

Figuring Out Britney: Anacoluthon, Aposiopesis, and Ambiguous Signification in “If U Seek Amy”

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Abstract: This article explores the dense web of textual and musico-textual communicative devices in Britney Spears’s 2009 song “If U Seek Amy,” focusing especially on the role of two rhetorical figures: aposiopesis and anacoluthon. Much of the innuendo in the song manifests as simple double entendre, but the titular phrase is more complicated, hearable either as “If you seek Amy” or “F. U. C. K. me.” The song, however, does not foreground the lewd subtext at the expense of the innocuous surface, or vice versa; instead, the verbal and musical features of the song interact to simultaneously express, with roughly equal plausibility, two different meanings for the titular phrase and the song as a whole. This article demonstrates how rhetorical analysis helps to illuminate the song’s complex ambiguities. In doing so, it provides evidence of how productive rhetorical (and particularly figural) analysis can be, showing how the distinct means of persuasion associated with the different media that collectively constitute the song all work together in complex ways toward a particular effect.

Keywords: Britney Spears, rhetorical figures, ambiguity, innuendo, music, rhetorical musicology

Résumé : Cet article explore la richesse de dispositifs de communication textuels et musico-textuels dans la chanson de Britney Spears, *If U Seek Amy* (2009), en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur le rôle qu’y jouent deux figures rhétoriques : l’aposiopèse et l’anacoluthie. Une grande partie des sous-entendus de la chanson se manifeste sous forme de doubles sens simples, mais la phrase titre est plus complexe, pouvant être entendue soit comme « If you seek Amy » soit comme « F. U. C. K. me ». Cependant, la chanson ne met pas en avant le sous-texte obscène au détriment du ton innocent, ou inversement ; les caractéristiques verbales et musicales interagissent pour exprimer simultanément, avec une plausibilité équivalente, deux significations différentes pour la phrase titre et la chanson dans son ensemble. Cet article montre comment l’analyse rhétorique permet d’éclairer les ambiguïtés complexes de la chanson. Ce faisant, il fournit des preuves de l’utilité de l’analyse rhétorique (et en particulier de la rhétorique figurative), en montrant comment la diversité des moyens de persuasion associés aux différents médias qui constituent

collectivement la chanson fonctionnent ensemble de manière complexe pour produire un effet particulier.

Mots-clés : Britney Spears, figures rhétoriques, ambiguïté, sous-entendu, musique, musicologie rhétorique

The 2009 song “If U Seek Amy” (Spears and Martin, Jive), written by Max Martin and sung by Britney Spears, is hardly the first work to include innuendo, subtext, or ambiguous lewdness. Upon release, “If U Seek Amy” was compared (in its lyrics’ apparent spelling-out of profanities alone) to songs by Memphis Slim, R. Stevie Moore, April Wine, Poster Children, and The Script (especially their “If You See Kay”) (Sheidlower). Nor are musical (or even popular) traditions the only ones to employ this particular type of subtext; the song was also compared to passages in Shakespeare and in James Joyce (Sheidlower). Whether these various artworks communicate their subtext in similar ways is a question much too broad for an article of this length.¹ But by investigating the communicative strategies of “If U Seek Amy” in particular, I hope to illustrate, in the paragraphs that follow, the striking and potentially highly figured rhetorical complexity that can be brought to bear on such ambiguities. To this end, this article uses the nomenclature of classical rhetoric (especially the inventory of figures of speech) to explore the lyrical and musical (mostly melodic and rhythmic) elements that inform either a subtextual or literal reading of the song.

Most of the innuendo in “If U Seek Amy” manifests as double entendre. Consider, for instance, the line “Can somebody take me home?” (Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:41–0:42). The song’s speaker may be asking for help in getting back to her own residence, perhaps because she is overwhelmed by the party at which the song’s scenario takes place, or she could be asking for one of the partygoers to take her to their (the other partygoer’s) residence, possibly for a sexual encounter. The effect turns upon the ambiguous meaning of the common phrase “to take someone

home.” The next line is “Ha ha, he he, ha ha, ho” (Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:43–0:44). Is each of those syllables mimetic of laughter? Or is the last an abbreviation of “whore”? These are just a few of the song’s innuendos, many of which are far more complex. But perhaps none is more so than the titular phrase from the chorus (Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:50–0:51), which can be plausibly heard either as “If you seek Amy” or as spelling out a profanity (“F. U. C. K. me”). It would be easy for the song to present this seemingly innocuous phrase as meaningless (and thus as having a “real,” lewd meaning to be uncovered), or to downplay the lewd alternative so that the innocuous surface seems robust. Instead, however, musical and textual features lend credence both to the innocuous and to the lewd meaning.

This article explores the song’s dense web of communicative devices, arguing that textual, musical, and musico-textual cues build two simultaneous, incompatible cases for the meaning of the phrase, and of the song as a whole. I propose that this ultimately insoluble interpretive dilemma is practically and aesthetically useful to the creator: with an equally strong case for the innocuous and the lewd, the song can more easily slip past censors, effectively play into Spears’s dichotomous image as a “sexy innocent,”² and provide listeners with richer enjoyment.

COMPLEX SURFACE, SIMPLE SUBTEXT: THE LYRICS

Taking the phrase “If you seek Amy” at face value produces extremely syntactically fragmented lyrics. In the terms of classical rhetoric, the phrase begins with an anacoluthon (“a change of construction in a sentence that leaves the initial construction unfinished” [Baldick 11]) and ends with an aposiopesis (“suddenly break[ing or trailing] off in the middle of a sentence, leaving the sense unfinished” [Baldick 22]):

All of the boys and all of the girls
are begging to— If you seek Amy...

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:45–0:51, spelled and punctuated
to convey surface meaning)

By contrast, the lewd version constitutes a straightforward,
syntactically integrated, and conclusive statement:

All of the boys and all of the girls
are begging to F. U. C. K. me.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:45–0:51, spelled and punctuated
to convey concealed meaning)

The phrase thus demonstrates an almost paradoxical communicative complexity. The act of mining a text for hidden meaning inherently entails greater cognitive effort than taking that text at face value; but this particular text's face-value version demands substantial cognitive effort in order to be understood.³ Therefore, it is tempting to say that the lyric is simply *designed* to be read for hidden meaning: if its surface is so fragmentedly difficult, perhaps that is a hint that we should ignore that surface and look to the depths, to an underbelly that turns out to be coherently easy.

Indeed, such an interpretation is supported by the song's music video. The video precedes its rendition of the song with a (staged) clip of a news anchor speaking the title phrase ("If you seek Amy") very slowly (Spears et al., "Video" 0:00–0:05); the video follows the song's conclusion with another (staged) clip of the same news anchor saying, "Doesn't make any sense, does it?" (Spears et al., "Video" 2:42–2:45), with "it" presumably referring to the title phrase that had been read out at the beginning. These clips parody a report on the song by *America's Newsroom*, and many critics certainly perceived the phrase as being meaningless on the surface but meaningful (and lewd) underneath. Indeed, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, Leah Greenblatt found it "difficult to believe

the song's real meaning will get past even the thickest listener" (Greenblatt). I should perhaps be embarrassed that the "real" meaning escaped my notice completely until I looked the song up on *Wikipedia*. But this paper is not an attempt to defend the honour of my perspicacity, nor a scandalized attempt to force an innocuous reading onto a bawdy text, for close examination of the song shows that it actually makes a surprisingly credible case for the phrase's surface meaning.

I have said previously that, to take the title phrase at innocuous face value, one must assume extremely fragmented syntax. And while this might seem like an argument against such a reading, the lyrics of the pre-chorus create strong precedent for fragmentary syntax with an unambiguous anacoluthon:

'cos I'm so— Oh!
I can't get her off of my brain.
(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:33–0:37)

Having heard this in the pre-chorus, it is not so great a leap to hear another anacoluthon in the chorus's words:

All of the boys and all of the girls
are begging to— If you seek Amy...
(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:45–0:51, spelled and punctuated to convey surface meaning)

An anacoluthic surface-reading of that title phrase becomes even more plausible if we set our view wider: the protagonist has spent the entire song up to this point enquiring after "Amy." As I discuss below, the very first words of the first verse are "Oh baby, baby, have you seen Amy tonight?" (Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:15–0:18).⁴ Thus, since one "Amy" has been clearly established as a character in the song's scenario, it is very plausible, come the chorus, for the protagonist to interrupt herself with the title phrase's innocuous, surface version ("If you seek Amy"). Perhaps she does so in order to ask her addressee (one of her fellow patrons at the club

where the song's scenario takes place?) to search for Amy on her (the protagonist's) behalf. That is, the title phrase could be interpreted as meaning, "If you (fellow clubber) go off to look for Amy, I (protagonist) will stay here in case Amy passes this way," or "can make it worth your while," or "have some advice for you on the perils of seeking Amy out." Or perhaps it is the clubber (the former addressee) who interrupts the protagonist with the title line: "If you (protagonist) want to find Amy, I (your fellow clubber) can help you do so," "have some advice for you," "have indeed seen her tonight," or some such.

Nor do we need to look back through the whole song to make the line's surface sensical. Backtracking only to the start of the sentence, we might find ourselves questioning whether the title phrase produces anacoluthon at all, even on the surface:

Love me, hate me,
say what you want about me,
but all of the boys and all of the girls
are begging to. If you seek Amy...

(Spears and Martin, *You Tube* 0:45–0:51, spelled and punctuated to convey different surface meaning)

This could be interpreted as something along the following lines: "Whether you love me or hate me, and whatever you say about me, everyone is begging to *say* that they love or hate me." In other words: "For better or worse, I am famous." Both of those formulations are complete statements. The title phrase, whether delivered by the original speaker or her original addressee, is no longer even an interruption, merely an additional statement, albeit one left incomplete itself.

The lyrics thus make a local case for the subtextual meaning, but a larger-scale, contextual one for the surface; or, to put it another way, the words of this song seem suggestive when taken in isolated chunks and more innocent when viewed in context. But songs do not live by words alone. Song lyrics are, by definition, set to music.

Again in terms of classical rhetoric, we have hitherto been exploring textual style or *elocutio*. Song, however, often goes farther than other artforms in crystallizing the *pronunciatio*, or delivery, of a text (pop songs especially, their primary source being not a set of performance instructions, but an actual recorded performance). And thanks to the surprisingly mixed messages of its musical delivery, “If U Seek Amy” becomes even more fascinatingly confusing when, beyond language alone, listeners experience the language as song.

THE MUSIC AND ITS EFFECT ON THE LYRICS

From the first line of the first verse, listeners are warned that something is wrong about this song’s use of the name “Amy.” The first time that name is heard, the music gives an accent to the second syllable rather than the first: that syllable lands on a strong beat and receives a long note, so its delivery becomes not the normal “A-my,” but “a-MY” (see ex. 1):⁵



Ex. 1. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:15–0:18), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), and box drawing attention to placement of first syllable of name “Amy” on weak beat and second syllable on strong beat.

Thus, when the title phrase arrives (ex. 2), its use of a previously musically problematized word (“Amy”) combines with the apparently fragmented textual syntax (“All of the boys and all of the girls are begging to— If you seek Amy...”) to suggest that a surface reading is ill-advised:



Ex. 2. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:45–0:51), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), and underlay spelled and punctuated to convey both surface meaning and concealed meaning.

That is not to say that a musical analysis suggests unequivocally a subtextual reading; throughout the song, the musical treatment of anacoluthon actually undermines a simple (single?) interpretation. As can be seen from example 3 below, the music provides a strong sense of interruption and discontinuity for the clearly syntactically fragmented text in the pre-chorus: the syntactic disjunction in the lyrics is marked with a rest (silence) and rhythmic irregularity in the music.



Ex. 3. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:33–0:37), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), and box drawing attention to anacoluthon.

In contrast, the title phrase is sung to music (ex. 2) not nearly so obviously discontinuous as that which sets the anacoluthic text in the pre-chorus. On the one hand, we could say that since it gave such strong musical support to its first textual anacoluthon, the song does not now need to be so insistent with its second. The logic runs something like this:

1. The first, unambiguous anacoluthon in the lyrics was backed up by forcefully interruptive musical gestures (ex. 3).
2. Therefore, the song has legitimized the idea of syntactic disjunction as part of its communicative fabric.
3. Therefore, any further such disjunctions can be taken on faith, without the need for such insistent musical realization labouring the point.

However (and here the paradoxical nature of this song's communicative strategies comes to the fore), we could also make the opposite claim:

1. The first, unambiguous anacoluthon in the lyrics was backed up by forcefully interruptive musical gestures (ex. 3).
2. Therefore, the song has established that unambiguous textual anacoluthon requires musical realization.
3. Therefore, by withholding such realisation, the song is now indicating a lack of “belief” in the title phrase’s merely potential anacoluthon.

This latter impression is strengthened when we realise that the syntactic unity of the lewd meaning (“All of the boys and all of the girls are begging to F. U. C. K. me.”) is, in some ways, actively suggested by the music: the title phrase is sung as part of a melody that falls by step all the way down the musical scale. Certainly the steady, unchanging melodic direction and complete coverage of the scale might both be heard to create the integration and conclusiveness necessary for the subtextual reading, at least if we take the passage in isolation. Yet, once again, looking at the passage in context shows that all is not so simple.

Based on what we have heard up to this point in the song, we would expect a falling scale to comprise the notes named in example 4 (the notes of what music theorists would call a natural minor or Aeolian scale):

The image shows a musical staff in 12/8 time with a treble clef. The melody consists of a descending scale of eighth notes: A, G, F, E, D, C, B, A. Above the staff, scale degrees are indicated: ^8 A, ^7 G, ^6 F, ^5 E, ^4 D, ^3 C, ^2 B, ^1 A. Bold dots are placed above the notes A, G, F, E, D, C, and A. The lyrics are written below the staff: "All of the boys and all of the girls are beg-ging to- If you seek A - my... to U. C. K me." The notes A, C, and A are boxed in the original image.

Ex. 4. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:45–0:51), transcribed by ear, modified to illustrate pitches expected on basis of previous musical material, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), underlay spelled and punctuated to convey both surface meaning and concealed meaning, letter-name of note above first occurrence of each note, and scale degree number above letter-name.

Instead, the penultimate note is flattened (lowered by one semitone); see the boxed notes in example 5:

Ex. 5. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:45–0:51), transcribed by ear, with underlay spelled and punctuated to convey both surface meaning and concealed meaning, letter-name of note above first occurrence of each note, scale degree number above letter-name, and box drawing attention to flattened second degree.

Compared to the scale that the song had led us to expect (the natural minor or Aeolian), this minor-with-flat-second scale (a Phrygian scale, in music-theoretical parlance) evokes an intensified sense of “darkening.” Might that darkening suggest a single speaker adopting a huskier, more seductive tone as she finishes spelling out the profanity? Possibly. Eron Smith has written on “flat-two as a hotness topic” in post-millennial rock (“topic” in the sense of rhetorical *topos*), and the flat second *might* evoke a husky tone appropriate for spelling out a profanity. But it might equally well point toward the anacoluthon required for the innocuous surface meaning: the flat second’s sudden, unexpected intrusion could represent the protagonist interrupting herself to embark on the new subject, or the darkness created by the flat second could mimic the interruption of another speaker with a markedly different vocal timbre (we will return to this possibility below).

Moving from ambiguity to outright contradiction: there may be no strong musical break for the surface meaning’s anacoluthon, but its aposiopesis is in fact heavily implied by a sudden change of musical rhythm (“hemiola,” whereby a set of six beats expected to be grouped 3+3 is grouped 2+2+2 instead); see the box in example 6 (the circle will be explained below):

Ex. 6. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:45–0:51), transcribed by ear, with underlay spelled and punctuated to convey both surface meaning and concealed meaning, dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), numbers above the first beat of each group indicating number of beats in that group, and box drawing attention to hemiola grouping.

This effect causes the melody to end on a very weak beat (the circled second-last weak dot in example 6), suggesting a trailing off that is entirely suited to aposiopesis, and thus to the surface meaning. The trailing off is not wholly unsuited to the subtext either, since the speaker might be seductively allowing her voice to fade to a whisper, but given the syntactic conclusiveness of the subtextual meaning, this is perhaps something of a reach. Moreover, the hemiola effect is the exact same rhythm with which the singing of the earlier, unambiguously (textually and musically) anacoluthic sentences concluded (ex. 7):



Ex. 7. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 0:33–0:37), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), numbers above the first beat of each group indicating number of beats in that group, and box drawing attention to hemiola grouping.

That earlier, medially anacoluthic sentence had not concluded aposiopetically, so we cannot really say that hemiola has been established as an aposiopesis marker; additionally, the earlier sentence's music ended on a strong beat, while that of the title phrase, as already mentioned, does not. But signification can be associative as well as direct, and listeners might, on some level, be inclined to think, "If a musical unit ends with a hemiola, there was an anacoluthon in the middle of the text-phrase sung to that music." And while we are discussing precedents of signification: the name "Amy" was indeed (as discussed) misaccented at first appearance (ex. 1), but that appearance came in a sentence that made perfect, unfragmented sense at face value, and was one of many references to "Amy" (or "her") that seem perfectly sensical on their surface, indeed, devoid of any obvious double-entendre. In summary, we can say that the first verse makes a local, musical case against the chorus's surface (by its misaccentuation of one crucial word, the name "Amy"), but a global, textual case for that surface (by including that word in a totally innocuous series of sentences),

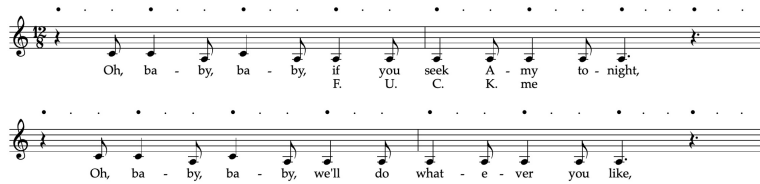
and at best sets up two contradictory potential expectations by the musical foregrounding of the unambiguous anacoluthon at “cos I’m so— Oh!”.

The second verse opens with the name “Amy,” but now properly accented, its first syllable landing on a long (two-beat) note beginning on a strong beat (see ex. 8):



Ex. 8. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 1:07–1:10), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak), and box indicating placement of first syllable of name “Amy” on strong beat and second syllable on weak beat.

Thus, when the titular phrase returns in the second chorus, the ambiguity is even more pointed, because the listener has been made to doubt their doubts of the surface’s viability. And the intensification of complexity (even confusion) does not stop at the end of the second chorus. When the title phrase returns in the bridge section, things become almost ludicrously polysemic (capable of multiple meanings). See example 9:



Ex. 9. Main vocal line of Spears and Martin (*YouTube* 2:20–2:27), transcribed by ear, with dots above staff to indicate beats (bold dots for strong, non-bold for weak).

Again the name “Amy” comes out as “a-MY,” suggesting a faulty surface. But listeners are armed with the ambiguities of two choruses and as many verses, and those ambiguities explode quasi-prismatically with the appearance of the first-person plural. Who are “we”? Is the original speaker speaking throughout, propositioning her addressee, then promising an encounter involving anything the addressee desires?

Protagonist: Oh, baby, baby, F. U. C. K. me tonight.
Oh, baby, baby, we [you and I]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as a sexual proposition from the song’s protagonist)

Is the original speaker propositioning her addressee, who responds by promising an encounter involving anything the original speaker desires?

Protagonist: Oh, baby, baby, F. U. C. K. me tonight.
Clubber: Oh, baby, baby, we [you and I]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as a sexual proposition from the song’s protagonist and a response from the clubber she propositioned)

Is the original speaker speaking throughout, promising that if her addressee looks for Amy, then she (the speaker) and Amy will make it worth the addressee’s while (sexually, perhaps)?

Protagonist: Oh, baby, baby, if you seek Amy tonight,
Oh, baby, baby, we [Amy and I]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as a sexual proposition from the song’s protagonist and as containing a reference to an absent third party)

Is the representative of a group addressing the original speaker throughout, saying that, if the original speaker is looking for Amy, their group will assist the original speaker in any way she asks?

Clubber: Oh, baby, baby, if you seek Amy tonight,
Oh, baby, baby, we [clubbers]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *You Tube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as an offer of help from the clubber that the song’s protagonist had earlier been addressing)

Is the original speaker addressing the representative of a group, promising that, if they look for Amy, she (the speaker) will make it worth their while, only for them to interrupt before she names the reward, saying that they will assist the original speaker in any way she asks?

Protagonist: Oh, baby, baby, if you seek Amy tonight...

Clubber: Oh, baby, baby, we [clubbers]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *You Tube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as a request for help from the song’s protagonist and an offer of help in response from the clubber she had been addressing)

Is the original addressee speaking throughout, propositioning the original speaker, then promising an encounter involving anything the original speaker desires?

Clubber: Oh, baby, baby, F. U. C. K. me tonight.
Oh, baby, baby, we [you and I]’ll do whatever
you like.

(Spears and Martin, *You Tube* 2:21–2:28, interpreted as an offer of help from the clubber that the song’s protagonist had been addressing)

To quote Ellen Rosand, “[p]atient analysis of this sort can seem compulsive, yet it builds a cumulative case for a conclusion of some importance” (*Monteverdi* 170). Here, somewhat meta-analytically, that conclusion would be that the song itself builds a cumulative

case for the important (inconclusive?) conclusion that both interpretations of its title phrase are viable.

THE ADVANTAGES OF AMBIGUITY

We have seen that “If U Seek Amy” is a communicatively complex song and examined why this complexity arises on a formal level. We now ask “why” on a more aesthetic level. Why design the song like this, and what is gained by such communicative complexity? In the words of Alan Moore, we now “go beyond just asking ‘What?’, to asking ‘So what?’” (Moore 26:58–27:05).

Drawing on Relevance Theory, Nigel Fabb asserts that, “in communication, if we are invited to expend inferential effort then we should expect cognitive rewards” (146). He goes on to suggest that “in our experience of literary texts, contradiction is experienced as aesthetic, and thus is a cognitive reward” (Fabb 146). If we accept pop songs as “literature” or “verbal art,” the web of contradictory meanings, syntactic structures, and even speaker-attributions in “If U Seek Amy” can be considered powerfully cognitively rewarding. This is especially true in light of the song’s conflicting “implicatures” and “explicatures” (Fabb’s Relevance-Theory terms again [Fabb 65, 83, 94]), simultaneously backing up at least two interpretations. Whether or not listeners would consciously shift their interpretative “lens” from replay to replay (or even within a single listening) is a more complicated question, as is the question of whether or not they need to choose one lens or the other; perhaps both meanings can be attended to simultaneously, equally, or in varying ratios. But the pleasure derivable from conflicting implicature should not be discounted.

More practical concerns should also be considered. By going so far to justify the surface interpretation, the song maintains plausible deniability in the face of censors. This did not save it from radio

edits, but did perhaps spare it from *only* receiving airtime in edited form. In fact, these edits themselves make an interesting case for the surface meaning of the song as it already existed: some stations played it as (and changed the hook line to) “If U *See* Amy” (emphasis mine). In other words, by omitting one phoneme, they brought the title phrase more closely into line with the song’s nominal context of asking for help finding a lost friend, veritably forcing listeners to hear the figures of syntactic discontinuity that I argued were present in the original surface meaning: “All of the boys and all of the girls are begging to— If you see Amy...” can only be plausibly interpreted as two unfinished sentences, since “begging to F. U. C. A. me” is nonsensical.

And combining these ideas, double meaning may simply be claimed as entertaining in itself. Bluntly explicit sex-talk has its place, but ambiguity can open a work to wider audiences, offering many possible interpretations or “lenses” through which it can be understood. This would also enhance “replay value,” allowing the song to be heard from various combinations of interpretive lenses at each playing.

Perhaps some listeners (like myself) actually recognise only one of the meanings at first, and so the song gains wider reach by appealing to those actively seeking shamelessly explicit content *and* those seeking content that is “rebellious” but still “safe for work.” It does after all still feature nightclubs, a forthright main character, clubbers addressed as “baby,” female friendship, and helping one’s fellow partygoers. Indeed, the issue of female friendship is arguably more strongly foregrounded if the hook line is heard as referring to a woman named Amy, which, in combination with the reference to “all of the boys and all of the girls,” perhaps offers an even more personalized (empowering?) portrayal of the protagonist as a bisexual woman. Amy may be her love interest; another ambiguity ripe for interpretation.

Perhaps some listeners spot only one meaning the first time, but notice that there “seems to be more to” the song, and so are drawn back to uncover the other side of the double-edged hook line. Perhaps they spot both meanings (initially or later), and appreciate the fact that the song can be as lewd or as innocent as listeners want it to be, depending on their mood when they replay it (or indeed—since choruses by definition recur, and this one contains two iterations of the hook line per chorus—each time they hear the hook line even in a single playthrough of the song). The lyrics are a semantic version of the famous optical illusion that depicts both a rabbit and a duck, where half the fun is in knowing that the other meaning or image can be accessed with a simple switch of mental gears.

Perhaps some spot both meanings but feel smugly superior because they think that most people will only spot the surface, or think that the surface is the sole intended meaning and feel superior to “dirty minded” listeners who think there is a subtext. These condescending positions might not be terribly tasteful from a moral perspective, but marketability is marketability, and pettiness is not a bad listener-sentiment for creatives to bank on.

And some listeners might even enjoy being able to focus on one plausible meaning while consciously ignoring the other entirely (whether in one listening or all of them). And, at the risk of sounding like a naïve proponent of rhetorical utopianism, this need not be a bad thing. Listeners should, even must, be allowed to explore and enjoy explicit content if they so desire, but facilitating non-explicit readings is not necessarily a repressive or regressive strategy either, and in general, giving an audience control over how they wish to experience a piece of media can be seen as supportive and inclusive. YouTubers offer their Patreon supporters access to uncensored versions of their videos for a reason; sex sells. But video game patches make sex scenes skippable for a reason too; customisation and variety of options also sell.

I have discussed “the song” as if it were an autonomous entity, but it was, in fact, written and performed by human beings. Without straying too far into minefields of authorial intent or death of the author, I should point out that I have not interviewed Spears or Martin about the song. And even if I had, they might have responded as the classical composer Benjamin Britten did to analyses of his music: “I must have a very clever subconscious” (Reed 5). I make no assertion that the song’s creators were explicitly aware of all the complexities with which they loaded it. Certainly, I would not assume that either knew the terms aposiopesis or anacoluthon. In anthropological parlance, this has been an “etic” rather than an “emic” analysis, various rhetorical and musical concepts serving as lenses through which to understand a song’s workings, not implied as techniques consciously employed in its composition.⁶ But complex, nameable techniques are observable in many contexts and artforms, whether or not the artists know the names or history of such techniques. To discuss anacoluthon and aposiopesis in Britney Spears seems no less useful than discussing *appoggiatura* in Medieval polyphony.⁷ Composers of the time might not have known or used the term, but they often approached a dissonance by leap and left it by step; and that is the harmonic/contrapuntal procedure that the modern term *appoggiatura* describes. Spears and Martin probably knew that they were using ambiguity and fragmentation, although they may never have read a rhetorical manual.

And on a related note (pardon the pun): even if neither Spears nor Martin could articulate every aspect of the complex argumentative structure that this article identifies (or the moral implications alluded to in recent paragraphs), both artists probably knew that the ambiguity was both present and effective. Ambiguity has helped Spears in a marketplace context, and her career has often played on paradox; we already noted her “sexy innocent” image, and might add that the title line of another of her songs (also co-written by Martin) explicitly declares her “Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman” (Spears et al., “Girl”). “If U Seek Amy” can therefore be read as a continuation of Spears’s musically communicative (and identity-

performative) ambiguity to favour her position in the marketplace. In fact, the song contains multitudes of paradoxical concept-pairings that match its dual reading modes: commercial/transgressive, empowering/objectifying, hedonistic/social-critical, possibly even for-young-fans/explicit. And it seems to play prominently on those paradoxes in more (and possibly more obvious) ways than I have examined here. For instance, the music video's scenario begins in a sex party before turning into a white-picket-fence family photo in front of the paparazzi. And (to return to rhetorical figuration), the chorus's lyrics contain the antithesis (semantically opposed predication) "Love me, hate me"; both two-word halves are set to the same music, perhaps encouraging us to infer that we may love or hate Britney and it will be literally all the same to her (and, on a more formal level, turning the antithesis into something like an oxymoron).⁸

In light of all this, it seems more than plausible to argue that the chorus communicates a genuine multiplicity of meanings (as opposed to a nonsensical surface with a "real" lewd subtext), through both its music and its lyrics, through local features and broader context. And as the previous paragraphs have argued, this need not be a wholly virtuous nor a wholly manipulative thing. Indeed (keeping to the spirit of this song and this analysis of that song), it can be both sides of these dichotomies at once, if not always in equal measure. Songs can contain multitudes, and those multitudes can themselves have multifaceted aims (and, more importantly, multifaceted results).

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Much more could be said of this song. For instance, anacoluthon and aposiopesis are not the only figures that operate in "If U Seek Amy." I have long felt that the echo effects produced by backing voices deserve attention, employing as they do various figures of

repetition and parenthesis. Rhetoricians might usefully explore such issues here and in a larger number of other vocal works.

I presented anacoluthon and aposiopesis as clearly distinct, but the two figures are often conflated, and their distinctions argued over. Such ambiguity opens up interesting perspectives on the interaction of style and delivery, the manners in which performance can ambiguate, disambiguate, or alter a text's figuration, and how music specifically figures its lyrics. Length of pause can be difficult to indicate through written text alone (especially in traditions that lack standardized systems of punctuation), but a musical setting could place rests of varying length at moments of textual syntactic discontinuity (shorter rests suggesting that the next words are an anacoluthic interruption, longer rests suggesting aposiopetic trailing off into silence), thereby clearly articulating which figure operates when. Alternatively, the text's original punctuation might be clear on which type of pause occurs when, only for the pauses in the music not to accord with the ones indicated by the textual punctuation, or to be of such diverse lengths as to blur the distinction between interruption and trailing off. The music might forego such rests altogether, turning all potential or clear anacolutha and aposiopeses into non sequiturs. Such avenues of investigation could prove very fruitful for both rhetoricians and musicologists, whether those studying songs with music and lyrics by the same artist (like "If U Seek Amy") or by different artists, and the method could surely be extended to other pairs or sets of figures that are often conflated or difficult to indicate with text alone.

I focussed on language and music, but largely ignored the phenomenon often conceived as mediating between them: poetry. "If U Seek Amy" is a sung text, but that text is rhymed and metrical, facts that play a prominent role in how it is sung. By dodging poetic issues, I avoided overinflating this article with terms like *molossus*, *unmetrical*, *strong and weak position*, *unaccented rhyme*, *enjambment*, and even figures like *antilabe*. But observation of these

and similar features could potentially lend much greater nuance and complexity to the analysis.

Some attention was paid to ambiguities of speaker, but not to every instance of such ambiguity. Which “character,” for instance, delivers which syllables of the phrase “Ha ha he he ha ha ho”? Since the phrase follows “Can somebody take me home?” might the song’s protagonist be laughing at herself and calling herself promiscuous?

Protagonist: Ha ha he he ha ha. Ho.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:43–0:44, interpreted as protagonist’s laughter and assertion of her own promiscuity by way of a [reclaimed?] whorephobic slur)

Is she laughing while someone else calls her such (perhaps interrupting her laughter with the imprecation)?

Protagonist: Ha ha he he ha ha.

Clubber: Ho.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:43–0:44, interpreted as protagonist’s laughter followed by her fellow clubbers applying a whorephobic slur to her)

Are other people laughing at and perhaps calling her such?

Clubber: Ha ha he he ha ha. Ho.

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:43–0:44, interpreted as protagonist’s fellow clubbers laughing at, and then applying a whorephobic slur to, her)

Why is she being laughed at and possibly called promiscuous (possibly by herself)? Has she or her addressee noticed that she said something with a lewd double meaning? Is the laughter friendly or malicious? How much “in-story” awareness and agency do we attribute to the speaking personas in a song, and how does that attribution shift based on whom we assume is speaking when? Such

questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but might be interesting for those interested in song as narrative or even drama.

Common sense might suggest that many of the song's ambiguities could be clarified or at least further explored by examining the music video. But even if we had time for such examination, music videos do not always crystallise a song's content as we might expect, and can actually add extra layers of complexity. For instance, the lyrics of this song reference a club, but the video is set in a private home, and Spears seems not to address any other "character" in the video, instead singing to the camera. Researchers who specialise in the dramaturgy of music video might find this article a useful starting point from which to explore such productive tension between song scenarios as described and as enacted on screen.

On a much more local, formal level, the long form of the vowel *o* is prominent at significant moments:

I'm *so*— Oh— I can't get her off of my brain

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:33–0:37, with prominent vowel "o" italicized for analytical emphasis)

Can somebody take me home?

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:41–0:42, with prominent vowel "o" italicized for analytical emphasis)

Ha ha, he he, ha ha, *ho*

(Spears and Martin, *YouTube* 0:43–0:44, with prominent vowel "o" italicized for analytical emphasis)

Is this mimetic of sexual moaning, a nod to common abbreviation of words like "orgasm" and "orifice," a structural device (conscious or not)? Such questions could be of interest to scholars of literary linguistics, those interested in subtextual communication (perhaps even evocation that slips below the level of conscious attention), or those who study mimesis.

And on higher hermeneutic levels, how do the communicative strategies of this song shape (and, if reconsidered, reshape) its portrayal of Spears, her sexuality, her image, and the titular “Amy”? Does an innocuous reading paint the protagonist as more vulnerable than does the subtextual, sexually forthright reading? Or does that risk reducing all female agency to sexual assertiveness? After all, she still seems quite outspoken as she asks her fellow clubbers for help in finding Amy (as the innocuous, surface reading of the song portrays her doing). To what extent can songs, or lyric poetry in general, even be said to *have* protagonists, characters, or narrative threads? Such questions are beyond the scope of this article, but might appeal to researchers of song as narrative or as drama, not to mention of communication and gender.

Throughout this article, I implied that there were two lenses through which to view this song, and two layers to its potential meaning: the innocuous and the suggestive. In reality, of course, these are just two extremes on a spectrum of interpretations, and nothing prevents a listener from changing lenses between listenings, or one or more times a single listening (or, for that matter, holding the two possibilities in tension simultaneously). This is probably a subject for scholars of audience studies or readership theory, but it obviously has applications far beyond this one song; indeed, it could be applied to almost anything that could be plausibly interpreted as having subtext of any kind.

I spelled and punctuated the title phrase to bring out whichever of their possible meanings I was focussing on at the time (“If you seek Amy” or “F. U. C. K. me”); but we should not ignore the fact that the official release spelled it “If U Seek Amy”. The paratextual stylistic implications of such respellings is much too broad a topic for an article of this length, but it should perhaps be noted that this spelling also points in two directions at once: “u” is a perfectly acceptable spelling of “you” in text-speak (supporting the innocuous surface reading), and also one of the letters of the

profanity being sounded out letter by letter as the lewd subtext. Perhaps this subject might interest scholars of *mise en page*.

As stated above, general observations on ambiguity in song lyrics would be beyond the scope of this article. However, fruitful avenues for future research might include distinctive ways in which ambiguity functions either in this genre at this time or in the work of performers adjacent to Spears, which might speak to the rhetorical exigencies that underlie this song. Rhetoricians in particular might be interested in the idea of “lewdness with plausible deniability” as a *topos*, a subject already investigated to some extent by online *topos* enthusiasts: the “trovers” of *TV Tropes* (which uses the word *trope* in the sense of “narrative convention”).

And, of course, my two readings (one innocuous, one lewd) are not intended as prescriptive or comprehensive. I interpreted “you” as being the second person singular pronoun throughout, based upon the fact that its first use in the song is almost certainly intended as such (“Oh baby [singular], baby [singular], have you [singular?] seen Amy tonight?”). But later uses of the word might just as easily be meant as the indefinite pronoun (more formally given as “one,” thus, “If one seeks Amy”) or the second-person plural (“If all of you seek Amy,” “tell me if any/all of you see her”), and each of these could offer a fascinating new lens or set of lenses on the scenario, through which other scholars could reveal further complexity in the song.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the textual, musical, and musico-textual communicative devices of “If U Seek Amy” reveals the potential for an interpretive experience of the song that is far more complex than either the acceptance of its innocuous surface or the dismissal of that surface in favour of the lewd subtext could be alone. This is emphatically not to say that the song’s real meaning is on the surface, and that over a decade’s worth of listeners have gaslit themselves into reading

bawdry into an innocent text. Rather, the song demonstrates a remarkable ability to convey, simultaneously, two very different contents. In fact, it sometimes hints at one or other or both of those contents through the same formal devices. And while this might be taken as yet another blow to the idea that music can communicate or even signify, a more optimistic interpretation would be to see the polysemic potential of such devices as an expressive resource for creators, listeners, and analysts. From Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, allegorical narratives can function just as well at their surface ("as stories") as beneath it (as symbolic vehicles for other, often more abstract concepts). "If U Seek Amy" is a striking case for the claim that the same can be true of innuendo.

NOTES

¹ The goal of the article is not so much to examine this particular genre of song or to explore in detail the song's distribution or reception, but to demonstrate how rhetorical analysis helps to illuminate the song's complex ambiguities. In doing so, the article provides evidence of how productive rhetorical (and particularly figural) analysis can be, showing how the distinct "means of persuasion"—in Aristotle's terms (*Rhetoric*, 1355b)—associated with the different media that collectively constitute the song all work together in complex ways toward a particular effect. The paper's approach is thus formal rather than social semiotic.

For readers interested in engaging with more analyses like this one, or who would like to conduct similar analyses themselves, however, it may be useful to mention some other studies that take a similar multimodal rhetorical approach to musical analysis or that have been foundational in establishing such an approach:

- Many music scholars have examined the concept of musical rhetoric, perhaps most notably Dietrich Bartel, but studies tend to focus on "purely musical" dimensions: *epizeuxis* as a term for the repetition of the same note, *synonymia* for repetition of a melody at a significantly different pitch, *meiosis* for the subdivision of long notes into shorter ones, and so on.
- John Walter Hill's 2005 study of Baroque music is one of the few to also deal extensively with musically figured lyrics; that is, how the music of a song realizes (or, to use terminology from the five rhetorical canons, encodes delivery of) rhetorical figures present in the words, or even adds figures not present in the words alone.
- The concept of musically figured lyrics is also foundational for Richard Toft's 2018 study of early modern singing in England and significant in Daniel Fischlin's 1998 study of the English ayre.

- Ellen Rosand’s studies of opera make rarer use of classical rhetoric’s vocabulary and figural inventory, but include extensive explorations of how musical and textual form interact persuasively in music drama, especially in Italian opera.
- Mauro P. Calcagno’s 2012 study of Monteverdi is primarily narratological and cultural-historical, but draws on rhetorical theory in support of several arguments, and also features detailed analysis on the communicative function of formal elements in vocal music.
- My own 2020 PhD thesis (Twomey) also examines music’s realization of the rhetorical figures in, and addition of rhetorical figures to, its lyrics.

All these monographs deal with early modern vocal music, but were central inspirations for this article’s approach to song as rhetorical and rhetorically figured (musically, linguistically, and musico-linguistically).

² I thank Máire Slater for bringing this to my attention (private correspondence).

³ Quite a lot of cognitive effort in this case. The formula runs something like:

1. Slightly reconfigure the syllable-boundaries.
2. Reinterpret the first four syllables as letter names in the Latin alphabet.
3. Realize that the fifth syllable is a homophone for the first person singular pronoun.
4. Assume that the syllable boundary is also a word boundary.

⁴ These are also effectively the first words of the song, since the introduction or pre-verse lyrics consist entirely of the vocables or nonsense syllables “la la la.”

⁵ Throughout this article, I use the word *beat* to refer to the note value that most frequently carries a syllable; thus, if a new syllable is sung every quaver, the quaver is the beat. A more accurate term for this would be *recitational* or *declamatory pulse*, but these terms have seemed unnecessarily obscure for the purposes of the article.

Nevertheless, interested readers might like to be aware that, in strict music-theoretical terms, the musical metre 12/8 actually uses dotted crotchet beats; thus, the note value that I have called the beat (the recitational pulse) is in fact the sub-beat, three of which comprise a single full beat, with those beats grouping into two *strong-weak* pairs in each bar.

⁶ In the words of the ethnographer David Fetterman, an emic perspective is “the insider’s or native’s perspective of reality” (20), while an “etic perspective is the external, social scientific perspective of reality” (22).

⁷ I take this example from Margaret Bent, an eminent scholar of medieval polyphony. In analysing the “harmony” of famous fourteenth-century *Messe de Notre Dame* by Guillaume de Machaut, Bent decided to “use modern terms (such as appoggiatura and passing note) where there seems to be no medieval term for concepts that observably extend the rudiments of medieval counterpoint teaching” in the manner captured by those modern terms (Bent 83).

⁸ The recurring falling melodic contour is also reminiscent of schoolyard jeering in the manner of “Na na na na na”; perhaps Britney taunting her critics or daring them to say more about her?

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