

**Calling Homer's Sirens
on Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's "Telephone"**

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The Sirens first appear in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey*, where they call out to Odysseus' ship in their famously deadly voices, "You can call all you want / But there's no one home / And you're not gonna reach my telephone."

If that claim were true, then the Western tradition of the feminine singing voice might have taken a radically different course. In place of this catchy pop refusal—which actually belongs to pop diva Lady Gaga—the Sirens instead send a vocal invitation to the Greek hero Odysseus. They attempt to lure him into their oceanic meadow by offering a tempting song about the Trojan War, from which he is attempting to make his way home.

I have opened by blurring the lyrics of Gaga and the Sirens, because Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's 2009 single "Telephone," a song which participates in a long tradition of dangerous feminine vocality, which can be traced back to Homer's Sirens. The message in the song of Homer's Sirens may actually seem diametrically opposed to Lady Gaga's lyrics in "Telephone":

'Odysseus! Come here! You are well-known
from many stories! Glory of the Greeks!
Now stop your ship and listen to our voices.
All those who pass this way hear honeyed song,
poured from our mouths. The music brings them joy,
and they go on their way with greater knowledge,
since we know everything the Greeks and Trojans
suffered in Troy, by gods' will: and we know
whatever happens anywhere on earth.'

(Homer *Odyssey* 12.183-91, trans. E. Wilson [2018] 307)

The Sirens offer an invitation to prolonged vocal experience, in which "all those who pass this way" have allegedly enjoyed, whereas Gaga's lyrics in "Telephone" deny the anonymous addressee access to her voice. Despite the apparent differences in the lyrical messages of their songs, the Sirens and Lady Gaga occupy a shared cultural heritage, and they both wield a mellifluous weapon in their throats. In this essay, I examine "Telephone" in the context of Homer's *Odyssey* in order to demonstrate the ways in which the Sirens' vocal danger operates both within and beyond classical antiquity. The Homeric Sirens provide an archetypal figuration of the nexus between music, death, and pleasure. Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's lyrics and video for "Telephone" adopt themes that are

central to Homer's representation of the Sirens, in order to both reclaim and overturn the Sirens' unique mode of vocal danger.

Unlike the voices of the Sirens, the voices of pop divas do not literally threaten the lives of their listeners—imagine what trouble we'd be in every time we enter a grocery store and “Crazy in Love” should seep from the speakers! Nevertheless, Lady Gaga's and Beyoncé's voices wield an ideological danger when they make active claims to their own power. Gaga and Beyoncé call upon a tradition of honey-voiced women whose voices can threaten both physically and ideologically, since they send forth an invitation to move beyond rigid patriarchal sexual expectations into feminine openness and multiplicity.

In a way that resembles Homer's pair of Sirens, Lady Gaga and Beyoncé collaboratively stake a claim to a new mode of multi-vocal power in “Telephone.” In the lyrics and video for “Telephone,” Gaga and Beyoncé offer a critique of the relationship between the seductive, feminine singer and her greedy audiences, and the two divas collaborate to dismantle a world which confines their bodies while asserting entitlement to their honey-sweet voices.

The “Honeyed Song” of Homer's Sirens

Of all the sweet voices that resound through ancient Greek myth, the Sirenic voice presents the most developed portrait of the matrix of temptation, interiority, and fatality that accompanies the allure of music. The Sirens' song operates in a manner that paradoxically caters to and precludes the possibility of satisfying the hero's desires. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the Sirens offer to their audience a melodious rendition of the listeners' deepest longing, translated into song. To Odysseus—a Greek hero known for his cunning and for his prolonged attempt to return home and secure heroic glory—they offer intellectual pleasure, coupled with the temptation of heroic praise and glorification in immediate and enticing song.

The Sirens extend an invitation to Odysseus to hear more of their singing, but Odysseus' audience never gains access to the song they promise. The full extent of their vocal presence in the *Odyssey* is limited to the passage quoted above, which is not interwoven into the main narrative, but is instead delivered by the Sirens' audience (Odysseus), when Odysseus narrates his adventures at sea to King Alcinous and Queen Arete's court in Phaeacia. Odysseus' quotation of the Sirens' words creates an illusion of access to the song, but the ears of Odysseus' crew, of the Phaeacians, and of the *Odyssey*'s broader audience, are blocked from the immediate experience of the Sirenic voice.

From Odysseus' elusive account of the Sirens' singing emerges an uncanny form of uncertainty surrounding these singing creatures. This uncertainty is enhanced by the fact that Odysseus gives no description of or allusion to the Sirens' physical appearance: his description of the encounter implies that Odysseus never *sees* the Sirens at all, but only *hears* their song. Later Greek and Roman authors depict the Sirens as bird-human hybrids, but Odysseus' account makes no mention of these avian features. Perhaps this is the case because Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens is exclusively auditory, or because it was assumed that the audience would infer their avian bodies as common knowledge. Or, perhaps the Sirens' bodies merit no description because their monstrous allure and danger are located in the Sirens' voices, rather than in their physical forms.

Before his encounter with the Sirens, Odysseus is warned about their power from the immortal witch Circe, a goddess who sings and turns men into pigs. She cautions him of the Sirens' threat to his ship and describes the corpse-strewn, oceanic meadow in which the Sirens reside. But discrepancies emerge between Circe's forewarning about the Sirens and Odysseus' description of his encounter with the Sirens, and these inconsistencies add a layer of unknowability to the entire episode. Their bone-covered meadow is absent in Odysseus' account: was it really there? Did Odysseus see it? Both Odysseus and Circe tantalizingly omit any description of the aesthetic experience of listening to the Sirens' song—what on *earth* is it *like*?—and Odysseus also leaves out any indication of whether the song continued past the invitation he quotes to the Phaeacians.

Circe's strategy to get past the Sirens is as follows: Odysseus must instruct his men to tie him to the mast, thereby taking away his agency and preventing him from sailing to the Sirens' shores. Circe thus offers Odysseus a plan of action that allows him a brief sonic encounter with the song that no previous audience has survived. Odysseus' men, who are denied the privilege of hearing the Sirens' song, are instructed to row on, their ears filled with wax to block the powerful sound from entering their ears and enchanting them. Through his special status as a hero, Odysseus is the one who can be penetrated by the Sirens' magical music and still carry on with his life.

And through the wisdom of Circe, Odysseus' survival strategy draws inspiration from the Sirens' very own monstrous techniques in order to survive their deadly song: the power of the Sirens' spell-binding song is here undermined by the literal binding of the man to the mast. Furthermore, their honey-sweet sound is blocked from the ears of the crew by beeswax. This device repurposes the monsters' tools, since the

honey-sweet quality that fuels the Sirenic vocal seduction is blockaded by wax, another apian product.

While Odysseus desperately attempts to secure a future for himself in Ithaca throughout his adventures at sea, the Sirens dangle before him the bait of surrendering, letting go, and sinking into his past accomplishments at the expense of forging new glories. The song of the Sirens positions Odysseus' military past – to be recalled in the Sirens' implied songs of the Trojan War – in precarious competition with the Odysseus' present attempt to journey home and ultimately secure a future for himself in Ithaca. The Sirens therefore threaten to distract the hero from the social and familial responsibilities that propel Odysseus' homecoming narrative: Odysseus can persist in his long journey home, or he can rest and enjoy the sweet song of the Sirens, who offer musical celebrations of the hero and his Trojan victories. To Odysseus, whose notoriously difficult journey attempts a particular mode of return (the *nostos*, or 'homecoming'), the Sirens offer a return that is more readily available—the escapist comfort of sublimely gorgeous song, and its own unique mode of return and glory, here and now, or here, in a little bit... if you just sail a *little* closer. In the realm of the Sirens, the past threatens to triumph over the present and future: it is the temptation of hearing these former glories, transformed into gorgeous music by the legendary Sirens, that nearly draws Odysseus into oblivion, and nearly snatches the *Odyssey* away from the purview of the Sirens' less nefarious counterpart—the Muses, who will provide inspiration for poets to sing of Odysseus' adventures and glories.

When he encounters the Sirens, Odysseus has broken away from the various divine and bodily temptations of goddesses like Circe and Calypso—he has even refused Calypso's offer of immortality—but the Sirens issue an even more profoundly enticing pull for Odysseus, despite the fact that they do not offer their bodies, nor do they wield a divine power that could physically keep him from continuing his journey. Instead, the Sirens tempt him with their voices, which wrap themselves around his *kleos*: the story of his very own glory. They invite him to surrender and relax into a narcissistic whirlpool of oblivion, which would of course ironically result in the annihilation of Odysseus' own body and *kleos*. In this way, surpassing the Sirens becomes Odysseus' ultimate challenge to and for his own unique form of heroism.

The seduction of the Sirens' song is not an overtly physical one, although the Sirens' reception history sexualizes their bodies as well as their voices. Homer's Sirens are what we might call 'all voice, no body,' insofar as the *Odyssey* offers no description of the Sirens' physiology. Indeed, Homer's Sirens engender an intense psycho-physiological

experience for their listener through the medium of the voice itself, rather than through visuality or tactility. The erotic power of listening to a voice, the *Odyssey* seems to say, transcends the mere visuality and corporeality typical of erotic encounters.

The Sirens themselves sing honeyed words that ooze into Odysseus' ears, and they ascertain his identity, the status of his journey, and his unique desires for *return*, in order to enact their unique mode of alluring monstrosity. This is perhaps why Odysseus does not describe the song more fully: the Sirens' song is so seductive because it is specifically composed *for him*, rather than for a general audience. Any attempt to render it more completely would result in an inadequate representation of its power. Just as Odysseus repurposes the Sirenic 'technology' of binding c(h)ords and products made by bees, they too identify and exploit Odysseus' own drive toward return that propels his *nostos*. And so, this hero and these monsters engage in a coy game of intellect, strategy, and sensory pleasure, where both parties identify the other's suprahuman techniques and tendencies, and utilize them in order to gain power over one another.

We're sorry: The Sirens Can't Come to the Phone Right Now

Although there are no overt references to mythical Sirens in Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's lyrics or video for "Telephone," this multi-media text nevertheless engages with the Sirenic tradition of deadly but honey-sweet voices, and does so from a posture of reclamation and revision. The characters played by Lady Gaga and Beyoncé serve as our YouTube Sirens, and they dually assert control over their own voices, their own allure, and their own fatality. They claim an active role in responding to the reception of their voices and seem to propose an end to greedy consumption of Sirenic song, when they add poison to their 'honey' in order to commit a crime of vengeance against Honey B (Beyoncé)'s abusive boyfriend.

But before Gaga and Honey B start mixing noxious potions, the video opens with a host of images of vocal mediation. The video's first setting is a prison, and the camera moves through shots of barbed wire, gates, fences, and walls. The video's early visual landscape consistently emphasizes the vivid boundedness of this space, and also depicts an 'outside world' through the bars and gates of the prison. In addition to being figured as a site of contained volatility and power, the attention to the prison's visual environment enforces the idea that the viewer is witnessing a specifically feminine realm: this space is not only a prison, but a "prison for bitches." The reader of the *Odyssey* encounters a similarly evocative treatment of the Sirens' isle, as an eerie onset of calm

signals the arrival into the domain of the Sirens, and a cloud of smoke signifies the departure from this space.

In concert with the physical boundedness of the prison, vocal mediation becomes a central motif within the video. The way that the voice enters and performs within the video in many ways parallels that of the Homeric Sirens: Gaga's voice creeps into the cinematic scene just as the Sirens' voices do in Homer's song. As the camera leads the viewer to the exercise yard of the prison, the boombox quietly plays "Paper Gangsta," a song from Lady Gaga's 2008 album *The Fame*. We see no singer: this voice arrives through the machine, evoking a musical past for Lady Gaga (her previous album), in the same way that the Sirens' song crawls onto the scene without their bodies and evokes Odysseus' own past in the form of song.

The song's title, "Telephone," as well as the multiple telephones that feature in the video, furthermore emphasize the mediation of Sirenic voice itself. Where the Sirens' voices are mediated by Odysseus' own narration of their song, here too Gaga's voice is mediated through both boombox and telephone, and the voices of both sets of Sirens, ancient and modern, enter the visual scene before the body of the singer does. In both texts, voice and body are initially estranged in the audience's experience. But while the Sirens' corporal forms never constitute a major locus of temptation, the visual incarnations of Lady Gaga and Beyoncé stream across the video in a way that suggests *unmediated*, naked access to these divas. Despite this seeming availability of the diva's body in "Telephone," their voices almost always enter the video's scenes from an external space: for most of the video, Gaga and Honey B sing into telephones, or don't sing at all. They fill the landscape with song, yet deny the visual performance of singing itself, just as the Sirens do. There are no claims made to *real* embodied singing—only to mediated voice.

"Telephone" engages with the forms of mediation that characterize Sirenic voice, and the video employs the mediating technologies of the telephone, the security camera, and the newscast, *not* in a way that binds their song into safety—as in Homer's *Odyssey*—but rather to allow its widespread transmission. Although the video's representation of voice emphasizes mediation, it is precisely technological mediation that allows Gaga and Honey B's voices to extend outside of the 'moment' of organic singing. Through recording technology, these divas' voices are detached from their physical bodies, allowing them to act remotely as a soundtrack to scenes of empowerment and to allow the divas to reject unwanted communication. Like an automated voice mail answering message, Gaga detaches her voice from her body—"Stop calling, stop calling, I don't

want to talk anymore”—and she thus inverts the Sirenic message of invitation to further song.

The second crucial connection between Odyssean Sirens and Gaga and Honey B in “Telephone” pivots on the use of “honey” as either a descriptor or a metonym of the alluring feminine voice. Honey appears in various forms throughout the video: Beyoncé’s character is of course called “Honey B,” and when she bails Gaga out from prison, Honey B is eating a honey cake, which she then feeds to Gaga in an eroticized exchange. Later, in the video’s diner scene, bottles of honey labeled with cartoon bees sit on the tables. Honey B is dressed in yellow, and her verbally abusive boyfriend pours out a whole jar of honey onto his waffle while he yells at Honey B and she sits in silence. Meanwhile, in the diner’s kitchen, Gaga poisons the bottles of honey and assembles poisoned sandwiches. Honey B pours yet more poison into the boyfriend’s coffee, which makes him cough and gag. When the poison takes effect and stops the flow from his abusive voice, Honey B quips—ostensibly to her dying boyfriend, but looking directly at the camera—“I knew you’d take all of my honey, you selfish mother[BLEEP]er.” The video’s tongue-in-cheek self-censorship of Honey B’s voice (“mother[*BLEEP*]er”) continues when Honey B subsequently covers her mouth in a parody of feminine modesty. This coy play at vocal modesty is what reveals to the audience that it is her *voice*, her honey, which has poisoned her boyfriend.

Honey and the voice are linked in both Sirenic narratives considered here, and honey and voice are both what is taken from Sirens and divas by their audiences. Odysseus takes honey from the Sirens by listening to their voices, consuming them, and circumventing the poison in the honey; Honey B’s boyfriend in “Telephone” attempts to consume all of her honey, while she sits without food or voice of her own. This poisoned honey is not, however, reserved for Honey B’s boyfriend alone; instead, the scope of Gaga and Honey B’s vengeance is not limited to a single man, but for a larger cultural narrative about the feminine voice. All of the diner’s inhabitants begin to choke on their honey-doused food; even the dog is poisoned. The camera rapidly cuts through images of different diners chewing, with loud and exaggerated noises, and eventually choking and vomiting. Gaga and Honey B dance in the center of the diner, surrounded by corpses. The Sirens’ corpse-strewn meadow is translated into the language of an American diner and a high-budget music video, while the divas sing, kill, and dance around those who consume their honey.

In both texts considered here, a pair of alluring feminine singers pours out a dangerously sweet sound, but the honey operates differently in the

Odyssey and in “Telephone.” In the *Odyssey*, the Sirens’ mellifluous voices *are* poison, in the sense that the consumption thereof results in death for their sea-faring audience. In “Telephone,” the narrative and imagery conjure an environment in which the divas’ honey is consumed with avarice (just as the dynamic between the singer and the greedy captain unfolds in George Lockett’s “The Last Siren Sings”), and so the divas take control of their honey by adding poison *to* it. Each individual in the diner—and perhaps each individual who views the “Telephone” video—is implicated in the practice of hungry and selfish consumption of the divas’ voices. Gaga and Honey B collectively revolt against the countless Odyssean figures who seek to take their vocal sweetness in ways they deem unacceptable.

A tension emerges: Gaga and Honey B violently punish their audience, despite the fact that the pop diva’s voice is marketed to be heard and consumed on a massive scale, and this mass proliferation of the diva’s voice is a central element of Lady Gaga’s self-fashioning as a pop star. We must consider, then, that it is not the generalized act of acoustic consumption itself that leads Gaga and Honey B to their honey-dripping homicide; instead, they warn against a certain mode of listening which dismisses or undermines their power.

“Telephone” thus offers a cautionary tale with a moral lesson for its viewers: if the audience interprets certain sexualized images as invitations to a gluttonous sensory feast and fails to recognize the singers’ autonomy over their own voices and bodies, they can—and will—poison that honey. For example, Gaga’s costuming throughout the video often displays the majority of her body. In her jail cell, a crime-scene tape-clothed Gaga cycles through a rapid series of poses that parody traditionally erotic postures. A viewer may consume these images merely as a bouquet of sensory pleasure, as pornography. But the outfit itself is both a warning and a prohibition: “CRIME SCENE—DO NOT CROSS.” Here Gaga’s costume signifies the *inaccessibility* of her body, which is in turn heightened by the fact that she poses alone in a cell. The viewer may gaze through the bars, but the only pleasure that Gaga invites is her own, while she touches herself and suggestively licks the blade of a knife.

If these images are eroticized, then the sexual pleasure centered here is that of a diva alone with herself, her power, and her unavailability. This scene is transposed over lyrics that also emphasizes the singer’s refusal to make herself available for another, as she sings,

Call all you want, but there’s no one home
And you’re not gonna reach my telephone
'Cause I’m out in the club and I’m sippin’ that bubb’

And you're not gonna reach my telephone.

(Lady Gaga, "Telephone")

The images, gestures, and lyrics all cooperate to suggest that the viewer, or caller, may freely seek access to Gaga, but she offers no availability. The viewer may gaze upon her image, but "there's no one home" to answer, because she's "out in the club," seeking and generating her own pleasure.

Gaga and Honey B thus work together to stage the death of a community of consumers who assume greedy access to their voices and bodies. The divas therefore offer something like a lesson for those who engage with their voices and bodies inappropriately, but they do not offer an alternative model for how to engage with their voices in a safer context. Instead, they operate within a framework which Jack Halberstam has termed "Gaga feminism," which dismantles normative models of gender and sexuality without offering concrete alternatives. Halberstam situates this as a feminism that creates openings and does not prescribe, but instead points toward potent ambiguities. We can see this Gaga feminism at work in the video's end. A television set plays a news report on the divas' mass homicide, and Gaga and Honey B engage in the following dialogue.

Gaga: We did it, Honey B. Now let's go far, far away from here.

Honey B: You promise we'll never come back?

Gaga: I promise.

("Telephone")

Gaga and Honey B vow to move forward together from their act of destruction, but the viewer has no clear indication of where they are headed. Instead, the Thelma and Louise-styled divas clasp hands, drive away, and text appears on the screen, which reads "To be continued..."

Through the course of the video, Gaga and Beyoncé therefore move from spaces of fixed boundedness to vistas of ambiguous openness. The video opens with Gaga in a "prison for bitches" and Beyoncé in an abusive and exploitative relationship with a man, and concludes with two friends driving on the open road, heading to an unnamed elsewhere. The video ends with this new beginning, which reveals just how much these divas have both adopted and subverted the Sirenic tradition. Where the Sirens remain on their flowery oceanic meadow, waiting for sailors to pass, issuing invitations, and bringing about mysterious deaths, Gaga and Honey B cooperate to break out of the Sirenic graveyard, destroy those who participate in their vocal exploitation, and leave the evidence behind on countless screens, phones, and speakers (instead of in one measly set of Odyssean ears!) and they drive into the distance, hand in hand.

Making Monsters

Suggested readings

- Elizabeth Alexander, *Diva Studies: A Verse Play*, 1996
- Linda Austern & Inna Naroditskaya, *Music of the Sirens*, Indiana University Press, 2006.
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- Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, Da Capo Press, 2001.
- Susan Leonardi & Rebecca Pope, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*, Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Morgan Parker, *There are More Beautiful Things than Beyoncé*, Ti House Books, 2017.
- Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*, University of California Press, 2005.