body as a theme in Harvey's lyrics, Harvey's music reifies this theme of bodily distress, presenting discomfort and conflict for the listener's body. Her music is not "body friendly": you cannot tap your foot to her songs without eventually becoming confused and lost in the seamless shuffling of beats and meters, vocal anticipations and delays, and sudden shifts in timbre and volume.

The British-born Harvey gained notoriety in early 1991 with her first single, "Dress"—a song that features what would become the sonic and lyrical trademarks of her first two albums: heavily syncopated or polyrhythmic drumming, harsh electric guitar riffs, and raw, mordant lyrics. "Dress" perfectly represents the paradox of inscription and inaccessibility. The verse presents a polyrhythmic complex consisting of a triple meter played against a quadruple meter. The quadruple meter is pounded out in the bass drum while the triple meter is articulated by the snare drum and, most conspicuously by a violin, which saws away on the F-sharp minor tonic. This lengthy rhythmic cacophony alternates with the clean rock beat of a

short refrain ("if you put it on" repeated four times). In contrast to the rich, inviting rhythmic complexity of "world beat" music, which integrates African and Afro-Caribbean drumming with rock ballads, the rhythmic complexities of PJ Harvey's music stems from distinctly African American grass-roots traditions of blues performers such as Howlin' Wolf and blues-based rock bands such as Led Zeppelin—traditions that feature highly formulaic melodies with moments of shifting beats and tenuous correlation among the members of a small ensemble. The play of fulfilled and frustrated expectations in these traditions is a chief part of their appeal. In "Dress," however, Harvey uses the violin as a wedge between the music and the listener—here, a repellent timbre exploiting the scratchy and boxy excess noise that occurs when the bow is pressed too firmly to the strings. Thus Harvey transforms a stereotypically warm and sensual instrument into an instrument of repulsion.

Over the cacophony of the verse Harvey sings lyrics that tease with sincerity and burlesque:

Put on that dress.
I'm going out dancing,
starting off red,
clean and sparkling, he'll see me.
Music play, make it dreamy for dancing.
There must be a way
that I can dress to please him.
It's hard to walk in a dress, it's not easy.
I'm swinging over like a heavy-loaded fruit tree.
If you put it on...

Throughout the song, the polyrhythmic phases create a tension that conveys the sense of the physical discomfort and emotional anxiety described by the lyrics. The refrain "if you put it on" both invites identity with the lyric subject, who buys into the status quo construction of femininity no matter the discomfort, and at the same time suggests the possibility of rejecting that construction.

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17. *Ibid.*, 337.

18. *Ibid.*, 338.

you pur - dy thang my man says

but I bought you beau - ti - ful dres - ses

Ex. 1. Bridge from "Dress"

Femininity within the patriarchal system of gender codes is a "dress" that, "if you put it on," has particular consequences.¹⁹

Male perspective makes a cameo appearance in the bridge section, where PJ Harvey puts words to a simple two-note guitar solo, and sings these in a high, country twang that matches the pitches and timbre of the guitar (see ex. 1). This apparent non sequitur passage quotes a stereotypic male attempt to appease an angry woman. At the risk of over-interpretation, I will venture to say that this high whining voice ironically represents the voice of the patriarchy and the background norm against which the female lyrical subject stands in stark relief. Here the voice—notably in a higher "feminine" register—both objectifies women ("you purdy thang") and constructs the gender codes ("but I bought you beautiful dresses") that define femininity according to a double bind of purity and sexuality. The horror of this double bind comes to the fore in the final verse of the song.

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.
If you put it on...

Having started out "clean and sparkling" and full of sanctioned erotic potential, the dress and the lyric subject end up "filthy," with the shame of "falling flat"—that is, the failure to attract a man.

The woman's failure to attract in fact exposes her motivation to attract, which is in turn condemned as whorish. The final line of the verse conflates the failed woman with the shameful "fallen woman," or prostitute. The slower three-beat cycles of the violin and snare eventually win over the four-beat cycle, and the song ends with an unpleasant oppressive pounding, as if to illustrate an internalized social condemnation.

"Dress" *fits* feminism paradoxically through a musical and lyrical portrayal of "misfit." The tensions of the polyrhythmic complexes and the deliberately unpleasant swipes of the violin create a strident sonic atmosphere that supports the cognitive dissonance of the feminine double bind expressed in the lyrics. Paraphrasing Jacques Attali, Susan McClary writes, "The relationship between noise and order in a piece or repertory indicates much about how the society that produced this music channeled violence."²⁰ Here the high ratio of noise (disjunctive, incomprehensible, inaccessible sounds) to music (tuneful, harmonious, recognizable sounds) communicates an inescapable social violence predicated on patriarchal constructions of gender.

"No Need to Shout"²¹ (or Not Stating the Obvious)
"Dress" presents a complex and thoughtful, though not particularly mysterious, commentary on the patriarchal system of gender codes. The "body politics" of "Dress" is truly "written all over her... sleeves," to quote Mark Paytress. This equation of

19. See Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolt*, 338–39, for a brief but similar interpretation of the video for "Dress."

20. Susan McClary, "The Politics of Silence and Sound," afterword to Attali, *Noise*, 153.

21. From "Man-Size."

guitar, repeats 4x alone, then with every phrase

alone

I'm com ing up

man - siz - ed skinned a - live I

snare drum

got to get I want to fit

snare and bass drum

with snare and bass drum

man - sized I'm heading on

with snare drum

hand - some got my lea - ther boots on

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Ex. 2. Rhythmic layering in "Man-Size"

clothes and self provides the most powerful and immediate mechanism of gender construction in Western culture. Although individual analyses may vary somewhat in surface details, "Dress" in fact leaves little room for alternative interpretations. The lyrics are satirical in their portrayal of the overly tight dress, yet poignant, capitalizing on the

metaphor of "wearing your heart on your sleeve," especially in the final verse where social failure and self-condemnation collapse into the term "costume." Similarly, the music, like the dress, is at once compelling and repelling, attracting us with its rhythmic and timbral intricacies yet frustrating our physical engagement with the very same devices.

The metaphor "clothes make the man" provides a related guiding metaphor for the two versions of "Man-Size"—one clothed in a grunge-rock trio, the other in a modernist atonal string ensemble. Like "Dress," both versions of "Man-Size" present disjunction between a straightforward "body politics" in the lyrics and a mystifying, inaccessible musical clothing that continually frustrates bodily engagement. The popular/elite pair, however, takes the musical expression of inaccessibility to its logical conclusion, especially given the context of a rock album, and forms a significant musical articulation of the discourse on gender and inaccessibility that runs throughout PJ Harvey's work and self-presentation.

In "Man-Size," PJ Harvey sings from the point of view of a man boasting of his sexual prowess and female trophy. To be "man-sized," however, is not the same thing as being "a man," as complexities in the lyrics and music indicate. PJ Harvey carefully constructs her masculine lyric subject piece by piece, and by fits and starts. The rock version begins with four statements of a metrically irregular guitar pattern that serves as a groove or, perhaps, anti-groove, for as ex. 2 shows the groove consists of a series of parallel fifths played in three bars of $\frac{3}{4}$ followed by a final bar of $\frac{2}{4}$. Such a metric shift works against the very function of the groove—which is to create forward momentum—by pulling the listener up short. However the harmonies outlined in the last two bars outline a cadence that invigorates the forward motion such that the rhythm in the final bar might seem like a sonic backspin. The highly percussive guitar strokes set up a constant series of eighth notes, with every third eighth note sounding an unpitched catch of the guitar string that creates the illusion of a long-short pattern.²² After the guitar introduction, the music comes to a momentary halt as the voice chants the words "I'm coming up," suspended in sonic mid-air, as it were, somewhere between triple, duple, and compound meters. With the words "man-sized," the drums begin to lay down a syn-

copated accent of the first and fourth eighth notes of each bar, as if articulating a $\frac{3}{8}$ meter in contrast to the strong $\frac{3}{4}$ meter of the vocal. The syncopated beats of the drum along with their shifting timbre—from snare to a combination of snare and bass—intensify the musical atmosphere of instability and unpredictability set up by the groove.

Against this, the voice chants relentlessly on the dominant D, puncturing the dense rhythmic texture at irregular intervals and articulating a curious series of disjunct phrases that unfold a story of self-creation couched in terms of dressing.

I'm coming up
man-sized, skinned alive,
I want to fit, I got to get
man-sized, I'm heading on,
handsome, got my leather boots on.

The lyrical subject begins "skinned," and, through a series of willful utterances ("I want to fit, I got to get"), ends up "re-skinned" with leather and appropriately handsome. As the music slowly builds to a noisy climax, the words slowly lead up to a definitive statement of literal gender construction. The already fragile ensemble of voice and instruments completely falls apart, however, at the start of the verbal boasts and the introduction of the female object.

I got my girl and she's a wow
I cast my iron knickers down,
man-sized no need to shout
Can you hear, can you hear me now
I'm man-sized

With the start of this second verse, the rhythmic play among the voice, guitar, and drums becomes heavily syncopated and seemingly afloat from any clear metrical organization. The vocal melody, however, does parse into an eight-bar phrase of $\frac{4}{4}$ —a shift from the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter of the opening (see ex. 3). However, both the guitar and bass drum continue

22. All transcriptions are my own and represent my best efforts to capture in notation the intricate rhythmic environment of PJ Harvey's songs. The notation should be understood as an approximate representation of the music and not a definitive text.

1
 guitar Got my gi-rl and she's a w-ow I cast my i - ron -
 bass drum

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4
 knickers down man - sized no need to shout
 bass drum

7
 can you hear can you hear me now I'm man - sized
 switch to snare drum

Ex. 3. "Man-Size," end of verse 1

their rhythmic patterns from the first verse. The bass drum sounds on every third eighth note, implying a $\frac{6}{8}$ meter, which creates strong rhythmic friction against the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter of the voice. At the halfway point of the verse, the bass drum adjusts itself to the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter momentarily (see of ex. 3, m. 4), only to start the series of syncopated beats anew. To the eighth-note groove of the opening verse the guitar adds low-level syncopated shifts in pitch that punctuate the end of each line of words. The voices and instruments finally become synchronized only at the start of the refrain—a triumphant cry after having navigated choppy waters. As with the dense syncopation of the voice and instruments, the boastful images in this verse seem them-

selves curiously displaced: the objectified girl is likened to a verbal exclamation ("she's a wow"), iron knickers don't suggest easy removal ("I cast my iron knickers down"), and the query of "can you hear me now?" discredits the preceding statement "man-sized, no need to shout."

In contrast to the complex syncopated rhythms that thwart the listener's physical involvement, the constricted harmonic and melodic scope creates a claustrophobic musical atmosphere that communicates entrapment. The music of the second verse heightens the tension of inescapability by enriching the instrumental texture and raising the recitation pitch of the vocal up a fourth to the tonic G. After a brief instrumental bridge, the metrically irregular

My babe looking cool and neat I'm pretty sure good e-nough to eat

I'm man-sized no need to shout let it all let it all hang out I'm

man - si - ze man - si - ze

Ex. 4. "Man-Size," end of verse 2

groove returns but with a new throbbing guitar feedback pitch (sounding a pitch between d' and e'). This pulsing feedback hits the ear with ebbing and flowing waves of sound, creating intermittent sonic friction against the groove and evoking a seasick-like queasiness.

Motion sickness indeed describes the condition of the turbulent yet static atmosphere of the second verse. The words cleverly describe "man-size" as the standard of measurement in the world—in other words, the genderless background and invisible slide rule by which all facets of life are computed.

I'll measure time, I'll measure height,
I'll calculate my birthright.
Good Lord I'm big, I'm heading on.
Man-sized got my leather boots on.

Such omnipotence as described here is the "birth-right" of men, yet the lyric subject here express a degree of surprise: "Good Lord I'm big" the voice exclaims, and then reasserts the presence of the newly formed skin ("got my leather boots on"). Against this constructed masculine background, the insertion of the female object with the verbatim repetition of the boasts again erodes the fragile stability of the groove. This time the boasts are extended an extra three lines, and the musical accompaniment continues to drop beats and elide

measures, leaving the listener completely without a predictable metric index during a barrage of objectifying lyrics.

Got my girl and she's a wow.
I cast my iron knickers down.
Man-sized no need to shout.
Can you hear can you hear me now.
My babe looking cool and neat,
I'm pretty sure good enough to eat.
I'm man-sized no need to shout.
Let it all let it all hang out
I'm man-size

Along with the increase in the intensity of the male boasts, representing, perhaps, an ever tighter grip of masculine gender on the lyric subject, the vocal line occasionally soars to the upper fifth, d' ("good enough to eat"), for a brief but inconsequential escape (see ex. 4). As ex. 4 shows, Harvey sings the final chorus "I'm man-size," on this high d'—an octave above the opening verse. The ascent of the recitatorial pitch over the course of a song about masculine prowess to a final series of high-pitched squealing assertions of "man-size" caps this piece off with neat, facile irony. "Man-Size" does not end at this point, however. The voice falls down from its ironic "height" to a horrifying epilogue of self-immolation sung to a melody that circles around the beginning pitch d' (see ex. 5).

Ex. 5. "Man-Size," epilogue

Silence my lady head.
 Get girl out of my head.
 Douse hair with gasoline.
 Set it light and set it free.

Harvey sings these lines twice to a new blues-inspired melody consisting of straightforward two-bar phrases.²³ The new melody and meter cut across the groove and seemingly ignite the dissolution of the instrumental ensemble—into a din of distortion and “car-crash” sound effects. Harvey then sings a second statement of these four lines a cappella—clear of metric unpredictability and constricted melody. Following the tension of the song these words’ a cappella repetition adds emphasis and determination, as if the lyric subject were waking from a dream. Harvey qua woman emerges from her lyrical transvestism but only to voice the desire to rid the “lady head” of her lyric subject. How do we reconcile the horrifying image of dousing hair with gasoline and setting it afire with the accompanying notion of freedom? The shock value of this image is indeed a wake-up call: gender (that is, feminine gender) is inescapable without a willful act of violence—here specifically, self-immolation so that the unfettered, ungendered soul can rise phoenix-like from the ashes.

The Number SEX

Does PJ Harvey escape her gender in “Man-Size”? According to the critics cited above, the answer to this question seems an unequivocal “no.” By these accounts Harvey’s voice is always heard as gendered. At best, the combination of feminine voice and masculine subject position creates a “calculated genderfuck”: transvestism, perhaps, but no true escape. The music of “Man-Size” supports an interpretation of feigned transformation with its ironic combination of monotony and shiftiness.

If, as the epilogue suggests, self-immolation provides the only means of escape, then “Man-Size Sextet” has PJ Harvey leaping out of the frying pan and into the fire. With the transformation of musical idiom from a popular to an elite genre comes a more convincing transformation of gender. I will venture to guess that to the rock-oriented audience, a “sextet” has less to do with the number six than with the word SEX. “Man-Size Sextet” all too readily reads “Man-Size SEX”—a phrase that, in this context, seems closely related to the term “cock rock” used by feminists in the 70s to criticize boastful all-male rock bands such as the Rolling Stones.²⁴ However, “Man-Size Sextet” presents a modern, highly dissonant composition for string ensemble “landing somewhere

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23. Greg Kot, in his review of *Rid of Me* for *Rolling Stone* 658 (March 1993): 68, connects the gasoline lyric to a Howlin’ Wolf song: “I asked her for water, (she brought me gasoline).” PJ Harvey has related many times in interviews that her two most salient musical influences are Howlin’ Wolf and Captain Beefheart. The Howlin’ Wolf song may have inspired the lyric as well as the basic bare musical framework of free floating vocals over a highly repetitive riff played by the guitar and bass.

24. See, for example, Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1977), 181–82.

between late Beethoven and Bartok" as one critic states,²⁵ in which Harvey renders the lyrics using a hybrid speaking and singing voice (or, to borrow from elite musical terminology, *Sprechstimme*) at times with clenched teeth and labored breath. What does such a composition mean apart from the rarified context of academic institutions and formal concert halls? What might listeners hear in "Man-Size Sextet"? And what might they understand from it?

Most reviewers of the album fail to mention the piece, or pass it off as a novelty. As I previously mentioned, PJ Harvey's drummer, Robert Ellis, composed the string arrangement, and so the "sex" of the sextet is in fact male, and presents a masculine musical response to Harvey's rock 'n' roll construction. Mark Paytress, one of the few reviewers to mention the sextet, constructs a mythic "behind the scenes" or subliminal battle-of-the-sexes narrative in which Harvey first "humiliated" Ellis by having him sing in falsetto the refrain "Lick my legs I'm on fire" for the song "Rid of Me." Paytress comments, "I reckon he had some kind of revenge on 'Man-Size Sextet,' for which he arranged a thoroughly modern string quartet. Instructing Polly to sing with her teeth gritted, his experiment briefly allowed a respite from the uncompromising Albini sound."²⁶

This scenario seems too childish and sensational to take seriously, but Paytress's story suggests a gendered disjunction between voice and accompaniment whereby the listener hears a female voice being subjugated by male music. For Paytress, Harvey still does not escape her gender, and Ellis's inaccessible sextet reads as punishment for an uppity woman. In light of PJ Harvey's insistence on complete control over the content of her albums,²⁷ I believe her decision to collaborate on and include "Man-Size Sextet" reflects a far more sophisticated

contribution to the discourse on gender than a simple tit for tat, as I hope to explain here.

By definition *rock* physically engages the listener in a playing field of gender and sexuality. The pulsing, repetitive drumming patterns and the explicitly relational and sexual lyrics set up an interpretative matrix of gender and eroticism for the listener. In contrast to popular rock music, elite music—especially chamber music—does not play on the same field of expectations. The dialogue set up by the two versions of "Man-Size," however, forces an interpretive connection of gender and genre. In this context, understanding the sextet as Ellis's response to Harvey's explicit (re/de)construction of masculine gender (in the rock version) adds a further dialogic dimension to the discourse of inaccessible and inescapable gender that saturates Harvey's oeuvre.

The arrangement for string sextet initially responds to the musical conditions established in the rock song. Much like the rock version, the sextet offers no rhythmic consistency or vocal melodic contour as a guide for the listener, and the sextet sets up further barriers with its atonal musical language and dense polyphonic string texture. Thus Ellis defamiliarizes the song through a transformation of genre. Harvey, whether at the suggestion of the drummer Ellis or on her own impetus, performs a corresponding transformation of her voice. This transformed, resisting voice (recall that Harvey performs the lyrics mostly through gritted teeth) does not obliterate gender, but defamiliarizes and de-eroticizes gender in such a way as to offer the possibility of "escape" through inaccessibility. In the rock version of "Man-Size" PJ Harvey qua woman always loomed in the background; the sextet, however, presents PJ Harvey as problematized gendered voice in an already problematized "song" given the context of this rock album.

25. Santoro, "50 Foot Queenie," 715.

26. Paytress, "A Secret History of PJ Harvey," 36. The "Albini sound" refers to the influence of producer Steve Albini (best known for producing Nirvana's *In Utero*), whose trademark is a flat, harsh sound quality and high contrasts in volume (either very loud or very soft).

27. See, for example, her remarks concerning the making of *Rid of Me* in *Rolling Stone* 663 (August 1993): 54–55.

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Ex. 6. Opening of "Man-Size," Sextet

What looms large in the sextet is the inaccessibility, pure and not so simple. Example 6 shows a partial transcription of the opening section.²⁸ The hollow parallel fifths of the guitar groove are replaced by gaping minor seventeenths (i.e., compound thirds), and the prior heartbeat throbbing of its rhythm now races in double time. Similarly,

the sextet retains but transforms the metric irregularity of the groove pattern. After only one statement of this anxious groove, the voice enters; soon after, a violin enters playing a sweeping atonal melody in direct contrast to the overly restrained vocal line. The lyric "Got my girl and she's a wow," which instigated metrical irregularities in the rock

28. I have transcribed here only the two lower string parts, the lead violin and the vocal line.

version, here effects a similar change; the groove drops beats and the polyphonic texture coagulates into patches of out-of-tune homophony. Metrical plucks and slaps punctuated by *arco* phrase endings accompany the chorus of the first verse, offering a skeletal response to the power-guitar sound of the rock version.

In the movies, the musical soundtrack behind words and action provides meaningful nuances to the narrative or (especially in the case of thrillers) clues the listener in to an unseen circumstance. Similarly, the sextet moves away from responding to the rock version and instead creates a soundtrack in conjunction with the words of the second verse. A solo high e' stands for the instrumental bridge, after which the music disintegrates into a wash of plucks, *col legno* slaps, and harmonics, ironically leaving the voice in an unmetrical musical void for the lyrics: "I'll measure time, I'll measure height, I'll calculate my birthright." With the start of the macho boasts, a series of frenetic tremolo runs begin in the upper strings above the trudging groove. These anxious runs replace the queasy throbbing guitar feedback and similarly undermine the bravura of the words, creating a sonic atmosphere of fear and powerlessness rather than triumph and self-assurance.

Indeed, the voice remains "controlled" by the precondition of "Man-Size" as is illustrated when the voice, still *Sprechstimme*, jumps up suddenly and unnaturally to the higher octave to enunciate "good enough to eat," in direct imitation of the melodic shift in the rock version (see ex. 4). This momentary feeble wail portends the horror of the final chorus for which the ensemble bursts into a quotation of the screeching strings from the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.²⁹ Whether or not such reference to the film score is intended, I would argue that it is understood; the rhythmic stabbing of the high strings (a portrayal of stabbing in the movie) undeniably conveys disquiet if not panic as the voice gasps "man-size" over and

over. Whereas the rock version eroticizes this final series of assertions with pulsing rhythms, power-guitar chords, and full-voice singing, the sextet turns this moment into a clear expression of horror, complete with a hard-to-miss reference to a well-known scene of murder.

After what can be construed as the murder of the lyric subject, the epilogue sounds almost like a eulogy—clearly sung (not spoken) to an instrumental "calm after the storm." Ironically, using the singing voice to convey the lyrics of self-immolation and freedom offers a vision not of horror, as in the rock version, but of an escape from the horror just experienced. With the last sung word ("free"), the strings play a concluding tonal chord (G-C-D), but one frozen in an unresolved 4-3 suspension. Although unresolved, our ears hear this chord as consonant after the harsh atonal accompaniment played throughout the song. Just as this warm sound begins to fade, a sudden seemingly accidental "blip" in the low strings (sounding A-flat) subtly disturbs the calm, and both tonally and rhythmically recalls the anxious musical atmosphere just past.

It is not surprising that "Man-Sized Sextet" ends without clear resolution; that is what you might expect from PJ Harvey and from this presentation of conflict. What is surprising is the initial pseudo-resolution—the faked cadential moment of the eternally suspended triad. The calm itself is disturbing—unbelievable—and the disturbance of the A-flat sounds familiar, but leaves the story open ended, as if we catch a final glimpse of the murderer we thought was safely behind bars; the condition of gender from which we thought we had escaped, but which in fact escaped our control.

"The Agony of Modern Music"³⁰

Jacques Attali contends that the social significance of music lies in its ordering of noise to a greater or lesser degree, and this degree in turn reflects society's relationship to violence. In other words, music

29. Greg Kot also mentions the *Psycho* musical reference in his review *Rid of Me* (*Rolling Stone*), 68, which supports my reading. Bernard Herrmann wrote the film score for *Psycho*.

30. The phrase echoes Henry Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).

channels violence through a balancing of ordered and disordered sound. Noise is disordered sound—sound that does not function as meaningful within a system of ordered sound such as language. Noise interferes with communication and thus silences, oppresses, and even destroys.³¹ Music operates within its own language-like system and is therefore distinct from noise. Most cultures develop a musical language or a system of ordering sounds so that the auditor, listening inside the meaningful system called “music,” can register order and disorder according to a specific set of culturally learned expectations.

But what about music that lies outside the musical language that is familiar to the listener? Does that music become noise? Henry Pleasants, writing from a conservative perspective in the 1950s, argues against composers of atonal music, stating that “the absence of popular origins in their new musical language... indicates conclusively that this is not the path of musical evolution and that atonality is, in fact, a still-born language.”³² Pleasants further asserts:

Whatever the method, the composer’s claim to historical continuity is supportable only on paper. The listener does not feel his music as music. As long as this is the case, its claim to being music at all is dubious.³³

Although Pleasants’ opinion of atonal music is reactionary and presumptive, it is nonetheless rooted (or at least clothed) in populist ideals, that is Pleasants believes that value inheres in the immediate comprehensibility by a critical mass. I suggest that in many ways Pleasants resembles an average listener who is oriented to several closely related musical styles, and who has allocated a finite amount of time and patience to the comprehension of music. Thus for Pleasants, atonal music—difficult to assimilate even for many musicologists—has a dubious claim to the title “music” because of its inaccessibility, its lack of popular appeal. I believe that Harvey and Ellis had this resistant attitude

firmly in mind when they recorded “Man-Size Sextet.” If this is the case, then we must examine the implications of creating such a musical communication gap.

Attali presents an ominous picture of the relation between music, communication, and power in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Musical play, like power play, alternately provokes disorder and proposes order as a means of asserting control.

The game of music... has the same form as power has: something emitted from the singular center of an imposed, purely syntactic discourse, a discourse capable of making its audience conscious of a commonality—but also of turning its audience against it.³⁴

“Man-Size Sextet” impresses upon the listener two types of noise: a generic noise of disorder, born of the inaccessibility of the atonal, elite musical idiom and made all the noisier by its juxtaposition with the surrounding rock songs; and an altogether comprehensible noise of horror wherein sound is indeed ordered, but invokes codes of violence via the musical quotation from *Psycho* soundtrack, and via a clenched-teeth *Sprechstimme* delivery—a sound that demusicalizes the singing voice. The only “commonality” that listeners may be conscious of, on hearing the sextet, is that communicated by the implication of horror—that is, the recognition of the musical quotation from *Psycho*. This quotation implies that, rather than the audience turning against the music (as in Pleasants’ scenario), it is the music that has turned against the audience, offering no restoration of order except through violence.

Attali formulates a radical social theory of music that depends on an analogy: murder is to noise as sacrifice is to music. Just as sacrifice (i.e., ritual murder) harnesses and orders the violence inherent in society, music harnesses and orders noise. “Music functions like sacrifice; listening to noise is a little like being killed... listening to music is to

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31. Attali, *Noise*, 26–27.

32. Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music*, 94.

33. *Ibid.*, 96.

34. Attali, *Noise*, 28.

attend a ritual murder."³⁵ Tension between order and disorder forms an important part of PJ Harvey's songs, as my discussions of "Dress" and "Man-Size" have argued. This tension and the invocation of violence and horror are taken to their logical extremes, however, in the sextet, which not only musically depicts horror and violence, but also uses "modern music" and *Sprechstimme* in creating disorder, noise to the rock-oriented listener.

Mark Paytress dismisses the sextet as "too self-conscious to take seriously,"³⁶ but I believe that this self-consciousness is precisely the point. "Man-Size Sextet" presents a self-conscious portrayal of inaccessibility by means of a musical idiom that is widely regarded as inaccessible—twentieth-century elite atonal art music. This particular sonic scheme easily leads to associations of a particular educational background and a particular socioeconomic class, all of which fortify the ramparts of this piece. But Harvey's distorted voice and the *Psycho* quotation suggest that this music is perhaps not an impenetrable fortress but rather an inescapable, horrifying prison. More to the point, it is the inscription of masculine and not feminine gender in the sextet that creates a horrifying prison.

In light of Attali's formulation of music as ritual sacrifice, "Man-Size Sextet," with its outright expressions of horror and conspicuous use of an inaccessible musical language, might be seen to offer the audience a sacrificial victim—but with an unexpected twist. The medium or weapon of this ritual violence is not "cock rock," which feminists in the 1970s demonized as violent and oppressive, but rather elite "classical" music, which is perhaps a less famously macho musical idiom, but nonetheless imbued with the masculine aesthetics of rugged individualism and rational evolution.³⁷

Taken by itself the rock version of "Man-Size" accords with feminist critiques of rock as ritual sacrifice of female victims—here the channeling of violence through a musical depiction of the inescapable gender system (the signification of which is, as de Beauvoir points out, the burden of women). Indeed, the theme of self-immolation and the silencing of the lyric subject's "lady head" in the final verse would seem to accord with a reading of "Man-Size Sextet" as a sacrifice for the preservation of the gender system.

The sextet lends itself to another possible reading, however, one in which the burden of the gender system is shifted to men. By extension, the musical sacrificial victim becomes male. In contrast to the sextet, the rock version sounds freer and comprehensible—presenting a familiar musical language, however complicated by the "noise" of incomprehensible rhythms. Although the rock version of "Man-Size" appeared as a single before the album's release, the sextet appears before the rock song on the album. The elite/popular cycle implies a false chronology from greater to lesser inaccessibility of musical genre, from greater to lesser melodic and vocal constriction. Indeed, Rob Ellis's musical response to Harvey's "Man-Size" appears as the prior situation of inescapable gender; masculinity as predecessor and forerunner—both the standard of measurement (the background of culture and language) and the instigator of havoc (here represented by an incomprehensible musical language). "Man-Size Sextet" presents a picture of man as isolated and trapped by his own "birth-right"—that is, to have constructed culture and in so doing to have generated and propagated mutually inescapable and inaccessible categories of gender. Thus, the ritual violence of the sextet represents the sacrifice of patriarchal culture itself.

35. *Ibid.*, 28.

36. Paytress, "A Secret History of PJ Harvey," 36.

37. From a popular perspective, the atonal musical language of the sextet evokes the "revolutionary" agenda of Arnold Schoenberg and his notion of the "emancipation of dissonance." For a discussion of classical music history as gendered discourse and Schoenberg's participation in this discourse, see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 17–18 and 103–9.

Given this prior sacrifice, the subsequent ritual violence of the rock version appears as carnivalesque reinscription of patriarchal culture.

Theorizing Inaccessibility

I have argued that the inaccessibility of "Man-Size Sextet" is meaningful within a larger discourse of inaccessibility and gender inscription, and that the sextet exposes the violence of the schismatic construction of gender. Yet how can we theorize meaningful inaccessibility when, by definition, the quality "inaccessibility" is remote from systems of meaning and precludes all manipulations? Attali's theory of the social function of music provides a theory of inaccessibility with regard to sound. Within the context of the rock album, "Man-Size Sextet" presents the listener with an incomprehensible musical language that registers as noise—disordered sound. When the sounds do present an order (i.e., the recognizable quotation from *Psycho*), that sound depicts and evokes horror.

Context certainly plays a role in creating the perception of noise, and no doubt the rock version of "Man-Size" would sound equally disjunct and noisy within a collection of modern string quartets. The sextet, however, becomes an overdetermined symbol of social and internal schism in the context

of the rock album. Such an insertion of "highbrow" culture engages associations of economic and educational inaccessibility in addition to portraying oppressive gender inscription. Furthermore, the sextet is a self-reflexive piece—the musical commentary of a man on maleness. Rob Ellis uses the idiom of elite music to respond to a satirical (*re/de*)construction of maleness created by Harvey using the idiom of "popular" music. Both versions present complexities, constriction, and horror, but Harvey's construction of maleness "comes up" as the more accessible—literally the more "popular"—of the two.

In feminist theory, inaccessibility emerges as a byproduct of essentialism and its insistence on mutual exclusivity of motivation and experience. In this theoretical space, how does one conceptualize the unknowable Other? It is, ironically, only through a blind construction in which inaccessibility is assigned to the unknowable Other, creating an inescapable tautology. In Western patriarchal culture, women have borne the burden of this tautology, signifying gender difference against a normative masculine background. With "Man-Size" and "Man-Size Sextet," however, PJ Harvey performs the inaccessibility of both genders, and effectively shifts the blame for this mutually exclusive gender system from women to men.

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