“Let’s exchange the experience”: Kate Bush’s Bodily Metamorphoses in Lyric and Voice

Some of the earliest promotional images of Kate Bush feature a nineteen-year-old Bush posed in a skintight leotard, hands on her hips and wide eyes directed at the viewer. From the start of her career, Bush’s body was subject to review just as often as, if not more than, her music. Interviews with Bush and reviews of her music all weigh in on her appearance; reporters couldn’t seem to help themselves from asking the “achingly young, sweet and British” singer-songwriter questions about sex. “I almost hate to ask you this,” led Ian Ravendale in a 1978 interview before posing the “standard question” about whether Bush felt that she had been “promoted as a sex object.” Bush diplomatically replied that she would be sexualized no matter what she wore but so long as people appreciate her music, “that’s okay.” Taking a mile from the inch Bush gave, Ravendale pressed her about sex in her music — Bush did not find sex in music “particularly shocking” — and then asked if her most recent single, “Wow,” was about an orgasm. “About an orgasm?” Bush repeated, sounding only mildly affronted before laughing, “well, it could be, I suppose.” But she had written “Wow” about show business.

Bush’s media treatment reflects the music industry’s tendency to “groom” young artists, often young women artists, for public consumption as well as the larger historical conflict surrounding women...
writers’ work. The codified prejudices of the latter debate date back to the Renaissance, when men standardized systems of “signs” — speech, posture, and gesture — through which they could “read” women’s bodies like texts and, supposedly, discern and control their sexuality. Early modern women’s speech was heavily restricted, since speaking brought their “interior” into the “exterior,” signifying “unchasteness.” Women writers, by making their “speech” available to anyone who looked at their work, were in permanent danger of tarnishing their reputations; writing for pay “could be read as a form of prostitution.” The contemporary media response to Kate Bush’s work and image is another part of patriarchal constructions of women’s bodies as texts and women’s writing as sexual access to their bodies; rather than mark her an “unchaste” woman, though, magazines, and newspapers reimagined the woman songwriter as a twentieth-century market product: the “sex symbol.”

While the patriarchal music media attempted to divert attention from Kate Bush’s music to her body and her sexuality, Bush insisted upon her artistry, sometimes at the expense of her body. In one telling interview, Bush reclaimed her body’s image by reconstructing it: “[When] writing a song, I like to think I’m a man, not physically but in the areas that they explore… I identify more with male musicians than female musicians, because I tend to think of female musicians as… ah… females.” Here, to subvert the gendered biases against women artists, Bush insists upon her artistic freedom and authority by imagining herself as a man, or at least as apart from the category of “female musicians.” This interview gestures towards the conception that women writers could only write their own bodies and, implicitly, that women’s bodies were not worth writing about. Moreover, I argue that this interview suggests a larger

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7 See Mark Breitenberg, “Anxious Masculinity and Sexual Jealousy in Early Modern England.”
8 Helen Wilcox astutely pinpoints a woman’s “reputation” as what is at stake when she is accused of unchasteness; she refers to reputation as: “The consequence of visible function in the world of men (a definition, perhaps, of the ‘public’)... the morally charged meeting point of private self and public name,” implying that to be seen by men in public is to be evaluated by what men “read” of the “private,” meaning “sexual” self. See Wilcox, “Private Writing and Public Function,” p. 53.
10 When asked again about her status as a sex symbol, Bush replied, “in nearly every interview I did, people were asking: ‘Do you feel like a sex symbol?’ It’s only because I’m female and publicly seen,” using strikingly similar language to Helen Wilcox’s definition of the Renaissance “reputation.” See Doherty, “Kate Bush: The Kick Outside” in Melody Maker, 1978.
12 See Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.”
method of conscious metamorphosis in Bush’s music. In this paper, I examine how Kate Bush combines poetic and performance strategies to transform her audience’s perception of her body through the speech act of “metaphoring,” effectively transforming her body itself to maintain privacy and artistic freedom within the context of a patriarchal music industry. I trace how Bush’s methods of metamorphosis also change over time, ultimately leading towards a symbolic obliteration of the body that concentrates all focus on her lyrics rather than her image.

Speech act theory, and the practice of “metaphoring” as a speech act, illuminates how Kate Bush’s lyrics and performance can make potent symbolic transformations of her real body. Most succinctly, J.L. Austin’s speech act theory is: “in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.”13 For instance, when I say, “I apologize,” I apologize. This direct speech act makes clear what act it performs, but indirect speech acts are more roundabout; for instance, by saying “I’m sorry,” I describe something about myself that performs the act of apologizing. Metaphors function indirectly as, Dorothy Mack asserts, “interpretive [speech] acts” which “[fabricate] another ‘reality’... suspended between a priori and a posteriori.”14 She describes metaphors as “impositive” because they force the speaker’s mode of “seeing and feeling towards a subject” upon the hearer, calling upon the hearer to adopt the speaker’s view.15 By “metaphoring” herself, Kate Bush creates counterfactual versions of herself which are not herself, redirecting and misdirecting attention from her personal, physical, eroticised body and identity. Despite the transformation’s temporality, we retain our perceptions of Bush as other than or more than herself, vastly expanding the range of roles she can inhabit beyond “sex object.” However, like her body, Bush’s

15 Ibid., pp. 248-9. Elisabeth Camp’s work concurs with Mack’s and stresses metaphor’s effects over time; Camp argues that when we adopt the speaker’s perspective, “even temporarily,” then the aspects of the referent that are being subjected to metaphor “will be highlighted in our thinking, and will take on a new significance for us.” Metaphor’s temporary transformation creates lasting alterations of the hearer’s perspective of the referent and constructs new ways of perceiving the referent that do not exclude other, preexisting or future ways, lending itself perfectly to Kate Bush’s desire to be seen as herself and as a conduit for experiences outside herself and her body. See Camp, Showing, Telling, Seeing: Metaphor and Poetic Language, pp. 1-4.
metaphoring does not always take the same form; she enacts her transformation through traditional poetic
metaphoring as well as the performance strategy I call “voicing.”

Kate Bush’s first single, “Wuthering Heights,” exemplifies how Bush uses metaphor to transform
herself. Rather than singing confessionally, the more conventional mode of singing and songwriting in
popular music, Bush sings, “Heathcliff, it’s me, Cathy, come home,” transforming our perspective of her
body and her voice so that instead of belonging to “Kate,” they belong to “Cathy.” Bush’s metaphor
creates a counterfactual reality in which she is Cathy Earnshaw, a reality which dissolves as soon as she
stops singing but which remains with the audience as another way of perceiving her. This metaphoring
operates, like written poetry, through lyric — we do not need to hear Bush sing for the metaphor to work.
But Bush also performs the transformation; Sounds reviewer Richard Cook noted her unconventional
vocal tone in “Wuthering Heights,” criticizing how it “might as well bellow, ‘Look at this, I’m acting.’”

Relative to a more autobiographical song from the same record, “Moving,” Bush’s tone in “Wuthering
Heights” sounds affected, more suited to musical theater than popular music. She whines through the
lines, “How could you leave me? / When I needed to possess you” (Invisible 187, lines 5-6), and affects a
more “posh” accent than her own, enacting her transformation through voice as well as lyric. Bush’s
“voicing” strategy is a key indicator of her metaphoring; helping us determine when she is and is not
herself.

In the cautionary tale “Babooshka,” Bush performs a near-metamorphosis through free indirect
discourse (FID), giving voice to her characters without voicing them. Like “Wuthering Heights,”
“Babooshka” is not autobiographical, but Bush sings in the third person rather than the first. From her
omniscient perspective, Bush uses FID to express both characters’ — the unfaithful husband and
Babooshka, the alias of his suspicious wife — perspectives, a narrative technique more characteristic of

16 Bush, “Wuthering Heights,” in How To Be Invisible, p. 187. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text,
abbreviated as Invisible.
prose writing than popular music. She begins by narrating: “She wanted to test her husband./ She knew exactly what to do,” before entering into FID with the wife — “A pseudonym to fool him,” — and back: “She couldn’t have made a worse move.” Bush combines FID with structural changes in her writing; her vocalizations of the wife’s thoughts are grammatically incomplete. The husband’s thoughts are similarly fragmentary: “Just like his wife.” Bush’s FID emphasizes her authority; her ability to weave in and out of multiple, fallible, fragmentary perspectives and summarize or pass judgment on them through her own narration makes her the voice in the song audiences trust. She holds herself largely at a distance from her characters’ fallible perspectives, reserving her transformative voicing for her expressions of her characters’ actual speech rather than their thoughts.

Kate Bush does alter her vocal tone to perform dialogue in “Babooshka,” metaphoring to fully, but only briefly, embody the subject and object roles within the song. Unlike FID, which gives her the capacity to occupy “other” minds while remaining in her own body in the viewer’s perception, Bush’s performance of dialogue indicates and enacts her full metamorphosis into her characters. The chorus of “Babooshka” contains the only complete transformation in the song; Bush signals the change with her vocal tone, hitting the song’s highest note at the beginning of the chorus and shifting from smooth singing to a raspier intonation. Although she shifts her tone back to her narrative “voice,” she suggests that her transformative capacities leave traces on her. Just as our altered perspectives of her remain with us, aspects of her raspy, “other” voice assert themselves as the second verse approaches the second chorus’s transformation, particularly the warbling final note of “Capacity to give him all he needs” (“Babooshka,”

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20 Ibid., line 6.
21 Daniel Gunn notes that in most discussions of FID and authority, FID was typically considered the most “objective” form of narration in English literature, allowing the author to present “impersonal” views of their characters, but could also undermine the author’s authority by allowing other voices to “compete” with the narrative voice. Gunn posits that FID in practice, particularly in Jane Austen, often functions very differently, privileging the author’s narrative voice over characters’ voices and setting up the audience to concur with the author. I argue that Kate Bush assumes this position of relative authority in “Babooshka.” See Gunn, “Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in Emma.”
22 Bush, Kate Bush Complete, pp. 62-3.
line 21). In this way, Bush demonstrates how complete metamorphosis enacts changes on her body and her voice.

“The Saxophone Song” and “Violin” also see Bush undergo brief but complete physical changes to play the roles of subject and object; however, rather than enact a clear transformation from one role to another, Bush collapses subject and object into one blended “voice.” In “The Saxophone Song,” Bush sings, accompanied by a saxophone, a love song to the saxophone. The interplay between her voice, praising the instrument with, “You know that I go very quiet/ When I am listening to you/ There’s something special indeed… saxophone”, and the saxophone’s wordless “reply” creates the effect of a conversation between Bush and the instrument. While at first the conversation appears to be between two distinct entities, in two distinct “languages” verbal and nonverbal, Bush blurs the lines between herself and her “interlocutor.” After the verbal cue “saxophone” and the saxophone’s nonverbal answer, Bush sings back, “Doo-ba-doo-ba-doo” (“The Saxophone Song,” line 10). By singing in the saxophone’s style and the “language,” Bush blends her voice with the object’s, vocally and wordlessly transforming herself into it. Implicitly, she takes on the saxophone’s positive qualities that she enumerates in her narration, emphasizing her capacity to transform herself between the worlds of instrument, artist, and listener.

While she switches languages in “The Saxophone Song,” she translates another language into hers with “Violin.” Like “The Saxophone Song,” Bush addresses her song to the violin and incorporates the violin’s “style” in her singing without changing herself, mimicking a glissando in “Filling me up with the shivers.” A combination of dialogue and voicing enact her transformation as she sings: “Get the Bow going, let it scream to me, / Violin, violin, violin.” From the chorus’s first line to the second, her tone changes as she takes on the violin’s “scream,” momentarily becoming the violin and inhabiting its voice rather than addressing or mimicking it. Rather than mimic the nonverbal sound of the violin during the

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25 Ibid., lines 9-10.
26 While Bush’s use of dialogue is evident in the album version of “Violin,” her vocal transformation is far less pronounced than it is in her live performances; she drastically changes her vocal and bodily affect to “perform” the transformation sonically and
chorus, as she does during “The Saxophone Song.” Bush instead translates the nonverbal voice of the violin into language, collapsing its sign with its sense so that the sound of the violin constitutes “violin.” Like the character thoughts in “Babooshka,” the violin’s capacity for speech is incomplete; it can only sing itself while Bush’s singing encompasses more territory. She moves beyond herself by singing the other and singing as the other. By juxtaposing herself with characters which can only express the self, she only appears vaster and more authoritative. Moreover, by constructing imagined worlds wherein she can move seamlessly between both speaker and hearer, subject and object, she keeps us somewhat displaced from our roles as “hearers;” we must perceive all of her transformed selves before we can begin to pry into her private self. No song better communicates the experience of the private self under attack than “Get Out of My House.”

From Bush’s first self-produced album, 1982’s *The Dreaming*, “Get Out of My House” stands out among Bush’s discography up until 1982 because Bush performs four distinct voices for different aspects of the same speaker, creating a perspective that is at once united and fragmentary. One provides the bulk of the song’s narration: “You paused in the doorway/ As though a thought stole you away” (*Invisible* 135, lines 2-3), but this voice is not as authoritative as the narrative voice for “Babooshka.” Bush’s tone sounds affected, almost spoken-word; we cannot place trust in it. The pitches of lines 1-4, 7, and 10-11 all gradually move higher without a balancing movement back down the scale, building a musical tension that Bush breaks with the scream in, “See the hackles on the cat, standing” (12), then rebuilds as she repeats even higher, “With my key I” (13). A second voice, alternating between a French and “posh” English accent, interrupts, goading, “I am the concierge, chez-moi, honey/ Won’t letcha in for love nor money” (17-18). This voice sounds even more affected than the first; we cannot feel comfortable with it, either. The only voice that clearly sings — “No stranger’s feet/ Will enter me” (23-24) — gets little airtime. All three voices compete with a fourth that screams continuously in the background, echoing the visually on stage. Bush’s stage performances and music videos also represent how she enacts her transformations and are worthy of further consideration, but rest outside the scope of this paper.
narrator with “slamming” and “(Lock it)” (2, 6), and breaking through to the forefront to repeat: “Get out of my house” (22). The cacophony of voices responding to and overlapping one another correspond to aspects of the self attempting to keep outsiders outside. One voice narrates concrete events, one imagines the body as a house that must be locked up and maintained, attempting to enact a transformation it does not convincingly complete. another affects control, and yet another pierces through all the attempts of the first three to “narrate” at all, simply screaming in self-defense. Bush’s successful transformation responds to the fifth voice that her fragmented speaker tries to keep at bay.

In another departure from her catalogue up until 1982, “Get Out of My House” also prominently features another singer, a male voice whose patriarchal imposition upon the song catalyzes Bush’s gendered transformation. While the male voice sounds clearly different in the recording, Bush indicates that it is a completely distinct voice by surrounding it with quotation marks (Invisible 136-7, lines 51-54). This male dialogue is not a dialogue Bush can assimilate to or overpower. Her conversation with the male voice is adversarial; it threatens penetration with “Woman, let me in” (51), and she refuses, “I will not let you in” (55). The battle the voices stage is a battle of transformation; Bush turns into “a bird” (57), a conventional symbol of women in poetry, to which the voice responds by changing into “the wind” (60), ubiquitous and necessary for the bird’s flight. Finally, Bush transforms into “the Mule” (65), adopting the “the” article from the male voice’s transformation to suggest her transformation’s authority and finality. Bush’s animal choice carries significance; unlike the bird, the mule is sterile; even if penetrated, it cannot conceive and become a “vessel.” Bush’s voicing suggests that this transformation, unlike the others, is painful and difficult; she screams like a mule to force the transformation, but does not scream as a mule until halfway through her second scream, indicated by the quotation marks in the middle of line 68: “Hee - ‘Haw.” In “Get Out of My House,” Bush transforms herself to escape male penetration at the expense of her sexuality, a transformation that carried over into her music’s reception.
Kate Bush’s voicing did not align with the sex symbol that the music media had wanted to create; instead, it forged the path for her to assert herself as an embodied artist rather than a body developed for public consumption. The magazine Sounds reviewed her first album: “What is this supposed to be? Doom-laden, ‘meaningful’ songs… sung with the most irritatingly yelping voice.” Sounds’ review set a precedent for every publication to describe her voice; all at once, her voice was “lilting and flighty,” “disconcerting… alternately childlike, womanly, seductive and haunting,” and “like a bewitched boy soprano or a cartoon crow.”

Bush took over the production of her music in 1982, removing limits on her singing and songwriting so that she could use whichever vocal techniques and tell whichever stories she wanted. Coming into her own as an artist with The Dreaming corresponded with waning sex appeal and waning commercial success; but in a 1983 interview, Bush was optimistic, glad that the media were asking her somewhat less about sex and more about her work. Despite the massive success of 1985’s Hounds of Love, some media still criticized her for being too conceptual in gendered terms. “Like her underwear, her guard doesn’t drop for a moment,” griped a Sounds reviewer in 1986, “The show is everything: show us, we implore, and like a sullen stripper she shows us everything and reveals nothing.” Bush’s body was a sex symbol, but her music did not reveal enough of it.

After the success of Hounds of Love, The Sensual World — particularly its title track — marked a turning point for transformations in Bush’s music; “The Sensual World” mirrors “Wuthering Heights” in its style of narration, but departs from its source text in order to explore the tension between women’s body and the written text. “The Sensual World” reimagines Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in Ulysses; the

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27 Robertson, "Kate Bush: The Kick Inside (EMI EMC 3223)" in Sounds, 1978. The UK magazine Sounds, geared towards punk music, tended to review Kate Bush’s music unfavorably. In the context of the UK’s punk wave, Bush’s image as a demure, erotic, middle-class artist singing about literary texts was anathema. The punk scene in the UK had a contentious relationship with women singers and fans, often creating spaces that were hostile towards women and forcing women in punk to create their own circles like riot grrrl. The punk revolution prized “authenticity” above all else and Bush’s “acting” seemed inauthentic. Moreover, Helen Reddington notes that Sounds was the most “bloke-ish” of the UK music papers. See Cogan, “Typical Girls?”; Downes, “The Expansion of Punk Rock,” and Reddington, The Lost Women of Rock Music, pp.16, 61-2, 135.


primary departure Bush makes from the source material is to set Molly in opposition to Bloom and to Joyce. Bush sings, as in “Wuthering Heights,” as Molly Bloom, but more explicitly references and writes against Ulysses. “He said I was a flower of the mountain, yes” (Invisible 30, line 6), she sings almost verbatim from Ulysses before adding, “But now I’ve powers o’er a woman’s body — yes/ Stepping out of the page into the sensual world” (7-8). Bush’s Molly Bloom resists Bloom’s attempt to transform her into a “flower,” reclaiming her “woman’s body” apart from the language that constructed it, enacting a transformation from the fictional, male-created world into a more real, woman-created world. The ways in which “The Sensual World” revises strategies from “Wuthering Heights” and modifies, even subtly critiques, its source text mark Bush’s reclamation of her own body, though Molly Bloom, apart from the text. This reclamation leads to a new style of writing which gradually removes Bush’s body from her music.

Kate Bush’s most recent albums, Aerial and 50 Words for Snow, depart from the rest of her discography in word as much as in image; she works to remove the body from the text and situate is as part of a real, “sensual” world that cannot live in text. Unlike every album that came before them, Bush does not appear on the album covers, visually disembodifying them from her. She begins to split many of her songs between her own voice and other voices, but unlike the imposing male voice in “Get Out of My House,” these voices work with her or for her. “Prelude,” “The Painter’s Link,” “Aerial,” and “Snowflake” from Aerial and 50 Words for Snow either do not include Bush’s voice at all or cede significant time to other voices.33 In Aerial, Bush appears to make peace with the bird image that fails her in “Get Out of My House;” in “Aerial Tal (A brief text on how to speak blackbird),” Bush learns to “sing” along with blackbird song. In line with her body’s departure from the text Bush enacts in “The Sensual World,” “Aerial Tal” has no lyrics; instead, Bush hand-wrote clusters of letters that come close to her vocalizations, creating her own language system apart from English “text” over which she has exclusive

33See Bush, Aerial; and Bush, 50 Words For Snow.
domain. *Aerial*'s title track includes a long interplay between a blackbird's song and Bush's laughter; her laughter mimics birdsong without completely assimilating to it, creating a conversation between herself and her object outside of written or write-able speech that provides us with no “in” to their intimacy. Her voice displays her private self without granting access to it or to her body, an act she finalizes in her book, *How To Be Invisible*.

Kate Bush’s most recent act of metaphoring is her 2018 collection of her selected lyrics, *How To Be Invisible*, through which she completely removes her body from her text. A 1978 interview with Bush illuminates her choice to publish a book: “It's a lot, to expect people to sit down and read my lyrics, and I'd be amazed if many people did. Not many people read poetry, and it's a similar effort… That's what I'd like them to do because that's why I do it.”\(^{34}\) As a response to a media which continually overlooked her lyrics in the interest of discussing her body, *How To Be Invisible*, without a single picture of Bush inside or out, transforms her embodied music out of the realm of the body entirely. Unlike in the Renaissance, we rarely consider text sexual access to a woman writer’s body; in the age of music video, image and voice make sex symbols. Despite the fact that Bush uses her voice for metamorphosis, it remains the primary conduit between her audience and her body. Moreover, music is temporal and ephemeral in ways that poetry is not; we can miss words and mishear words; and we can listen without thinking. Bush’s book enacts her latest transformation. In addition to image and video, she creates another way we can view her: an invisible composite of her work, which, she seems to assert, can speak for itself.

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