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Drag, camp and gender subversion in the music and videos of Annie Lennox

GILLIAN RODGER

Abstract

In this article I examine Lennox's earliest performance strategies, and her reasons for employing them, as well as some of the reactions to her adoption of transvestism as a sartorial style. I discuss three videos from Lennox's 1988 LP Savage, which, in my view, marked a radical shift in her approach to depicting gender through performance. I argue that Lennox may be more productively viewed by keeping in mind performance ideals of music hall and other popular musical theatre styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally I discuss Lennox's challenge to late twentieth-century gender construction using Judith Butler's theories of the performative nature of gender and of the subversive reiteration of gender, outlined in her books Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter, and suggesting ways in which Lennox's performance embodies these theories, while extending them to include a broader range of sexualities.

In the more than twenty years since Annie Lennox began her career in pop music, she has paraded herself in seemingly endless transformations before her audience via album covers, video, and live performance. She has reinvented herself over and over, starting as the blonde 'girl singer' for a less than successful group, the Tourists, in the late 1970s, then reappearing with a bright orange flat-top in a suit, as a high-class blonde call girl, as an S & M dominatrix, as a campy angel in a Louis XIV drama, as a repressed housewife, and as 'Earl', a working-class Elvis look-alike, as part of the Eurythmics. Her solo career has also relied on these multiple Annies, which have ranged from an angel to Minnie Mouse, and from a cabaret singer to a circus bear and a nineteenth-century serio-comic.

Commentaries on Lennox's performance have, almost inevitably, centred on her assumption of male dress in music videos and live performance that characterised the early part of her career with the Eurythmics. Or they have focused on her androgynous style, and drawn parallels between her and male performers such as David Bowie or Boy George.¹ Yet, watching music videos from even the early 1980s, when the Eurythmics was still a relatively new group, it is clear that Lennox also assumed many different styles of female dress. I would argue that the key to understanding Lennox's approach to performance is recognising that she rarely if ever appears as completely 'herself' in Eurythmics music videos. In other words, acting, and the assumption of 'characters' is central to Lennox's performance style, even in concert performances. The description of Lennox as a 1980s gender-bender may be accurate to some degree, but this description effectively devalues, or even erases Lennox's challenge to late twentieth-century constructions of gender.

Lennox's entry into the world of popular music came in part as a result of her dissatisfaction with rigorous training in classical music. Born in 1954 in Aberdeen, Scotland to working-class parents, Tom, a boiler-maker, and Dorothy, a cook, Lennox's interest in music and the arts was encouraged by her parents and teachers. As a child she was accepted into a prestigious girls' school, which further involved her in musical activities. At the age of seventeen she was accepted by the Royal College of Music in London to study piano and flute. While music had provided Lennox with class mobility, it had also represented freedom and creativity to her as a child, and she rebelled against what she perceived as the restrictive atmosphere and the competitiveness of the College, dropping out just a week before completing her final exams (O'Brien 1993, pp. 30–2). Unwilling to return home to her parents, she took odd jobs waitressing and also began to write songs and become involved in the popular music scene in London. In 1976 she met Dave Stewart and by 1977 they were involved in a band named the Tourists.

Lennox's experience with the Tourists was valuable in teaching her about the pop industry and, when the band collapsed in 1981, all involved were left disillusioned and deeply in debt. When Lennox and Stewart decided to form their own band they were determined to stay in control of the creative process, including their image. As the singer and the only female member of the Tourists, Lennox realised that the press would never let her be just one of the 'boys'. So, in forming the Eurythmics, Lennox and Stewart made Lennox's image the focus of the group, but they were also determined not to let anyone else control that image (O'Brien 1993, p. 57). Lennox did not want to be pigeon-holed into neat pop categories. She was uncomfortable with the sexism inherent in the pop industry of the early 1980s, and unwilling to put herself on sexual display. Lennox's performance style grew out of her deep discomfort with this public persona and her need to create alternate characters and images that would allow her to express a wide range of emotions.

The Eurythmics emerged in a crucial period for popular music when MTV had launched its network and music videos were quickly becoming an integral part of popular music. Lennox and Stewart produced music videos that were unusual for their theatricality. Video allowed Lennox to present a much wider range of characters than she could in live performance.² From early in her career with the Eurythmics, Lennox tended to employ a number of stereotypes or archetypes in performance and many of her characters were drawn from gender stereotypes such as that of the perennial dichotomy between the virtuous and the fallen woman. Madness was another persistent theme, as was the tension between sexual repression and sexual freedom, particularly sadomasochism.

In Eurythmics music videos, Lennox played both male and female characters with minute attention to detail; her working-class male character had an air of confident sexualised charm, her middle-class housewife was shown as a neurotic, sexually repressed figure whose sanity could not be saved by consumer culture. The real power of all of these figures was Lennox's ability to invest them with life without becoming so identified with any particular image that it was assumed to be the 'real' Annie Lennox. In part this was achieved through constant change; no one image was maintained long enough to become dominant, although many of them have continued to reappear in slightly different forms through the course of her career. It was also due to the air of almost complete disdain with which Lennox approached the media, initially providing only scant biographical information, and by insisting that interviewers focus on the music and performance rather than details of her personal life.

The most striking of Lennox's early characters were male, although even early in her career she did not limit herself entirely to portraying male characters. Unlike Madonna, Lennox did not seem to cite Marlene Dietrich or the mannish lesbian figure of the 1930s, in Eurythmics music videos of the 1980s.³ Instead she visually transformed herself into male characters that were not always recognisable as Lennox to audiences.⁴ Lennox's portrayal of male characters drew the attention of critics and audiences alike, and their impact seems to have been due mostly to the shock of seeing convincing female-to-male drag in the early 1980s. Lennox did not wear male clothing to heighten her own femininity and to elicit a sexual response from the audience; instead, she visually transformed herself into a man, hiding or obscuring the feminine curves of her body and adopting male body language to express powerful emotions, particularly anger.

Lennox first appeared in male character in the video accompanying the title song from the Eurythmics' second album, *Sweet Dreams*. In this video, Lennox had cut her blond hair and dyed it fluorescent orange and she and her partner in the band, Dave Stewart, appeared dressed identically in men's suits. The only clue to Lennox's 'true' sex lay in the red lipstick and eye make-up she wore. All of Lennox's movements and body language in this clip are convincingly masculine. Towards the end of this video, Lennox and Stewart are shown walking, backs to the camera, across an open field, and their gaits match almost exactly.

In the second video from this album, which accompanied the song 'Love is a stranger', Lennox played with the transformative process that turned her visually from a woman into a man. Lennox appeared first in this video, riding in the back of a limousine, dressed as a high-class call-girl, wearing a long blond wig, feminine make-up and a full-length fur coat. In the course of this video, she metamorphosed from the prostitute, into an S & M dominatrix, into the businessman who purchased their services, and then finally into a puppet-like male figure controlled by Dave Stewart. This transformation, which included the almost stereotypical de-wigging traditionally included in the acts of female impersonators, blurred the boundary between male and female, prostitute and john, and perfectly reinforced the lyrics of the song it accompanied which focused on obsessive love and the loss of self-control to it.

Both 'Sweet dreams' and 'Love is a stranger' infuse a European synth-pop backing with the warmth and depth of Lennox's voice. In 'Love is a stranger', Lennox provides her own backing lines. The main melody track is set in the middle of her range just below the break into head voice, a point at which her voice is timbrally less complex than at either of its extremes. This powerful, sometimes forced melody is harmonised above with lines completely in Lennox's upper register that meld at times into the synthesizer backing. Lennox's upper register is produced in a way not typical of pop – her tone is full and rounded and the sound sometimes approaches operatic. The word obsession is underlined by being set low in Lennox's generous alto range, where again the tone is warm and full. And, woven into these lines, are wordless grunts from a male voice.⁵

While Lennox's voice is still obviously that of a female singer in 'Love is a Stranger', she moves into more ambiguous vocal territory in 'Sweet dreams'. Once again, this song juxtaposes the almost clinical coolness of the synthesizer backing and a driving drum beat with the wide range of timbral colours of Lennox's voice. The main vocal line is a repetitive melody with a narrow range that echoes the synthesizer riffs of the accompaniment and it stays in the lower part of Lennox's range, just under

the break. In this song, three or more backing lines, sung by Lennox, embellish the main melodic line, sometimes briefly coming to prominence.⁶ The tension in Lennox's voice as it approaches the break is exploited to create timbral ambiguity, with the melody and one harmony line above it staying below Lennox's break. This ambiguity is further heightened by soul-infused runs starting well above her break in the backing tracks that increasingly interject, and layer over the other vocal tracks, as the song progresses. The first of these interjections is sung in beautifully produced 'head' voice, but as the song draws to a close, this line is increasingly sung in 'chest' voice, which introduces tension as Lennox pushes her voice to pitches she has previously delivered in 'head' voice. While Lennox does not sound like a man, the layering of her voice in multiple vocal tracks that exploit the break in her voice opens up a sonic space rife with possibilities for interpretation. As the musicologist Elizabeth Wood has noted, '[t]he extreme range in one female voice from richly dark deep chest tones to piercingly clear high falsetto, and its defective break at crossing register borders, produces an effect I call sonic cross-dressing: a merging rather than splitting of "butch" authority and "femme" ambiguity, an acceptance and integration of male and female' (Wood 1994, p. 32). While Wood was writing about the operatically trained voice, her observation is just as true for Lennox. Many of the Eurythmics' songs rely on Lennox exploiting the region around her break for dramatic and emotional effect.

In both of these songs that were accompanied by cross-dressed images of Lennox, the vocal lines can also be seen to be 'cross-dressing', to use Wood's idea of sapphonic. This vocal ambiguity and Lennox's gender ambiguity combined to pose a serious threat to gender constructions of the 1980s, and particularly those present in pop music. Lennox did not appear to be pretty or passive in her performances, nor did she draw attention to her body in a sexualised way. When she appeared in female costume, it was often exaggerated and excessive, and she relied on wigs and make-up. Indeed, Lennox seemed more 'herself' in male clothing than in female costume. Later, in interviews, Lennox justified her assumption of masculine and androgynous styles of clothing by citing her own discomfort at the expectation that, as a woman in pop music, she should present herself in an overtly sexual way:

When I started wearing mannish clothes on-stage, it was to detract from what people had come to expect from women singers, the height of which was Debbie Harry, who I loved. But I felt I couldn't be a sex symbol. That's not me. So I tried a way to transcend that emphasis on sexuality. Ironically, a different kind of sexuality emerged from that. I wasn't particularly concerned with bending genders, I simply wanted to get away from wearing cutesy-pie miniskirts and tacky cutaway push-ups. (cited in Mewborn 1985, p. 42)

While Lennox managed to avoid conforming to the image of female sex symbol in her early career, her masculine appearance began to raise speculation about her gender. The transformation from prostitute to john in 'Love is a Stranger' resulted in MTV demanding proof that she was actually a woman (Randall 1996, p. 45). Lennox's cross-dressing in combination with the powerful ambiguity of her voice and the strength of the image she projected through performance ultimately led to speculation about Lennox's sexuality.

In many ways, Lennox's performances in music videos had more in common with performers in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century music hall than with her contemporary pop music performers. Singers in music hall were regarded as actors and actresses rather than singers *per se*, and their ability to breathe life into a character was central to their delivery of songs on stage. Music hall songs were highly formulaic in structure and subject matter. They relied heavily on

stereotypical characters or social 'types' such as the young working-class woman or man, the dandy or man-about-town, the sailor, the policeman, the flower-seller, the newsboy, and so on. Some performers specialised in a single character-type, while others portrayed a range of characters. But in each case these characters were presented through song, and the audience's understanding of those stereotypical characters contributed to their interpretation and enjoyment of the songs presented.

Lennox's portrayal of male characters such as Earl had all of the realism of male impersonators active in British music hall and American vaudeville from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century.⁷ And she ran into exactly the same difficulties encountered by music hall stars such as Vesta Tilley. In her autobiography, Tilley noted the constant presence of young female fans waiting for her after performances, the most devoted of whom followed her from town to town to see all of her performances. While Tilley was evidently flattered by this attention, she also considered the most devoted of her fans – the individuals who begged for mementos and to meet her and attended every performance – as slightly deranged. On meeting one of her most devoted fans in America, Tilley was careful to make herself seem as unattractive as possible, appearing in her robe with cold cream on her face and her long hair still braided to fit under her short wig in an effort to discourage the young woman's passions (DeFrece 1934, pp. 233–4). In an article published in 1904, Tilley was also careful to distance herself from 'mannish' women, calling women who 'ape' male dress and manners 'objectionable' (Tilley 1904, p. 5). Without saying so in this article or her autobiography, Vesta Tilley made it clear that she was aware of the existence of lesbians and she wanted to reassure her audience that she was not one.

Similar tactics were employed to free Lennox from the spectre of the lesbian, which seemed to hang ominously over her through most of the 1980s.⁸ Newspaper and magazine articles inevitably raised the issue of Lennox's androgynous appearance, and sought to reassure the reader that, despite this, Lennox was a very feminine and 'normal' woman.⁹ Her early relationship with her partner in the band, Dave Stewart, was almost always mentioned and interviewers fished for more details of her off-stage life. Lennox, an intensely private person, reacted defensively to questions about her off-stage life and limited her answers to the barest of biographical details. This reluctance to play the role of 'female pop star' served to confirm suspicions about the singer – if she would not talk about her life she must have something to hide.

Lennox's frustration at this situation is apparent in many published interviews of the mid-1980s and she earned a reputation for being temperamental and for snapping at interviewers. As early as 1983 Lennox stated: 'I am very feminine. I am not gay. But I feel as a woman, sometimes, very masculine, powerful' (quoted in Oglesbee 1987, p. 58). Lennox's reaction may well have been prompted by homophobia, but it is also worth considering that the frustration she exhibited may also have been due to the limits being imposed on the array of images available to her – if the identity 'strong masculine woman' was seen as being synonymous with that of the lesbian then it became unavailable for non-lesbian women. This was especially true in the early 1980s, the era of Thatcher and Reagan. The second half of Lennox's response tends to support this reading, as do statements made in later interviews.

The mid-1980s saw a softening of Lennox's image and a move away from realistic female-to-male drag. Videos for songs from the albums *Be Yourself Tonight* and *Revenge* featured Lennox in an array of female guises, but once again the short-haired, icy cold and sexually unavailable Annie seemed dominant. The one thing that Lennox was apparently not willing to do was to offer her body and herself to her

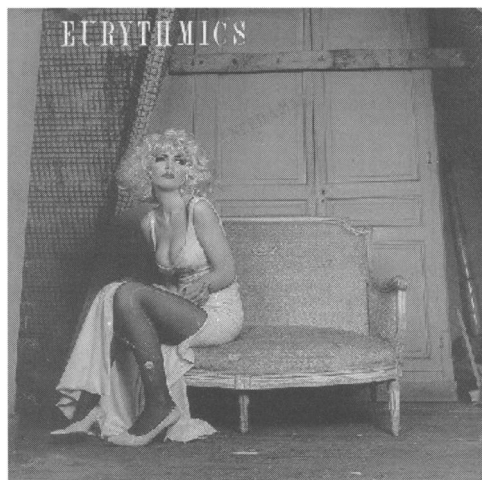


Figure 1. Annie Lennox.

audience for consumption as a sexual being, particularly through the medium of music video. The video for 'Missionary Man', from the album *Revenge*, at first glance seems to be an exception to this. In it Lennox appeared dressed in body-hugging leather pants and girdle (complete with her own version of a Madonna-like cone-bra), but any suggestion of sexual display that might have been suggested by the costume Lennox wore was removed in the editing of the video.¹⁰ In this video, Lennox appeared almost as an automaton. Through editing, her movements lost any fluidity, and animated sections, which used Lennox's face, transformed her into a machine repeating a series of tortured expressions.

The contrast between the cold, distant Annie, or the tortured mechanical Annie, and the Annie that appeared to promote the Eurythmics' next album, *Savage*, was striking. If androgyny and sexual unavailability had been the hallmark of the earlier Annie, then excess femininity and a ferocious feminine sexuality was the most marked feature of the Annie Lennox pictured in *Rolling Stone* in January 1988. In this article, Lennox was photographed sitting on a sofa, poised as if to spring, wearing a long low-cut dress that barely contained her breasts, which was also split to the top of her thighs. The intense Annie Lennox stare remained, but it was accompanied by a sneer that was almost frightening. This figure can be seen as sexually inviting but there is a ferocity about her that would dissuade all but the most foolhardy. While critics were generally pleased with the album, they seemed unsure of how to react to the excessively female Annie. The public also seemed puzzled by this move and *Savage* had none of the success of earlier albums.¹¹

Savage was essentially a 'concept' album that Dave Stewart described as being about '... the despair and pain of being on the receiving end of men being so horrible. That was Annie's time out, it was almost a solo album ...' (quoted in Randall 1996, p. 92). The videos that accompanied the three singles released from this album in the US were a kind of trilogy featuring Annie in three distinctly different roles that were startling for their theatricality.¹² In the first, 'Beethoven (I Love to Listen to)', Lennox assumed the role of a middle-class housewife whom she has described as 'an oppressed woman who is on the verge of cracking up' (Rogers 1988, p. 5). As she cleans her already fastidious modern apartment, the character portrayed by Lennox

fantasises about what it might be like to be 'a girl like that', the kind of woman who was sexually free enough to be promiscuous, to flirt, or to become somebody's mistress, a woman who is her exact opposite.

The narrative of this video is essential to understanding the song, which never identifies the character singing, or provides any narrative within which to contextualise the lyrics. Musically, 'Beethoven' is centred on the drum track, which is dominated by a pounding bass. The opening four measures of this song consist of nothing but the drum line. This is joined by a slowly ascending pitch on the synthesizer at measure five, but no other instruments enter until measure sixteen. The vocal tracks in this song rely only partly on singing. The chorus, 'I love to . . . listen to . . . Beethoven', is made up of three separate sound bites that are electronically modified and combined. The text to the verse is not sung, but spoken by Lennox in an upper-class English accent. The spoken lines are echoed in the backing tracks, very occasionally with a sung rendition of the same text. This repetition of text in an echo serves to mock the main vocal line, which is the track associated with the repressed housewife depicted in the video. And the dislocated and fragmented vocal lines, along with the relentlessness of the drum track, signal her impending breakdown.

As the video progresses, the housewife is shown obsessively performing domestic tasks, while a mischievous girl in a blond wig constantly disrupts the order she tries to impose in the house. In the background, but never intruding on the action, is a man in a low cut dress, partly but not completely made up as a drag queen (he has on his 'face' but no female wig). These two figures are the forces that Lennox-as-housewife battles. They represent uninhibitedness and sexual freedom, and they eventually win, allowing her to become the woman she has been fantasising about. Lennox is shown in the kitchen of the apartment, skewering and slicing phallic vegetables such as cucumber and corn, and at the instrumental bridge to the song she leaves the kitchen and enters her bedroom and sits down in front of a mirror. The last part of the video shows the transformation from housewife to drag-queen in loving detail, juxtaposing the three faces, Lennox's, the young girl's and the drag-queen's, in a bedroom mirror. As Lennox-the-drag-queen emerges, so too does the sneer that was so apparent in the publicity shots for this album, and the triumphant laughter of this character resonates in the vocal track of the song.

The second video, which accompanied the song 'I Need a Man', begins with the transformed figure of the sexually free drag-queen Annie walking away from the orderly apartment complex and into a night club. Lennox has described this character as ' . . . a sort of dream goddess/sex kitten gone wrong . . . She's a parody of what men have found attractive in women. She becomes a parody of herself and ultimately looks like a man in drag' (Rogers 1988, p. 5). Once in the club she sings a harsh, hateful parody of a Rolling Stones song, screaming and sneering at an audience that is never shown, in a clear imitation of Jagger's singing style. This song is representative of the darker side of this album, the one that presents men with the caricatured ideal baby doll image that is glorified in rock songs. In this guise, Lennox is chilling, challenging men with typically male 'fighting' language: 'Come on, I'll take you anytime'.

Once again the track begins with the drum track and a spoken introduction before the entry of the trademark Rolling Stones bass line and guitar chords. 'Hey is this my turn?' Lennox asks in a little girl voice, 'Do you want me to sing now?' A Jagger-like scream leads into the entry of the instrumental lines. While this song is sung, the sound comes closer to heightened speech than song. Lennox's voice is hoarse and the song sung almost on a monotone. During the choruses she snarls and

growls the refrain, 'I need a man'. The song is delivered in an accent that combines lower-class English and American, in clear parody of Mick Jagger. In the video, references to Jagger are made through pouting and strutting. The baby-doll voice heard at the beginning of the song disappears with the opening scream, which is also echoed throughout the song in the lead guitar line.

Referring to this song, Richard Middleton comments on Lennox's '“reverse-macho” stance' that becomes a parody. He also notes her citation of Jagger's performance style and sees her performance as suggesting the possibility that she is a man in drag (Middleton 1995, p. 480). The lyrics of this song in combination with Lennox's over-the-top hyper-feminine appearance certainly suggest this reading. I would suggest, however, that through this song Lennox opens a space in which not only her identity is in question, but so too is the identity of the 'man' she desires. A closer reading of the lyrics of this song reveal that Lennox is singing about a 'man' who is possibly neither heterosexual nor male.

In 'I Need a Man', Lennox's character claims she is looking for a man who doesn't wear a dress, doesn't shave his legs, who doesn't double-comb his hair, doesn't powder-puff, who wears no rings or jewellery, and that, at night, she can take anywhere. If Lennox is singing as a heterosexual woman desiring a heterosexual man, then these requests would appear to be redundant – men generally don't wear dresses or shave their legs – so why mention these characteristics? This redundancy opens the possibility that Lennox, who in this video visually could be a man in drag, is singing as a drag queen in search of his ideal masculine mate. Or alternatively, she is the 'femme' woman she appears to be but what she wants is a 'butch' lesbian rather than a biologically male mate. Neither the music video nor the album offer any clues on a 'correct' reading of this song and the resulting effect is quite marvellously unsettling.

In the third video from this album, 'You Have Placed a Chill on my Heart', Lennox appeared dressed in a long dark men's wool coat. Her hair was uncovered by a wig, and was still short and blond. She was made up to look almost sick – dark make-up in the eye area and little colour anywhere else on her face. This is a song that expresses disillusionment with love and the promises love brings, but despite the bitterness expressed at the beginning of the song, the singer does not lose hope. The video echoes this showing Lennox in a barren desert, or blindfolded outside an XXXX-Strip club as she sings 'Love is a temple, love is a shrine, buy some love at the five and dime'. These same lyrics at another point in the video are accompanied by a shot of Lennox-as-housewife pulling cleaning products from the shelves of a supermarket and loading up her cart.

Of the three songs in this trilogy, this is the only one in which Lennox sounds like the Annie Lennox of earlier Eurythmics releases. 'You Have Placed a Chill' is a more melodic song than the previous two, and it also exploits the highest part of Lennox's range as well as the area around her break. The full warmth of Lennox's voice, and the improvisatory, soul-inspired vocal lines in the backing tracks, are effectively contrasted with the synthesised instrumental lines. The aural impression that Lennox is 'herself' in this song is also confirmed in interviews in which she talked about this video. In an interview, Lennox described this third character as being herself, 'in the middle of the two' previous characters (Rogers 1988, p. 5). These descriptions are important, because they hint at Lennox's new approach to presenting herself through music videos, and to some extent music. Of the three figures presented in the videos, Lennox claims to be the one that is colourless. She hints at the fact that she sees herself as a rather ordinary person for whom dressing up and assuming different characters

provides a release. She essentially becomes a blank canvas upon which she can project different images of femininity, and the triumph of the colourless Annie over the other personas in this video serves to remind the viewer that neither of the archetypes invoked – repressed housewife and whore – are sufficient as a real identity.

The tactic employed by Lennox in these videos is one best described as homeovestism, that is, dressing up as a woman, masquerading as ‘a quintessential feminine type’ (Gamman and Makinen 1995, p. 70). The term homeovestism was originally coined in reference to the work of psychoanalyst Joan Riviere. In the 1940s, Riviere noted that as women began to work in traditionally masculine occupations, they were expected to retain a feminine appearance. Riviere saw displays of excessive femininity by successful career women as an attempt to compensate for their success in what they viewed as masculine pursuits (Gamman and Makinen 1995, pp. 70–1). Gender roles, and femininity in particular, were seen by Riviere as a form of masquerade.

Lennox had long hinted in interviews that image and style were something to be played with but not taken too seriously or read too literally. As early as 1984, Lennox had described her approach to image as ‘the visual presentation of me’ (Popson 1984, p. 18). By the 1990s, Lennox had found ways to express her dissatisfaction with pop music’s stereotyping and labelling in a more articulate way:

Sometimes, in order to create and develop in what you do, you have to step into another spot. You become entrenched by the labelling that people put upon you . . . I do what I do because that’s what I want to do – whatever anybody makes of it. (Alleman 1992, p. 264)

Videos made since *Savage* (1988) have continued to play with homeovestism, and Lennox has turned to the past, to nineteenth-century England, to old movies and to American popular culture for much of her inspiration. In the music video for ‘King and Queen of America’ (from the 1989 release, *We Two are One*), Lennox appeared in parodies of Vanna White, Tammy Faye Bakker, Nancy Reagan, Minnie Mouse, and a cheerleader as well as an American version of her middle-class housewife. She appeared at the 1995 Grammy awards dressed as Minnie Mouse, and when she appeared on *Late Night with David Letterman* in 1995, her three male backing singers were dressed in the same Minnie Mouse costumes. On the video that accompanied Lennox’s first solo album, *Diva*, veiled references to films and film stars of the 1940s such as Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe and Katherine Hepburn abound.¹³ Like early music-hall performers, Lennox’s characters are based on recognisable social ‘types’.

With her move away from overt masculinity, Lennox has had to find alternative ways of distancing herself from the characters she assumes. She can no longer rely on the shock of recognition that she is not what she first appears to be. While Lennox has not totally abandoned her androgynous style of dress in live performance, since 1988 and the release of *Savage*, she has also relied heavily on camp humour to undercut the believability of any female character she portrays.¹⁴ Camp is a difficult thing to define. In the entry under ‘Camp’ in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, Fabio Cleto notes the ‘slipperiness’ of this term, associating it with a mode of performance that exposes the artifice of what passes for natural (Cleto 2000, p. 164). Associated primarily with gay male culture, camp is ‘a style . . . that favours “exaggeration”, “artifice” and “extremity” . . . [it] exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture’ (Bergman 1993, p. 5). There are two prevailing styles of camp. Low camp, exemplified by the grotesque drag queen, often comes close to kitsch. High camp, on the other hand, is more restrained in its parody and almost always takes its

target seriously. As Christopher Isherwood wrote: '... true High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun *of* it; you're making fun *out* of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance' (Isherwood 1956, p. 106).

Since the release of *Savage*, and particularly since the beginning of her career as a solo artist, Lennox has relied primarily on high camp in artfully and seriously presenting every stereotype associated with women and simultaneously claiming and denying them all. Through performance she has portrayed virtuous women and prostitutes, madness and sanity, drag queens and butch women, middle-class and working-class women, and even men, and in each character be seeming to say, 'this is an aspect of me, but this is not who I am'. Lennox's rapidly changing identity and her consistent refusal to be pigeon-holed, I would argue, also serves to expose the performativity of gender, and undermine gender construction, in a manner akin to Judith Butler's theory of subversive reiteration.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler sees the performance of gender as 'the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990, p. 33). In Butler's view, all identity gains legitimacy through reiteration, whether it is that of the individual or of gender roles in general. Gender is not a voluntary 'performance', but it is '*performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express' (Butler 1993, p. 315). Butler suggests that gender roles can be changed, or at least challenged, through the 'subversive reiteration' of gender. These are acts that expose the constructedness of gender and sexuality and 'call into practice the regulatory practice of identity itself' (Butler 1990, p. 32). But women, and particularly heterosexual women, are largely ignored by Butler, who sees transvestism, or more specifically male-to-female drag, as one of the most effective means of subversive reiteration. Lennox's performance strategy, I would argue, suggests that homevestism rather than transvestism may provide a more effective means for heterosexual women, and possibly all women, to question and undermine contemporary constructions of femininity.

Lennox's approach to performing gender has certainly served to broaden the possibilities for women in pop music considerably, although few younger performers have employed similar performance strategies. Echoes of her sartorial style can be seen in the performances of k.d. lang. lang has also employed camp to destabilise her image as a butch lesbian. In 1992, lang appeared on the talk-show circuit to promote her cross-over album, *Ingenue*. At this point in her career, lang was known to be a lesbian, and when she appeared on the short-lived American late-night talk show hosted by Arsenio Hall she was dressed in a long, lacy gown (but with bare feet) to sing the song 'Miss Chatelaine'. Hall had clearly been expecting her to be 'butch', and lang's playful enactment of 'femmeness' left him absolutely speechless. lang's 1993 appearance on the cover of the magazine *Vanity Fair*, dressed in a pin-striped suit and being shaved by a barely clad Cindy Crawford is, on the other hand, an example of lang camping on her butchness.¹⁵ And lang's recent appearances with Tony Bennett singing ballads of the 1950s, in which lang often appears to be as masculine as the aging Bennett, also has the effect of destabilising gender construction because of the disjunction between the way lang looks and the way she sounds in performance.

Natalie Merchant, the singer who once fronted the band 10,000 Maniacs, also made some tentative moves in this direction with her 1998 solo release, *Ophelia*. On the

cover and sleeve of this CD, Merchant appeared dressed in a black evening dress, as a blonde athlete, as an inmate of an asylum, as a young college political delegate, and in a circus costume with a cape. The diversity of images on the cover did not seem to relate directly to the songs on the CD, however, although they were also used in music videos that accompanied single releases.

While there are still relatively few heterosexual singers who employ similar strategies, particularly that of homeovestism, Lennox's contribution and consistent commentary on gender should not be overlooked. Her challenge has been less controversial and confrontational than that of Madonna, for example, but I think over the long term it has deepened into a cutting critique of gender. Lennox's work has shown women in pop that it is possible to avoid the cute, sexy female pop singer image. Her work has opened up a space in which alternate and less (or differently) sexualised images of women are possible and it continues to create a space in popular music that does not rely on youth or prettiness. Lennox's work certainly serves as a model of what is possible for women who are dissatisfied with gender stereotypes, particularly those stereotypes that are still very much a part of the popular music industry even in the twenty-first century. And, as pop singers who began their careers in the 1980s and 1990s age, Lennox's work should become more relevant for female performers.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Whiteley 2000. In this essay, Whiteley concentrates on the early Eurythmics releases from the albums *Sweet Dreams* and *Touch*. Lucy O'Brien (1993) covers more of Lennox's career, but her discussions of Lennox's performances also focus on cross-dressing and androgyny. O'Brien does, however, discuss Lennox's use of camp as a means of making fun of the industry's expectations of her (pp. 93–4).
2. In a recent *Billboard* interview, Lennox explained that she was attracted to video as a medium because it was 'a way for me to be the many mes that I think I am'. http://www.billboard.com/billboard/specialreport/annie_lennox/pg3.jsp (1 March 2003, 9:00 a.m.)
3. See, for example, an image of Madonna from the music video 'Express Yourself' juxtaposed with a portrait of Una, Lady Troubridge (who was the partner of the lesbian novelist Radclyffe Hall) painted by Romaine Brooks in 1924, in Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests*. Madonna's visual citing of the earlier lesbian sartorial style is unmistakable and, like the Brooks portrait, despite the severity and 'mannishness' of the costume, the figure in the suit remains clearly female.
4. Probably the best example of this occurred during the 1984 Eurythmics Grammy performance in which Lennox appeared dressed as what critics called an 'Elvis impersonator'. The character she assumed at the Grammys was, in fact, a character known as 'Earl', a young working-class man of the 1950s who had made his first appearance in the video for 'Who's That Girl', from the Eurythmics album, *Touch* (1983).
5. No credit for musicians or backing singers is given on the cover of the CD.
6. Lennox has said that she enjoys singing her own backing vocals because the different harmony lines allow her to take on different personas. http://www.billboard.com/billboard/specialreport/annie_lennox/pg5.jsp (1 March 2003, 9:00 a.m.)
7. My own understanding of Lennox's performances, both on video and on stage, has very much been informed by my study of performers active in music hall and vaudeville. I had long admired Lennox's vocal abilities as well as her unique sense of style, but I had never thought about her theatrical approach nor considered her use of stereotypical characters until I began examining the acts of nineteenth-century performers.
8. Lucy O'Brien, for example, notes that rumours about Lennox's sexuality have circulated among fans since the early 1980s. Her 1985 feminist song, 'Sisters Are Doin' it for Themselves', was interpreted by some as an indication of her bisexuality or lesbianism, and even Aretha Franklin assumed that Lennox was a lesbian, which caused tension during the filming of the video for this song (pp. 83–4). This reading of Lennox as something other than heterosexual is confirmed in my own experience. In 1987, I attended a showing of the film *Eurythmics Live in Australia* in Honolulu, Hawaii. A large proportion of the women attending on this occasion were

- lesbians, and during the performance of 'Sisters ...' they sang along with Lennox, transforming the song into an explicitly lesbian anthem through a change in lyrics to 'Sisters are doin' it TO themselves'. Interestingly, in a recent *Billboard* interview, Lennox noted that she long assumed that listeners would hear this song as referencing female masturbation (http://www.billboard.com/billboard/specialreport/annie_lennox/pg5.jsp [1 March 2003, 9:00 a.m.]
9. See, for example, *Rolling Stone*, 29 September 1983, p. 24; *Washington Post*, 21 March 1984, p. B15; or the *New York Times*, 3 August 1984, p. C5. The last two are particularly interesting because they mention Lennox's appearance at the Grammys in March, and work particularly hard to recuperate her from perceived charges of being overly butch. Lennox's frustration with interviews is readily apparent in the information attributed to her in the opening paragraph of the concert review in the *Washington Post*, 31 August 1984, pp. F1, F5–6.
 10. This video is included on the compilation *Eurythmics greatest hits*, 1991.
 11. O'Brien notes that 'You Have Placed a Chill on my Heart' was the most successful single release from this album, reaching number 16 in the UK charts. None of the other three singles released, 'Beethoven', 'Shame' and 'I Need a Man', made it into the top 20 in the UK charts (O'Brien 1993, p. 132). None of the three singles released in the US (all of the above except 'Shame') made it into the top 40 (see http://www.rockonthenet.com/artists-e/eurythmics_main.htm, 17 February 2003, 4:30 p.m.).
 12. The three videos discussed are included on the compilation *Eurythmics greatest hits*, 1991.
 13. See *Totally Diva*, 1992.
 14. While Lennox most often appears in live performance in trousers, in 1986 she began to strip down to her bra on stage, and on at least one occasion she took the bra off as a slap in the face to those who thought she was not sexual enough. Camp humour is most evident in the videos for Lennox's solo work, particularly the videos that accompany her second solo CD *Medusa* (1995), but I have also seen it in videos of her live performances. It most often manifests itself in a certain self-conscious self-parody, in overly large physical movements that serve to undercut the meaning or intent of the text being sung, and sometimes in an over-the-top musical excess – for example in the call and response, the exaggerated final descending run and sobbing finish to the performance of 'You Have Placed a Chill in my Heart', performed in the Central Park concert in 1995.
 15. This photo appeared on the August 1983 issue of *Vanity Fair* (Vol. 56, no. 8). In the article that accompanies these photographs by Herb Ritts, Leslie Bennetts writes: 'Watching lang, you inevitably think about what this culture has traditionally defined as feminine: frothy masses or tortured hair, thick layers of makeup, lips dripping with sticky artificial gloss, false eyelashes painstakingly applied with glue, waist-cinching gowns you can hardly breathe in, let alone move, high heels that make you mince and totter instead of striding around as if you owned the stage. And they call k.d. lang unnatural?' (p. 98).

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