

## HETEROSEXUAL ANDROGyny, QUEER HYPERMASCULINITY, AND HETERONORMATIVE INFLUENCE IN THE MUSIC OF FREDDIE MERCURY AND QUEEN

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### **ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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In a musical career that spanned two decades, Freddie Mercury served as lead vocalist and chief songwriter for the rock band, Queen. Initially regarded as a glam-metal outfit, they later experimented with more eclectic musical styles, notably the rock-opera fusion that characterized Mercury's widely successful composition, "Bohemian Rhapsody." Mercury's use of imagery in live performances and music videos helped to shape responses to his lyrics and music. His change in appearance from androgynous, heterosexual rock star to "gay macho clone" led many to speculate that he was homosexual, although he never disclosed his orientation until shortly before his death. His protean appearance contrasted with his lyrical and musical consistency and provided alternative avenues for interpreting his music beyond the scope of heteronormativity. Many songs that were initially construed as reflecting his assumed heterosexuality were later interpreted as expressions of his homosexuality. Mercury has retained a legacy amongst admirers of differing sexual orientations, from members of the gay community during the early years of the AIDS epidemic to sports fans in stadiums around the world.

Heteronormativity, according to Judith Butler, assumes heterosexuality as the norm, and deviation from heterosexuality as unnatural or abnormal. The apparent tendency to avoid decentralization of sexual identities and to default to heteronormative viewpoints is evident in the rock and pop music of Freddie Mercury and Queen. The contrast between Mercury's appearance in the 1980s and the lyrics of his compositions, coupled with the ambiguity of his sexual identity and public reactions to his wardrobe changes, exemplifies the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in popular culture and music. This paper explores incongruities between Mercury's lyrics and his stage persona from Queen's inception to his 1986 live performance with them at Wembley Stadium, England.

Freddie Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara on September 5, 1946, in Zanzibar, Tanzania, to a family of Parsees, or Zoroastrian Indians (Smith). He attended boarding school in Bombay, India, for most of his childhood, and he began cultivating his interest in the fine arts from an early age, particularly by playing the piano. In 1964, he moved with his family to England (Smith), and graduated in 1969 from Ealing College of Art with a degree in graphic design (Ressner). Mercury later used his talents to design Queen's crest shortly before the release of the band's first album. At this time, he met future band mates, drummer Roger Taylor and guitarist Brian May. Each of them had been involved with other musical projects, but in 1970, they formed the band that Mercury dubbed "Queen" (Smith). Although Mercury had identified as a heterosexual throughout most the 70s, I think his decision to name the band "Queen" unearthed underlying homosexual inclinations. Conversely, this might not have been construed to such a definitive extreme given the androgynous image that all of the band members were actively displaying during the band's early years. Regarding his decision, Mercury stated in a 1977 *Rolling Stone* interview, "It [Queen] was a very strong name, very universal and immediate; it had a lot of visual potential and was open to all sorts of interpretations. I was certainly aware of the gay connotations, but that was just one facet of it" (Ressner). The band's lineup was completed after bassist John Deacon was recruited in 1971.

Although elements of Mercury's then-latent homosexuality were hinted at through his naming of the band and his flamboyancy, he remained guarded about his sexuality until shortly before his death. In

a 1974 interview with *NME*, he stated, "I'm as gay as a daffodil, my dear," but retracted this statement in a later interview (Webb). After press reports asserting Mercury's homosexuality following the release of the controversial video for "I Want to Break Free," he added, "If I tried that on, people would start yawning, 'Oh, God, here's Freddie saying he's gay because it's very trendy'" (Ressner). Moreover, he consistently denied that he had contracted AIDS, which was by many considered a disease exclusive to the gay community, until the day before his death. Nevertheless, his sexual orientation was regarded as an open secret in the music industry (Ressner). Regardless of his public statements and early media speculation, the drastic shift in his appearance from the 1970s to the 1980s provided greater insight into his sexual identity, as it reflected his self-discovery as a gay male (Lewis).

Queen originated as a glam-metal band (Brackett and Hoard 668), and much of the music on their self-titled debut bore strong stylistic semblances to hard rock and heavy metal pioneers, particularly Led Zeppelin. In accordance with their musical style and with other contemporary acts, all members of the band adopted an androgynous appearance with long, stylized hair and effeminate clothing. As evidenced in the music videos for "Killer Queen" and "Now I'm Here," Mercury used eyeliner, nail polish, jewelry, and flamboyant, decorated clothing. With the releases of their third and subsequent albums, the band began experimenting with more eclectic musical styles, most notably the rock-opera fusion that characterized Mercury's extravagant "Bohemian Rhapsody." Queen introduced elements of camp into their music that distanced them from the very aggressive, strongly heterosexual hard rock sounds of their first two albums. However, despite Mercury's gender bending and androgyny, he still maintained his heterosexuality throughout the decade. He had been involved in a long-term relationship with a woman, Mary Austin ("Kenny Everett"), and he addressed women in many of his songs, particularly "Killer Queen" and "Bicycle Race," in which he alludes to "fat bottomed girls," the title and subject of a Brian May composition.

In 1980, Mercury abandoned the androgynous look, cut his hair short, grew a mustache, and started appearing more often in jeans and a sleeveless shirt. He also incorporated sadomasochistic imagery into his wardrobe, borrowing from the leather-clad gay biker subculture ("Freddie Mercury"). This change in his appearance was sparked in part by his newfound friendship with the radio DJ, Kenny Everett, who was also a homosexual man involved in a relationship with a woman ("Kenny Everett"). As Everett's confidant, Mercury discovered his own sexual identity, since the lives of the two paralleled ("When Freddie Mercury Met Kenney Everett"). In her seminal essay on masculinities and queer culture, Rachel Lewis described Mercury's transformation into a "gay macho clone." In the late 1970s, a masculine gay subculture emerged in which gay men sought to express their homosexuality while exercising gender conformity to traditional masculine norms (Levine and Kimmel 1). While gay macho "demonstrated acquiescence to prescribed gender norms, it also represented a break from the stereotypical images of gay men." In a society that chastised men for effeminacy, adopting a more outwardly masculine appearance afforded many gay men the freedom to explore their sexuality with less public scrutiny over their appearance and lifestyle choices. Mercury's use of clone imagery, however, had the opposite effect, with many fans interpreting it as a declaration of his homosexuality; some even proceeded to throw razor blades on stage at him during live performances (Ressner). Subsequently, the band's international popularity began to diminish, although they still remained successful for many years in the United Kingdom (Brackett and Hoard 668).

The change in Mercury's appearance over the course of his musical career with Queen provides an interesting framework for analyzing heteronormativity in the context of their music. Indeed, despite his changing physical appearance, there was a stylistic and lyrical consistency amongst many of his compositions. For example, campy, embellished workings of vaudeville, blues-rock, and rock-opera styles exemplify "Killer Queen," "Crazy Little Thing Called Love," and "Bohemian Rhapsody." Thematically, many of his songs that were released as singles dealt with personal relationships, loneliness, longing, and love, unrequited or otherwise. Thus, because Mercury outwardly represented two distinct individuals over his tenure with Queen, there were essentially two different men singing virtually the same songs. This was especially the case when the "gay macho" Mercury of the 80s performed songs live that were written by his androgynous, heterosexual self of the 70s. Furthermore, the meaning of a single song was largely influenced by which of his two personas was singing it.

Although one might assume that his songs from the 70s expressed heterosexual sentiments, these same songs could, after 1980, be interpreted as expressions of homosexuality.

The 1974 release of the Mercury composition, "Killer Queen," from Queen's third album, *Sheer Heart Attack*, launched the band's international success (Webb). This song is especially important as an expression of Mercury's homosexuality, his personal breakthrough in the discovery of his sexual identity. He addresses a woman in his lyrics, with lines such as "She keeps a Moët et Chandon/In a pretty cabinet," "She never kept the same address," and explicitly in the chorus, "She's a killer queen." In addition to the pronouns that identify the person as a woman, Mercury emphasizes that, "She spoke just like baroness," and compares her to Marie Antoinette. Furthermore, in a 1974 interview with *NME*, he explained about the song, "It's about a high class girl. I'm trying to say that classy people can be whores as well." He qualified this comment, however, by adding that he would prefer the listener to interpret it in his or her own way, and "to read into it what they like" (Webb). Thus, he suggested that there was another dimension to the lyrics beyond the heteronormative viewpoint. Moreover, parallels between the band's name and the song's title support this proposition. Because Mercury used the term "Queen" to refer to the collective of four men that comprised the band, a "killer queen" could also be a biological male that challenged gender conventions and was addressed as a woman. In addition, the changes in Mercury's appearance over the years coupled with the redefinition of his sexuality calls his heteronormative explanation of the song into question.

The music video for "Killer Queen" features the band performing on a colorful set with a spotlight focused on Mercury. Although it was filmed when Mercury presented an androgynous persona, he appeared much more feminine in this video than in other 70s Queen videos. He wears black nail polish, much jewelry, a feminine fur coat, and very deliberately styled long hair. His femininity is highlighted by the fact that his band mates appear in traditionally male clothing, with May and Deacon wearing suits, and Taylor wearing a dress shirt and a tie. Thus, they appear as suitors, with Mercury assuming the role of a high class "killer queen." This suggests that the song's subject could be a biological male similar to Mercury. Because the individual who served as the inspiration for the lyrics was never revealed, the "killer queen's" gender remains a source of contention (Smith). Eric Hall, Queen's promotion manager at the time, claimed that Mercury told him that the song was about him, and that he was a "killer" because the heterosexual Hall would never reciprocate Mercury's affection. He defended his claim by adding that he used to keep expensive champagne in a fancy cabinet, and that his hairstyle reminded Mercury of Marie Antoinette's. Moreover, he regarded Mercury's androgynous appearance and the aspects of his performance in the video as an "audio-visual mating call" ("Freddie's Loves"), highlighting his overtly feminine act as an expression of homosexual sentiments.

Mercury's appearance also influences one's response to the 1984 single, "I Want to Break Free," which appeared on Queen's tenth studio album, *The Works*. In contrast to "Killer Queen," the music video features the hypermasculine, mustachioed Mercury of the 80s, but homosexual undertones pervade the song's lyrics. In addition, for portions of the video the band appears in drag, with Mercury portraying a buxom housewife, frustrated by traditional norms of female domesticity. He notably retains his mustache while dressed as a woman, and by maintaining this element of gay clone imagery, he links the music and accompanying video to his homosexuality. By singing, "I want to break free/I want to break free from your lies/You're so self-satisfied, I don't need you," while dressed as a woman, he comments on these very same lyrics as he sang them in his 70s androgynous persona. But video viewers who associated this image with heterosexuality, particularly through performances of "Fat Bottomed Girls" and "Bicycle Race," would have adopted a heteronormative perspective and assumed Mercury was singing about moving from a relationship with one woman to another. When singing the same verses in drag, Mercury seems to be addressing another man. In fact, the lyrics may express a gay man's desire to escape from a heterosexual relationship.

After singing the first verse, Mercury opens a closet door to reveal the shirtless, shorthaired, masculine identity that he adopted in the 80s. This implies the act of "coming out of the closet," or explicitly declaring one's homosexuality to others for the first time. Moreover, this imagery parallels the lyrics as Mercury sings, "I've fallen in love/I've fallen in love for the first time/And this time I know it's for real." He seems to accept his homosexuality as he engages in his first relationship with another male.

Had there been no accompanying music video or visual imagery, heteronormativity would dominate. Because Mercury does not categorically reveal the gender of the individual whom he is addressing, it would be easy to assume he was singing of his relationships with women. The imagery employed by the band had a very clear impact on their audience, as evidenced by the single's lack of success in the U.S., where there was an outcry against the music video. According to Brian May, "When we did the video in drag, everyone in England thought it was very funny, but America hated it and looked on at it as some gross insult" (Ressner). The song would have been generally popular had it been written and released in the 70s when Mercury was still regarded as heterosexual, or if there had been no music video. Alternatively, the video would have been less controversial had it been released twenty years later, when homosexuality was more accepted. Although the imagery that Queen employed initially incited controversy, it was crucial in challenging public notions about sexuality by departing from heteronormative standards.

The public's reaction to changes in Mercury's appearance reflects their changing response to his lyrics and music. Queen's American legacy is reflected in compositions that predated 80s, when Mercury was still regarded as a heterosexual (Smith). "We Will Rock You" and "We Are the Champions," released as singles in 1977, have been universally embraced as sports anthems, and are "heard around the world at sports stadiums and wherever else thousands of people gather for some form of gladiatorial combat" (Brackett and Hoard 668). "We Will Rock You" employs a simple foot-stomp and handclap pattern, as well as a multitracked chorus, which were deliberately crafted to elicit audience participation (Wawzenek). In "We Are the Champions," Mercury sings about triumphing over various hardships, without references to love, relationships, or sexuality. Both songs, however, seem to be characterized by elements of subtle high camp in that the hypermasculine and highly aggressive music and imagery verge on being performative and preconceived, although this may be inadvertent. Therefore, while the songs do not explicitly express sexuality, they retain traces of the camp characteristic of Queen's music.

Queen achieved much greater, more prolonged success in the United Kingdom despite the change in Mercury's appearance in 1980. Their 1985 Live Aid performance was voted the greatest rock performance in an industry poll, winning out against more outwardly heterosexual and harder rock performers, Jimi Hendrix and the Sex Pistols ("Queen Win Greatest Live Gig Poll"). Additionally, BBC Radio 2 listeners voted Queen the best British band of all time, basing their decision on songwriting, lyrics, live performances, and showmanship ("Queen Declared 'Top British Band'"). The differences in the opinions of British and American Queen fans have not been extensively explored, but it is likely that British fans were more tolerant and accepting and that American homophobia was exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic, since many Americans regarded AIDS as a "gay men's disease." Moreover, in England, Mercury's charisma, enthusiastic performances, and ability to win over audiences at live shows far surpassed any concern over his sexual identity. At Queen's live performance at Wembley, in 1986, the band played for a near-capacity audience of 90,000. Indeed, Mercury got that audience to clap in unison during the performance of "I Want to Break Free," a song which was met with hostility in America.

It is peculiar that Mercury's androgynous, gender-bending 70s image was not met with the same hostility that he received after cutting his hair short and growing a mustache. When he was still involved in a relationship with Mary Austin, he appeared to be more effeminate than at any other point in his musical career. He may have appealed to his fans because they did not question his sexuality, and simply regarded the androgyny as a bold challenge to gender conventions and to the dominance of performative masculinity in rock music. By contrast, his appearance in the 80s might have been widely viewed as a proclamation of his homosexuality, despite its overt masculinity, and this might have turned away fans who did not notice camp elements in his earlier career and recognize their homosexual implications.

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity in rock and pop music may be explored through the music of Freddie Mercury and Queen. The shift in Mercury's appearance from the androgynous, flamboyant, heterosexual rock star of the 70s to the shorthaired, mustachioed gay icon of the 80s altered the interpretation of his music and lyrics from heterosexual to homosexual. The effect of Mercury's physical changes on responses to his lyrics is exemplified in songs such as "Killer Queen" and "I Want to Break Free." Whereas heteronormative analysis would assume his heterosexuality in each of these works, his use of imagery coupled with knowledge of his sexual orientation suggests otherwise. Although

heteronormativity is a powerful influence in understanding rock and pop culture, many works require fuller knowledge of their context in order to develop a better understanding of their meaning.

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