

MERMAIDS AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE IN LITERATURE AND
FOLKLORE

by

LARA KNIGHT

(Under the Direction of Charles Doyle)

ABSTRACT

Mythological characters, mermaids represent seductive women and hybrid personas; their dual nature often reflects a conflict within their environment. By studying different popular mermaid appearances in literature and folklore, I can map cultural changes along with ideas and symbols that vary little between cultures. Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Little Mermaid," for instance, allows a female character to take charge of her destiny within a patriarchal world; his little mermaid finds a road to salvation she can walk alone, without a man. Many critics have condemned Disney's adaptation of Andersen's story because it neglects the spiritual quest. Instead of explaining this shift as a regression, a common trend among scholars, I have considered the film within the context of the 1980s and the context of mermaid traits found in mythology. I have also traced mermaid appearances in American legends of the Flying African. Mermaids represent several cultural variations.

INDEX WORDS: Mermaids, Hans Christian Andersen, "Flying African," "Singing River," Walt Disney, "The Little Mermaid," Sirens

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LARA KNIGHT

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LARA KNIGHT

Major Professor: Charles Doyle

Committee: Jonathan Evans
Coburn Freer

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2005

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1. INTRODUCTION TO MERMAIDS

When Disney Studios released *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, critics and fans regenerated their belief in Disney, not mermaids. The popularity of the film, grossing over \$89 million and taking an Academy Award, the first award Disney had received since *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* in 1971, reinvented not only Disney but also the significance of mermaids in American culture. The film actually begins with a dialogue about belief in mermaids within the context of mermaid sailor legends. Prince Eric is out on a fishing boat with his tutor, Grimsby, and a handful of sailors and fishermen. Perhaps Eric is on his maiden voyage. Later that day he celebrates his sixteenth birthday: evidently, Disney's version is about Eric's coming-of-age experiences, among other things. Eric's unfamiliarity with mermaid legends, specifically legends about King Triton (a character based on a mythological Greek merman), marks his inexperience at sea, at least among regular folk, the fishermen and sailors. The sailors taking Eric out on his birthday voyage are well aware of mermaids: in fact, they have a mermaid figure at the prow of their ship which zips through the water just behind dolphins, sea-creatures often associated with mermaids. When one unidentified sailor turns to Eric and cries, "A fine strong wind and a following sea— King Triton must be in a friendly-type mood," Eric reveals his ignorance, questioning, "King Triton?" Another sailor interjects, "Why, ruler of the merpeople, lad. Thought every good sailor knew about him!" Grimsby, the rational landlubber, instructs Eric, "Pay no attention to this nautical nonsense," revealing his own disbelief in mermaids. The second sailor refuses to be contradicted, educating Eric and the audience by replying, "But it ain't nonsense; it's the truth! I'm telling you, down in the depths of the ocean they live!" As if to verify the sailors' belief, the

camera soon cuts to a scene below the sea, revealing the existence of mermaids. A film-adaptation children's book published in 1989 repeats this dialogue and adds to it: "Not everyone believes in mermaids. A lot of landlubbers think the very idea is fishy. But those who spend time at sea know better. They know that the ocean is deep and that it holds many secrets" (Carr 1). In the Disney version, mermaids are real to people who dwell near to and labor on the sea. Other legends actually reject the idea that mermaids exist to coastal people only, but the importance of this opening scene is that it establishes mermaids within the context of legends.

Legends "are stories regarded by their tellers as true, despite being partly based on traditional motifs or concepts" (Brunvand 196). Mermaid lore involves traditional motifs, and to the second sailor, mermaid stories hold water. Significantly, "legends are often told to validate superstitions or other traditional beliefs in modern folklore" (196). Events occurring in legends happen "to ordinary people in everyday situations" (197). The sailor takes it on himself to instruct Eric about merpeople, because legends "are recounted, usually in conversation, as a way of explaining strange things that occur—or are thought to have occurred—and they are passed on in order to warn or inform others about these improvable events" (197). The conversation between Eric and the sailors is textbook, except that the scene stops short of an actual legend. The sailors merely begin to tell Eric about the legend of King Triton, touching on motifs that include merpeople and their ability to control the seas and weather. Interestingly, King Triton, here, has created the beautiful day, but typically the female figure, the mermaid, is known for "her ability to control the weather and the waves," which is "well documented in folklore" (Potts 15). Grimsby's doubt about mermaids is in necessary binary opposition to the sailors' belief, reaffirming the importance of belief amidst doubt. If everyone aboard the ship assumed that mermaids exist, there would be no need to inform Eric or stress the faith of the storyteller.

In the wake of Disney's film, do Americans believe in mermaids? Although there is little or no evidence that Americans continue to tell mermaid legends, belief-status can hardly be determined because "even the serious folklorist frequently experiences difficulty in gaining the confidence" of others (Benwell 261). Did Americans ever believe in mermaids? The origin of mermaid legends is probably the Mediterranean and European area, and "nearly every country has its mermaid lore; if the sea does not wash its shores, then its rivers, lakes or wells are likely to have their mermaid traditions" (Benwell 13). In fact, kinds and degrees of "belief" in any legend can be difficult to determine. Gwen Benwall and Arthur Waugh, authors of *Sea Enchantresses*, struggle to account for the belief in mermaids among certain individuals and the disbelief among others. They recall that early explorers to America undoubtedly brought their beliefs with them. Columbus recorded his sighting of mermaids, later published in *Purchas His Pilgrimages* (Benwall and Waugh 82). Henry Hudson never saw a mermaid, but in 1608 he believed his crew's various accounts (Benwall and Waugh 95). Also in 1608 Captain Whitbourne "described, in great detail, a mermaid who approached him and his crew in a Newfoundland harbour" (Benwall and Waugh 96). Even Captain John Smith, in 1614, logged his enchantment with a woman he spotted near the West Indies; this woman, he soon realized, was a mermaid (97). When a good Christian sailor or explorer saw a mermaid, he often testified to his sighting in front of a priest and God. Such testaments indicate that many people did not have faith in mermaids' existence but did have faith in sailors who swore before the church, signifying a complex relationship between legend and religion.

At some point, mermaids did exist close to the North American continent, even if their existence can be credited to Europeans. Benwall and Waugh, however, also determine that in the sixteenth century "belief in the mermaid's existence began to fade" due to the "curious struggle

of disbelief flowing from the advancement of learning, with belief based on what seemed to be real, observed and duly chronicled fact” (86). The beginning of disbelief should be impossible to mark on a timeline, however, when considering the importance of the belief coexisting with a disbelief. Explorers and sailors, such as Columbus, Hudson, and Smith, naturally believed in mermaids. Benwall and Waugh cite the first stanza of John Donne’s poem “Go and catch a falling star” to stress the sixteenth century disbelief in mermaids based on the one line “Teach me to hear mermaid’s singing.” The speaker in this poem resembles Grimsby, a rational educated man who lacks faith. The poem is really about cynical despair, centering on the speaker’s belief that “No where/ Lives a woman true and fair.” The speaker compares his lost childhood fantasy of love with his lost childhood belief in mermaids; yet, some hope exists, as when the speaker asks for instructions, “teach me.” While Benwall and Waugh acknowledge the existence of mermaids to explorers in the sixteenth century, they do not venture to explain that a belief in mermaids could exist for one group of people, such as sailors, without existing for another, such as intellectuals. Therefore, belief in mermaids may wax and wane, and may die out completely, but it is nearly impossible to gauge existence of belief within any specific time frame. Today, mermaids certainly do not exist for all Americans, but they may exist for some.

Belief in mermaids can hardly be established on a timeline, and so, the origin of mermaids, including their first appearance in the oral tradition, cannot be determined. Mermaids appear to remain intertwined with religion, and even when religions change, mermaids, vary little, symbolically. Mermaids often have beautiful voices, tempt sailors, drown sailors, save sailors, and carry a comb and a mirror. The traditional mermaid developed from the image of divine half-fish and half-human gods and from the concept of sirens. Eventually, merpeople typically became exclusively female, though Disney certainly resurrected the male-counterpart.

The first sea-person, however, was probably male. A god who was sometimes described as having the tail of the fish and other times shown as completely human called “Ea” or “Oannes” “was originally worshipped in Accad as early as 5000-4000 B.C.” (Benwall and Waugh 23). The Babylonians later adopted the god, and he became “Lord of the Waters, as one of the great triad of Babylonian gods” (23). The first mermaid “worshipped in her own right” who was not a daughter of Ea was probably Atargatis, “a Semitic moon-goddess, known also as Derceto” (Benwall and Waugh 28). The Philistines, the Syrians, and the Israelites worshipped her (28). Derceto, however, was not born a mermaid but instead transformed into one (Lao 84). In fact, Derceto became a mermaid as punishment for consummating her desires (willed by Aphrodite) with a priest. After giving birth to, and abandoning, their love child, Derceto, “intent on committing suicide . . . threw herself into the waters of Lake Ascalon, but only succeeded in obtaining a fish tail as a sign of her transgression” (Lao 8). Many mythological characters became associated with the sea, either through a specific transformation informed by myth or legend, like Derceto, or by the general change in myths and legends over time. One example of the latter case is Neptune, who “was not, originally, connected with the sea” but “commenced his career as a comparatively unimportant freshwater god worshipped by the non-maritime Romans; he was not even connected with the sea until he came into contact with the powerful Greek god Poseidon” (Benwall and Waugh 35). Triton is the “original Greek merman,” the offspring of Poseidon and Amphitrite (Benwall and Waugh 36). Other figures often confused with mermaids are sea-nymphs who “are sometimes referred to as ‘mermaids.’ If the word be used in the sense of sea-dwelling maids, then it is correct; but mermaids in the accepted sense—that is, maidens with fish-tails—they were not” (Benwall and Waugh 39). Perhaps the greatest influence on the feminizing of merpeople was the sirens.

In some languages, the word for “siren” and the word for “mermaid” is the same, but “in English, of course, we have terms to differentiate the two types: *Siren* for the winged women of the Homeric poem and *mermaid* (maid of the sea) when referring to fish-Sirens” (Lao 92). Sirens first appear in literature in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Perhaps Homer is responsible for endowing the siren with “a glorious voice” and turning her “into a femme fatale of the ocean: the emblem of feminine seduction that the world has accepted ever since” (Benwall and Waugh 42). Still, Homer neglected to “tell us whether she had a ‘bird woman’ form; the sirens are only ‘voices’ in *The Odyssey*” (Benwall and Waugh 42). Meri Lao argues in her book *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, “Homer neglected to describe [sirens] physically; to have done so would have been superfluous because everyone knew what later was forgotten: the Sirens were bird-women” (1). Art surviving from the Hellenistic period, primarily in the form of vases, depict the sirens as bird women who “like the Harpies, Gratiae, and the Fates . . . are almost always represented in triads and rarely in pairs” (Lao 8). Sirens evolved from half-human/half-bird to half-human/half-fish; many have labeled this a regression, perhaps because the theory of evolution would have fish evolve into birds. The change appears to have begun in the Hellenistic period, about 300 B.C. onwards (Benwall and Waugh 46). While sirens gradually changed into mermaids, some “Latin bestiaries and other natural histories illustrate a ‘Syren’ who is fish-tailed but who nevertheless retains her bird’s feathers and claws,” illustrating the changing form of the siren (Benwall and Waugh 47). Most importantly, “once the birds’ feathers disappeared, the lower part of the new hybrid acquired one or two very visible tail fins. The sirens became mermaids” (Lao 82). The transformation indicates that the traditional concept of a mermaid cannot be separated from that of the siren.

The male sea-figure meets up with the siren in mythology, and eventually classic mythology overlaps with Christian mythology. Mermaids make their way into Judeo-Christian mythology early on. One of Oannes's daughters, Nina, gave oracles at a temple named for herself at Nineveh (Benwall and Waugh 23). Jonah, the eponymous character from the Old Testament book, is summoned by God to "go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness" (Jonah 1:2). Jonah's God is similar to Oannes; he has control over the water, and when he is not happy with Jonah, sends "out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea" (Jonah 1:4). (Later, in the New Testament, Christ also has power over the water.) Jonah ends up in the belly of a great fish for three days until "the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10). Lao points out that Oannes "eventually evoked . . . Jonah, represented almost invariably coming out of the mouth of the whale, forming a single body with the cetacean" (83). Lao also compares Oannes with the New Testament John the Baptist, "who using liquid consecration offered admission to a better world" (83). The three religious figures, separated by many than centuries, are Oannes, Jonah, and John. According to Lao, "the very homophony of the names helps confirm this derivation" (83).

Another male-sea-person to appear in the Bible is Dagon, a god to the Philistines. He appears in 1 Samuel 5. Although this account does not refer to Dagon as a merman, "it is now generally accepted that he was, and that he was similar in form to Oannes (Benwall and Waugh 26). 1 Samuel 5:2-4 marks the destruction of Dagon:

When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.

And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his

face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again.

And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him.

Benwall and Waugh believe “when the Old Testament says that ‘only the stump of Dagon was left to him,’ it should be interpreted as meaning that ‘only Dagon’ (that is, only his fishy part) was left to him” (26). They further assert, “in other words, the image of Dagon, which was housed so proudly in the temple dedicated to him, was fashioned in the form of a merman; his human torso broke off and came to grief before the Ark of Yahweh, leaving his fish-tail alone” (26). Dagon is also associated with Noah, a biblical character who predates both Jonah and the books of Samuel.

While Loa points out the similarities in name shared by Oannes, Jonah, and John, Benwall and Waugh focus on the relationship between two other names: Noah and Dagoan. In 1883 Henry Lee wrote that in Hebrew, “‘Dag’ signifies ‘a male fish,’ and ‘Aun’ and ‘oan’ were two of the names of Noah. ‘Dag-aun’ or ‘Dag-oan’ therefore mean ‘the fish of Noah’” (Benwall and Waugh 27). Many artistic representations of the flood myth connect Noah with mermaids, emphasizing the significance of the possible meaning of “Dagoan.” One such representation is a woodcut made by a German artist, printed in Nuremberg in 1483 by Anton Koberger. This picture shows Noah’s ark, afloat, between two merpeople; one is certainly a long-haired mermaid, but the sex of the other, though probably male, is ambiguous. Benwall and Waugh refer to this piece of art as a “quaint coloured woodcut,” depicting

The Ark in the form of a small house, painted yellow, with a red roof, on top of which is perched a dove-cote; the whole surrounded by a square, brown, 'boat-deck.' A little group of persons in mediaeval costume is seen through the door of the Ark (centre); the bearded Noah looks out of a window on the right as the dove flies towards him, olive-branch in beak. In the typical mediaeval sea on which the Ark floats, a mermaid, on the left, half rises from the waves, holding a mirror in her left hand; to the right is a merman, and between them jauntily swims a tiny merdog. (28)

The diction in this passage, including the words "quaint," "small," "little," "typical," and "jauntily" suggests a happy scene of normal life. Because Benwall and Waugh printed a picture of the woodcut in black and white, it may have been necessary to describe the colors of the picture, but their interpretation suggests a happy scene. Their caption reads: "Noah and his Ark share the sea with a merman and mermaid" (28). In fact, Benwall and Waugh's description suggests a harmonious relationship between Noah and the merpeople; they seem to live parallel lives, one family in the ark, the other in the water, both with animal friends; not only does Noah have the companionship of other people and the doves, he also has a dog and cat on deck with him. Lo prints a copy of the woodcut in color. In her book, the woodcut is labeled "Sirens ready to tempt the survivors of the Flood, Nuremburg Bible, 1493" (106). Lo stresses a tension in the scene that Benwall and Waugh do not detect. According to Lao, when "the sea element became accentuated in the fish-Sirens . . . [and] the concept of flight eliminated, what prevailed was the fall: the painful experience of the child, the nightmare of man" (104). She claims that mermaids swim "in the waters of the Great Flood, awaiting the survivors of the Ark" (109). Lao's interpretation is not of a harmonious relationship between Noah and the mermaids; instead, she believes that the mermaids are yet another threat posed to Noah and his family. Upon

reexamining the picture, perhaps Noah is looking at the olive-branch-carrying dove fearfully, knowing what lies beneath him. His family, huddled inside the Ark, perhaps show facial expressions of their concern, and thus their lack of faith in God to protect them. If the mermaids are distracting Noah and his family, causing them to lose faith, then they have become symbols of temptation, not harmony; thus, depending on context, mermaids can be contradictory symbols of ungodly temptation and of miraculous, providential survival. Thus, in one picture, mermaids suggest the harmony between pagan mythology and Judeo-Christian religion along with the tension of contradicting faiths, of different mythological beliefs facing off.

Perhaps Noah represents a mermaid because of his ability to survive a flood. In fact, “Noah, his wife and his three sons have all been represented with fish-tails” (Benwall and Waugh 27). Such interpretations, however, may not have come about until the Christian era. The specific image of Noah as a fish-tailed person “arose when devout Christians interpreted what was left of the writings of Berossus on the Chaldeans, and their story of the Flood (which so closely resembles the biblical account) as a version of the Old Testament” (Benwall and Waugh 27). As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the myth of the great flood was certainly not limited to Noah and his family. One legend in Ireland involved a merman who does not appear to be a representation of Noah, but was still like Noah because he was a human who survived the flood. One version explains that “St. Patrick . . . encounters the merman, Fintan, and is instrumental in his conversion to Christianity. Fintan came to Ireland before the flood, and survived the deluge, when it came, by changing himself into a fish” (Potts 83). Another Irish legend involving the flood does not intersect with the Old Testament version of the flood myth until the Christian era. Lao refers to this particular legend, “the legend of the Lake of Belfast,” as “one of the earliest mentions of mermaids” (93). A young girl lost her entire family “during

the flood of 90 B.C. [and] somehow succeeded in remaining afloat for a very long time” (93). Unlike Noah, who had the benefit of an ark and family, and the responsibility to secure future generations of all creatures, this girl had one companion and no ark. In order to survive her predicament, the girl adapted to her environment by “sprout[ing] a salmon’s tail, and her faithful companion was transformed into a sealion” (93). Many years later “in the year 558 A.D.” she was captured and baptized “Murgen” (born of the sea) and after the saint Congal helped her ascend to heaven” (93). Both Fintan and Murgen are human by birth, mermaid by transformation, and Christian by salvation. The various stages of their lives suggest an extremely close relationship between human beings and merpeople: merpeople are not simply like people; often they are transformed people. If all merpeople were descendents of merpeople only, and all regular people descendents of legged-people only, merpeople and people would be inherently distinct. The ability to transform from one species to another within one lifetime suggests a difference in form; though merpeople and legged-people look different and live differently, they are not as different, say, as people and apes.

Though human and merperson can hardly be distinguished from some perspectives, their relationships often signify a balanced struggle between good and evil. While Benwall and Waugh may not associate the woodcut with a symbol of temptation, they certainly acknowledge mermaids as a symbol of temptation. Christian religion actually appears to have perpetuated mermaid legends, rather than stifled such legends as pagan, and “the conception of the siren as a mermaid began near the Christian Era and gained ground steadily in the Middle Ages” largely because of the Church’s influence (Benwall and Waugh 48). Artistic representations of mermaids appear in “the medieval cathedral, where they have been immortalized in sculptures, on portals, capitals, choir pews, and holy water stoups, or in the colors of mosaics and stained

glass” (Lao 196). The medieval evangelical movement did not replace mermaid legends with Christian inspirational accounts. Indeed, mermaids went through another form of transformation as the Church chose to adapt mermaid symbols for its purpose. Benwall and Waugh ask, “ “How came the [medieval] Church to perpetuate belief in the ‘Syren’?” (69) and answer, “the medieval Church, bringing into the fold a mainly illiterate population, still prone to heathenish practices and beliefs, found it politic to adapt ancient legends to her own purposes” (69). The result of the Church incorporating the mermaid was primarily to emphasize the “fabulous creatures as a warning against sin” (Benwall and Waugh 69). She also “served as a symbol of the ‘deceitful lures of the flesh’...and “as a form of that ‘mortification of the flesh’...in this instance a perpetual reminder of delights both forbidden and out of reach” (Benwall and Waugh 126). To further illustrate this point, Lao insists, “In early Christian art and in the allegories of patristic philosophy, [Sirens] are associated with evil, personifying all opinions contrary to those of the church: the pleasures of the senses, diabolic temptation” (54). By teaching with symbols of pagan mythology, the Church could indoctrinate members without establishing an entirely new vocabulary, so the transition from one set of beliefs to another was not immediate but rather evolved; set symbols, such as mermaids, were preserved to introduce a new religion.

Mermaid symbolism remains complicated, however, because “the fish symbolizes the Christian faith itself” (Potts 79). As a symbol of Christianity, the fish appears in “the earliest miracles of the Nazarene, in the apostles who were fishermen, in the water and wine of early Christian mystery, drawn in the graffiti of the catacombs where it also appears in writing through the word *ichthys*, forming the acrostic in Greek for Jesus Christ Son of God the Savior” (Lao 104). The “ichthys” fish remains a modern fashion trend for American Christians, appearing on the back of cars, on jewelry, key chains, t-shirts, hats, and other apparel people wear to display

their faith publicly. In fact, some people exhibit a mutated form of this symbol, the fish with attached legs, to reject Creationism in favor of evolution. Fish symbols can be used for different purposes; the mermaid is a hybrid in many ways—she is also a hybrid symbol. Other examples of the duality of the symbol included “certain medieval mystery plays [where] a mermaid is used to represent the duality of Christ as part man, part divine” (Potts 79). In this case, she is not a temptress, leading people away from Christ, but instead actually represents the complicated duality at the center of Christianity. A mermaid holding a fish (and in representations of her found in cathedrals, she often does) might signify that “the mermaid is the pagan seagoddess attempting to ensnare the souls of the faithful,” luring followers of Christ away from the Church (Potts 79). When the apostles are pictured fishing, they are not trying to ensnare the souls of the faithful, but rather trying, symbolically, to claim souls for Christ. Even Christ uses the image of fish metaphorically:

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20)

Not only do merpeople and fisherman struggle with each other to ensnare fish, Christ’s followers, in this passage, abandon their nets, temporarily leaving fish in order to fish for humans. The image of mermaids and apostles struggling over fish, in the most basic form, represents good and evil struggling over mankind, leaving man as an inactive participant in the whole ordeal.

While the souls of people wrestle with good and evil, between God and Satan, the mermaid sometimes simply desires a soul. A major motif appearing in mermaid legends is “the

desire of the mermaid—from the Christian Era onwards—for a soul” (Benwall and Waugh 13). According to many legends, mermaids are not born with souls. They cannot choose good, and thus choose God and heaven, unless they obtain a soul. In order to obtain a soul, mermaids must become human. In many legends, mermaids only choose to become human to obtain a soul; often they reluctantly abandon the sea. One other unifying aspect of Fintan and Murgan is their ability to acquire a soul and accept Christianity. In one legend, a mermaid from Edam also “received the rite of holy baptism . . . ultimately achieving Christian burial” (129). Granting a mermaid a Christian burial is an example of the church’s faith in mermaids, like the explorers who were willing to testify to mermaid sightings in a church; such occurrences provide evidence of the existence of symbols that newer religions borrow from older mythology. The symbolic purpose of baptism is much more complicated for mermaids than for humans. Mermaids must leave sea-water, their home, in order to earn the holy water of baptism. Not all mermaids are able to do so. In one Irish legend, a mermaid daily approached a monk at I Chaluim Chill to request a soul. The mermaid in this legend represents both a soul-seeker and a temptress. As her relationship with the monk develops, she falls in love with him. The legend does not indicate whether the monk returns her love, or was willing to abandon his vows for her, but the mermaid’s presence in his life certainly threatens his vocation. As for the mermaid’s desire for a soul, “the monk always returned the same answer: she must, as an essential preliminary, forswear the sea forever” (Benwall and Waugh 63). The mermaid cries, but “despite her longing for a soul and her love for the man who withheld it, the call of the sea proved stronger than either” (63). The mermaid and the monk are both asked to sacrifice, he his vows for love, she the sea for a soul. When both realize that neither can give up one desire for the other, “the mermaid returned to the sea, never again to visit the holy Isle of Iona” (63). The mermaid does leave

something behind for others to remember her by: “the tears she shed as she departed formed themselves into pebbles. And to this day the greenish-grey pebbles peculiar to Iona’s shore are known as ‘mermaid tears’” (63). This legend not only details the reluctance of sacrifice and the longing for a soul; it also explains how a geographically feature came to be.

Although the priest eventually resists the mermaid’s love, the legend does not indicate the extent of his temptation. This mermaid is siren-like, because her love could destroy the priest’s career, or even life, but she is not malicious. In many instances, mermaids are attracted to the wrong person, and this attraction, not the mermaid herself, destroys her love interest. W.B. Yeats wrote a short poem about such a situation:

A mermaid found a swimming lad,
Picked him for her own,
Pressed her body to his body,
Laughed; and plunging down
Forgot in cruel happiness
That even lovers drown.

In a way, the mermaid is a victim too. She cannot satisfy her amorous desires without killing her love. Although she is beautiful, mysterious, and seductive, the mermaid is also a symbol and agent of death. The mermaid’s connection to the siren strengthens her connection with death. Sirens, in bird-form, look much like the harpies. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes a harpy as “A fabulous monster, rapacious and filthy, having a woman’s face and body and a bird’s wings and claws, and supposed to act as a minister of divine vengeance” (def. 1). Loeb distinguishes sirens (in bird form) from harpies, claiming that the ancient Greeks would not have confused sirens with harpies: “though they resembled them, both were the issue of a sea god, and

both were dedicated to the task of carrying off the dying” (2). Harpies, described as “cawing and ravenous, dripping their putrid excretions over sumptuously laid tables,” are repulsive, whereas mankind lusts, naturally, after the siren (Lao 2). Still, the mermaid, like the siren, kills and bears away the dead.

In some instances, such as in Yeats’s poem, the mermaid simultaneously causes death and so carries the dead. Yet the mermaid’s motives for murder are not always malicious. In Yeats’s poem, the mermaid drowns the lad because she “forgot” that “lovers drown.” The sirens the mermaid descended from, who sing to Odysseus, do not act out of malice either, but rather out of self-defense. According to legend, “as with the Sphinx, it had been predicted by the oracle that they would not survive the first man to resist them” (Lao 9). Artwork, primarily in the form of vases, confirm, “when Odysseus escaped them, all three sirens threw themselves into the sea and were drowned” (Benwall and Waugh 45). These sirens were not careless or cruel if they were simply trying to spare their own lives. Saving themselves, of course, meant death for another; “Homer was quite clear that to listen to the song of the sirens meant death” (Benwall and Waugh 44). Sirens could not detach themselves from death no matter what course of action they took.

Mermaids remain a hybrid symbol in regards to death because they are also connected to birth. The mermaids’ home, the water, represents procreation, “whether menstrual blood or amniotic fluid or mother’s milk” (Lao 112). Mermaids, as symbols, have become associated with the moon, “which controls the waters and female ovulation” (Lao 117). Even though the first merpeople appear to be male, women now dominate the image. Birth, of course, is connected to sexuality, and mermaids always seem to have an overwhelming sexual appeal (perhaps the fishy nether half itself gives an olfactory suggestion of femininity). One reason that mermaids carry

combs and mirrors is that they are tools to enhance their allure. Lao points out the irony that although mermaids “embody female sexuality, they lack a literal vagina” (114). Exceptions exist, of course; some mermaids have been shown with two tails, like two legs, so that their vagina can be exposed and accessible. Other depictions of mermaids, such as David Delmare’s “Bathing in the Moonlight” suggest that the tail begins below the sexual organs. The paradox, however, remains; mermaids are “imagined creatures whose upper bodies awaken a desire their lower parts are incapable of satisfying” (Lao 117). Modern comedy pokes fun at the situation. In the adult television cartoon *Futurama*, an episode titled “The Deep South” depicts Fry, a young male who lusts for a mermaid he meets in “the lost city of Atlanta.” He is willing to give up land to live with this mermaid, primarily because he can survive underwater thanks to a suppository, and because the blond voluptuous mermaid does not hesitate to take Fry to her bedroom, like most of the females on land. Acting in character, Fry abandons the mermaid as soon as he realizes that intercourse is not an option. While the situation can be funny, it has its dark side. Mermaids embody femininity; their attractive breasts and connection with the water represents procreation; their allure offers promise. Yet, this all leads to death without satisfaction. A mermaid is “a tease,” a woman who offers what she will not provide. Her sexuality is a threat to others, not to mention to herself. Her promises are empty and dangerous. As a representative of womanhood, she signifies goods overshadowed, or even poisoned, by her own sex.

2. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S "LITTLE MERMAID"

In 1837 Hans Christian Andersen published "Den lille Havfrue." Nine years later, "The Little Mermaid" appeared in the British magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*. This was the first English translation, done by Lady Lucie Duff Gordon. "Nine of Andersen's books, with six different translators," were published in English between 1846 and 1847 (Eilstrup 10). Today, an uncountable number of translations and versions of "The Little Mermaid" appear in English alone, signifying the popularity of the short story over the years. Although "The Little Mermaid" is often called a "folktale" or a "fairy tale," folklorists do not consider "The Little Mermaid" as such. Brunvand calls "folktales" "the prose fiction of oral literature" (229). This particular story is an Andersen original; the story does not come from the oral tradition. Folklorists prefer not to use the word "fairy tale" because the term suggests narratives about fairies, creatures that seldom actually appear in the genre. Now, "the German word "Märchen" is the most widely adopted scholarly term" (Brunvand 230). Stories like "The Little Mermaid" are so often confused with märchen that "such literary creations are usually referred to as 'Kunstmärchen'" (*Kunst* is the German word for "art") to differentiate between the oral (*Märchen* or even *Volksmärchen*) and the created (Dundes and Dundes 117).

The mermaid, as a symbol, was well established by 1837, yet scholars argue over what the story "The Little Mermaid," along with its protagonist, represents. To begin with, the short story is, or at least is like, a Christian allegory. Some scholars, such as James Massengale in his essay "The Miracle and a Miracle in the Life of a Mermaid," suggest that "Andersen, with childhood training in Lutheranism...and recent travel in Catholic countries, might find it

productive to combine a number of disparate religious elements to form a fantasy that reflects a creative, individual usage of the mermaid concept” (567). Yet, while Andersen’s story is creative, and original, his use of the mermaid concept, as far as Christian religious symbolism is concerned, is not “individual,” but rather reflective of earlier legends. Andersen’s main character, the unnamed mermaid, pursues eternity through good works and sacrifice. This theme should come as no surprise; by 1837 the Christian church had been using the mermaid as a symbol for hundreds of years: she was already established within the context of the church. As a Christian symbol, the mermaid commonly represented a heathen temptress, but her quest for a soul, found in many legends, suggests that the mermaid had also become a symbol for an ideal conversion. Like the New Testament Paul, the mermaid seems to be an unlikely candidate for salvation. Her conversion, then, is all the more significant. Some mermaids, such as the one who approached the monk at I Chaluim Chill, long for a soul but cannot make the necessary sacrifice of abandoning their home in the sea. Mermaids willing to accept the sacrifice suffer, like Paul, but receive eternal reward.

Andersen borrows from legend to create his own legend-like story (and he borrows more from legend than simply a religious backdrop). Many scholars neglect to realize that the mermaid is a hybrid symbol: she signifies more than one thing at a time. Her duality is essential to her being, representing both her allure and her repulsiveness. Lise Præstgaard Andersen strips the little mermaid of her mermaid-like qualities, suggesting in her essay “The Feminine Element” that “‘The Little Mermaid’ . . . is, as we all know, to a marked degree a disavowal of the usual myth of the mermaid, since the protagonist longs for the light and human culture and instead of annihilating the man’s soul, saves his body. And as if this were not enough, she longs fervently to have an immortal soul herself” (508). Yet, it is this mermaid’s longing for a soul that

marks her as a Christian-Era mermaid. The little mermaid's journey to salvation begins with her instinct to serve mankind, even if she does not belong to the legged race herself. The differences that separate her from the human world make her ascent to heaven all the more meaningful. Also, although mermaids are sirens, it is not unheard-of for a mermaid to value human life and desire to save it: mermaids are not always destructive. Benwall and Waugh's research affirms that mermaids can be benevolent: "There are many . . . stories of generosity of sirens . . . most of those of whom the Channel fishermen spoke tended to come to their assistance, rather than drown them" (190). In fact, "one siren not only took into her palace a young girl whose wicked nurse had thrown her into the sea, but gave the girl a magic ointment with which to bring her drowned brother to life" (190). The merfolk in "The Little Mermaid" function as sirens, but just because the little mermaid saves a human life does not mean her actions are uncharacteristic of a mermaid. True, she is a minority mermaid. Most mermaids in folklore pose threats to human life, but some do signify good fortune, such as a "curious variation" found in French folklore that "if on a Wednesday a ship, battered by a storm, is hailed by a mermaid, it is a certain sign that it will reach port safely" (190). According to this legend, sighting a mermaid has a one-in-seven chance of being a good omen instead of a bad one. The little mermaid is, in a sense, that one exception out of seven; there are seven important mermaids in Andersen's story, the little mermaid, her five sisters, and their grandmother. Andersen, of course, may not have been aware of this legend, but he does carefully construct the little mermaid's character, marking her as a minority, an exception to her sisters. In her article "Hans Christian Andersen's Fish Out of Water," Nancy Easterlin asserts, "Andersen's mermaid came to life in 1837, at a time when folk beliefs were on the wane, and it is thus not surprising that she lacks many, even most, of the characteristics of her mythological sea-sisters. She is not a siren . . . or temptress" (Easterlin 262). Not only does

Easterlin, like Benwall and Waugh, try to mark a turning point in belief, citing when it began to wane, an impossible task; she also supports the idea that the little mermaid is unlike a mermaid. In fact, the mermaid is the exceptional mermaid but a mermaid, and siren, and temptress nevertheless.

Mermaids, like sirens, are sexual. Often they lovingly call to men, unaware that their seductive voice will drown the objects of their affection. Whether the mermaids desire men or not, men often respond sexually. Desiring the love of a mermaid, men unable to resist temptation will drown. The temptation mermaids represent in medieval churches is also often sexual. The mermaid's long hair and naked torso cannot help but conjure sexuality, and art has certainly hyper-sexualized the mermaid. Mermaids lacking sexual characteristics do not surface in Andersen's story: humans and prepubescent mermaids do not mingle at all. Until the mermaid has reached puberty and become distinctly female, she is not allowed to leave the depths of the sea to behold—if not interact with—the human world. The grandmother instructs her grandchildren, “As soon as you are fifteen...you shall be allowed to rise to the surface, and to sit on the rocks and watch the great ships sailing past” (10). The age of fifteen signifies a sexual readiness; only then can the mermaids function appropriately as sirens. Often mermaids are pictured on a rock. Legends from antiquity connect Sirens with rocks and cliffs (the Lorelei) and caves (as in *The Odyssey*). The image of a mermaid on a rock appeared long before Andersen's time. In one account published in 1809, a Scottish schoolteacher wrote to a local newspaper, claiming to have seen a mermaid sunbathing on a rock (Davidson 12). This image, however, became extremely popular in the wake of Andersen's story. “The Little Mermaid” perhaps fixed in the popular consciousness the image of a mermaid sitting on a rock calling to sailors. After the story's publication, the mermaid was often pictured on a rock. John William Waterhouse's

painting *The Mermaid* (1900) shows the figure on a rock watching a man drown beneath her. One of the most famous pieces of mermaid art is Edvard Erikson's "Little Mermaid" statue sitting (on a rock) in Copenhagen's harbor. Erikson's mermaid posed on a rock was erected (in 1913) as a tribute to Andersen and his famous little mermaid. Folklore has shaped Anderson's story, and Anderson's story has shaped art.

When the mermaids in "The Little Mermaid" do surface, one by one, year by year, they adopt the characteristics of a typical mermaid. One sister, on her trip to the surface, sits on an iceberg. While she watches human life on the sea, "all the ships gave [the iceberg] a wide berth as they sailed in terror past where she sat with her long hair streaming in the wind" (14). Not only does her long hair mark her as a typical mermaid; the sailor's terror signifies the danger she projects. Sirens do not always *intend* to create dangerous situations, but by nature, they often do. Once the first five sisters successively turn fifteen, they sing, like sirens, tempting sailors: "when a gale sprang up threatening shipwreck, they would swim in front of the ships and sing tempting songs of how delightful it was at the bottom of the sea...when the ship sank the crew were drowned, and only as dead men did they come to the palace of the Sea King" (17). However, mermaid sisters do not intend to bring harm to the sailors; they simply fail to understand that the sailors will die underwater. The mermaids' role in this scene, in fact, is ambiguous. Perhaps their presence further endangers the sailors, but because they choose to go to the surface during a storm, the diction implies that the mermaids are merely witnesses, not murderers; they do not cause the storm but rather join it. The death of the sailors does not affect their conscience, and like the majority of mermaids in legend, they make no attempt to rescue the drowning. When the little mermaid turns fifteen and surfaces for the first time, alone, her experience is different from that of her sisters. She does not rise to the surface expecting a storm as her sisters often do;

instead, the storm surprises her. Unlike her sisters, the little mermaid realizes the sailors are in danger; she “remember[s] that humans can’t live under the water” and cries “ ‘No, he musn’t die!’” and unlike her passive sisters, the little mermaid heroically strives to save the prince’s life (21). Again, her dedication to human life prepares her for human religion; she has adopted a Christian virtue: “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:4).

The little mermaid’s silence also separates her from her sisters. They sing to the sailors while the little mermaid watches then rescues. The little mermaid differs long before she visits shore. The narrator describes her as “ a curious child, silent and thoughtful; when the other sisters decorated their gardens with the most wonderful things they had got from sunken ships, she would have nothing but the rose-red flowers that were like the sun high above, and a beautiful marble statue” (9). Her sisters are interested in the human world before their fifteenth birthdays, but the little mermaid desires the surface most; she is “the very one who had the most time to wait and [is] so silent and thoughtful” (10). When she returns home after rescuing the prince, “her sisters [ask] her what she had seen on her first visit to the surface, but she [will not] say” (24). Yet, the characteristics that make the little mermaid different from her sisters do not suggest that she is in every respect different. In fact, the similarities she shares with her sisters emphasize their differences. For instance, all six of the sisters have gardens; the first five have similar gardens, while the youngest comes up with an original. Likewise, even in her silence, the little mermaid has a voice. Initially she refuses to speak of her birthday-visit to the surface, but “at last she could keep it to herself no longer, but told one of her sisters” (24). Her sisters, of course, are much more talkative, “and immediately all the rest got to know, but nobody else—except a few other mermaids who didn’t breathe a word to any but their nearest friends” (24).

The other mermaids all appear to be very talkative and sociable, certainly not secretive, but the little mermaid is much more reserved. The little mermaid does not even sing in the story until after she has related her experience to a sister. For all her reserve, “the little mermaid sang the most sweetly of them all . . . for she knew that she had the most beautiful voice on earth and sea” (32). While the little mermaid reveals that siren-like quality, her voice, she hides it with her silence. She is still a siren; the identity is just not as apparent as with her sisters. The little mermaid may willingly retire from vocal communication on land because she already ranks thought and contemplation above conversation.

When the little mermaid becomes human, she is no longer a mermaid, so naturally she is no longer a siren either. She specifically exchanges her tongue—and her voice—for legs. The Sea-Witch warns her, “With that voice, no doubt, you think to enchant [the prince]; but that voice you shall hand over to me” (37). Although the mermaid clearly makes a sacrifice, mermaids who turn mute on land are not so uncommon. For instance, in one legend from Holland, a broken dyke floods the entire town of Edam. The flood brings with it a mermaid who cannot get back to the sea after the water subsides. She lives in the town for fifteen years, never speaking a word (Davidson 15). Again, the mermaid is a paradox: she has a beautiful voice, but once taken out of water, she cannot utter a sound. This, of course, is not true in all legends, but it does carry over into “The Little Mermaid.” Once she becomes human, she is “dumb and [can] neither sing nor speak” (38). Her disability does not, however, distract her from her goal. She continues to pursue love and salvation despite obstacles. Humbled, the little mermaid accepts self-sacrifice.

Before she loses her voice, she asks the Sea-Witch what she will have left without her tongue. The witch answers, “your lovely form . . . your graceful movements, and your speaking

eyes” (38). The mermaid will still be sexy on land, and she should be able to attract men with her body, but the prince, who is enthralled with her dancing, never appreciates her as a sexual partner. Having relinquished her role as a siren, the mermaid can no longer tempt the prince. Her eyes, however, do speak. She even has a short “eye” conversation with the prince. After she asks the prince, with her eyes only, “Do you like me best of all?” he responds, “Yes . . . you’re the dearest of all” (45). So why does she make no effort to speak to him and reveal her identity? Two other literary maidens who had their tongues cut out managed to communicate when necessary: the mythological Philomel weaves a tapestry, and Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* uses her stumps to open a book to a page on Philomel to reveal her rape. Rhoda Zuk argues in her essay “*The Little Mermaid: Three Political Fables*” that the little mermaid’s “silence is voluntary. Anxious to please, and therefore not to reveal her history or misery, she disguises the excruciating pain” (Zuk 168). On land, the little mermaid makes no effort to tell the prince that she is the woman who has saved him. By her silence she recognizes that the prince would reject her if informed of her former tail. Perhaps she will not reveal her identity because she believes it would threaten her relationship with the prince. Her former identity as a mermaid also prevents her from acquiring a soul. She essentially forgets her past to take hold of her future potential. Her actions could be modeled after Paul’s advice:

Bretheren, I count not myself to apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

(Phillipians 3: 13-14)

The little mermaid forfeits her tongue, in essence taking a vow of silence, to become worthy of a human’s right to a soul.

The love of the prince is not the mermaid's primary objective; neither are legs, for that matter. Her interest in the human world leads to her desire for an eternal soul. When the little mermaid asks her grandmother about the difference between merpeople and human beings, her grandmother instructs her, "We can live for three hundred years, but when our life here comes to an end we merely turn into foam on the water...We've no immortal soul; we shall never have another life...But human beings have a soul which lives forever; still lives after the body is turned to dust" (28). Her grandmother tells her the only way for her to attain a soul is to win the love of a human; she specifically instructs her charge, "if he clung to you with all his heart and soul, and let the priest put his right hand in yours as a promise to be faithful and true here and in all eternity—then his soul would flow over into your body and you, too, would get a share in human happiness" (31). The grandmother can offer nothing more, not even understanding, because she believes life as a mermaid is superior to life as a human. The little mermaid, of course, differs from the mermaids around her. After learning about the human soul, she cannot "forget the handsome Prince and her sorrow at not possessing, like him, an immortal soul" (32). The desire for the soul, coupled with her desire for the Prince, leads her to the Sea-Witch, but her desire for the Prince alone is not enough. Many scholars misunderstand the mermaid's motives; for instance, Alan and Lauren Dundes claim, "Anderson is given credit or rather blame for transforming the traditional seductive, aggressive mermaid figure into a passive self-effacing heroine who sacrifices her own goals and fulfillment for the sake of the happiness of an unattainable male prince" (119). Andersen's little mermaid, however, aggressively pursues her goals: the soul and the prince. When she approaches the Sea-Witch, she initially hesitates, "but then she remember[s] the Prince and the human soul, and that [gives] her courage" (35). Roberta Trites argues that the sentence structure reveals the mermaid's priorities: "The soul is placed last,

in the climactic position, because the mermaid considers happiness in eternity more important than happiness on earth” (146). Even the Sea-Witch acknowledges the mermaid’s dual motive, admitting, “You want...the young Prince [to] fall in love with you [so] you can win an immortal soul” (36). The Sea-Witch is hardly an antagonist; though she may appear to be “bad because she is called a “witch” and surrounds herself with aesthetically displeasing objects, she does not promise the little mermaid love or heaven, but rather offers a warning in her condescension: “How stupid of you! Still, you shall have your way, and it’ll bring you into misfortune” (36). The Sea-Witch’s role is not completely opposite to that of the grandmother; both prepare the little mermaid to surface, both discourage her from desiring the Prince and a soul, and both acknowledge the importance of sacrifice. Andersen’s story does not focus on the battle between good and evil but rather the difficult quest for eternal salvation.

When the grandmother prepares the mermaid for her maiden voyage to the surface, she “made eight big oysters nip tight to the Princess’ tail to show her high rank” (17). The little mermaid dislikes the adornment and the physical pain that accompanies it, crying “ ‘oo! That hurts!’ ” (17). Her grandmother responds to her granddaughter’s displeasure by instructing her, “one can’t have beauty for nothing” (17). Beauty, according to the grandmother, is not completely natural nor completely inherited. Although the little mermaid deserves beauty because of her position as a princess, she becomes beautiful (at least in the eyes of the grandmother) because she can afford to pay for it, and in the world under the sea, the payment is sacrifice. Critics often find such lessons disturbing, fearful that the story will instruct young girls that sacrifice—to the point of self-mutilation—is necessary to achieve beauty, love, and acceptance. According to Zuk, “the grandmother trains the girl to make trivial sacrifices for womanly ends; but this education prepares the mermaid, once she has knowledge of other-

worldly life, to sacrifice everything for larger ambitions” (168). The little mermaid does sacrifice much: her rank as a princess for an unranked—even unnamed—position as an abandoned, strange, alone human girl; her loving family for the hope of love and eternity among strangers; comfort for pain; her tongue for legs. The transformation from mermaid to human is not wholly unlike modern elective plastic surgery: pain results in beauty. The Sea-Witch does not offer an easier way but warns the little mermaid, “it’ll be like a sharp sword going through you” (36). Unlike advice offered to a virgin before her wedding night, the Sea-Witch warns the mermaid that the pain is not a one-time occurrence from which she might heal; instead she tells the mermaid, “every step you will take will feel as if you were treading on a sharp knife, enough to make your feet bleed” (37). Still, the women in the story do not demand sacrifice of other women without accepting sacrifice themselves. The grandmother, who pierces her granddaughters’ tails with oysters, wears oysters as well. The Sea-Witch, too, offers her own blood as a part of the sacrifice: “she scratched her breast and let her black blood drip into the kettle” while preparing the little mermaid’s transformative potion. Zuk argues, “The brutal logic of her craft requires both self-mutilation,” yet the logic does not solely belong to the witch, or even to the people of the sea, but rather to the allegorical properties inherent in the story (168). For though the mermaid suffers physically and psychologically, and “she [feels] as if her heart must break for grief” when she leaves the sea, she continually remembers “her Prince and prize of an immortal soul” (38, 37). While many critics argue that the little mermaid is a passive female who willingly endures physical pain for a man, again, other critics counter this argument by realizing “she suffers the resulting pain willingly because she hopes to gain eternal life by self-denial in this life” (Trites 148). Also of significance is the correlation between the mermaid’s sacrifice and the Christian allegory. In fact, men play no role in leading the little mermaid to salvation; the

process is entirely female, and in the end, a sign of the little mermaid's independence, assertiveness, and female upbringing, for "although it takes longer, salvation can also be achieved through the self-sacrifice of good works (Trites 150). According to Trites, "Andersen clearly wants the mermaid to gain a soul by her own efforts instead of relying on someone else to bestow a soul upon her" (Trites 150). Though she initially believes salvation lies in a man, the little mermaid discovers salvation within her own actions.

The religious goal of salvation in Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* may be the primary allegorical objective, and such religious imagery is supported elsewhere in the story. Churches, and their steeples, appear throughout the story. The first paragraph measures the depths of the sea in units of church steeples: "Many church steeples would have to be piled up one above the other to reach from the bottom of the sea to the surface. Right down there the sea people live" (5). The actual distance between the communities of sea people, who live at the *bottom* of the sea, and land people, who live on *top* of the land, serves as a physical boundary divide, but not one impossible to cross. Using units measured in church steeples, the narrator explains distance with objects familiar to humans to clarify that mermaids are not part of Andersen's intended audience; this allegory is for land people, not soul-desiring mermaids. While church steeples do not appear under the sea, measuring depths in church steeples brings their image to the ocean in order not only to mark what is different but also to point out similarities. The second paragraph continues to describe the undersea communities, explaining differences by comparing undersea life to land life. For instance, "all the fishes, big ones and little ones, slip in and out of the branches just like birds in the air up here" (5). Church steeples belong to religion, and while mermaids are excluded from participating in Christian religion (outside of the aforementioned exemptions), the desire for religion, like the image of church steeples, penetrates the ocean.

Churches are represented by steeples or bells six times in the short story, and their presence remains from the beginning to the very end, indicating the importance of the godly structure. When the eldest mermaid returns from her first visit to shore, she has “a hundred things to tell” her sisters (10). One of her favorite things is to “see all the towers and spires on churches and to hear the bells ringing” (11). The little mermaid longs for the human world so much, she “seemed to catch the sound of church bells ringing down to her” (11). She is certainly not the first mermaid to imagine a church. In the anonymous ballad “Agnes and the Merman,” published in 1835, which very possibly influenced Andersen, Agnes is a human woman who marries a merman. After giving birth to their seventh child,

Agnes she sat by the cradle and sang

And she heard how the bells of England rang.

Unto the merman she then did say:

“May I go up to the kirk to pray?”

Matthew Arnold borrowed the plot in “Agnes and the Merman” for his poem “The Forsaken Merman,” appearing in his first book of poems, *The Strayed Reveller*, published in 1849. In this poem, the human wife of the merking is also lured away from her home and family by church bells:

When down swung the sound of a far off bell.

She sigh’d, she look’d up through the clear green sea;

She said: “I must go, for my kinsfolk pray

In the little gray church on the shore to-day.

’T will be Easter-time in the world—ah me!

And I lose my poor soul, Merman! here with thee.” (lines 54-59)

Why the women forfeit their souls beneath the sea is unclear: either their marriages are forbidden because they connect two different groups of beings, merman and human, or the sea itself strips the women of a soul; the little mermaid cannot attain a soul until she surfaces, so why should these women (assuming the rules are consistent between the different texts) maintain their souls beneath the surface? Churches in all three texts represent the danger of change as well as the importance of a soul. When the little mermaid rescues the prince, she delivers him in front of “a church or convent—she wasn’t sure which” (22). From this building comes the girl with whom the prince falls in love—this young woman unintentionally separates the prince and the little mermaid forever. When the prince proclaims his love for the convent girl instead of the little mermaid, “All the church bells were ringing, as the heralds rode around the streets to proclaim the betrothal” (47). Such bells also announce the end of relationships, including the little mermaid and her prince, Agnes and her merman, and Arnold’s merman and his wife, while also announcing the admission (or readmission) into the heavenly kingdom for all three women. One major difference between the little mermaid and the other women is that her love for the prince helps her achieve a heavenly reward, while they must break ties with their love for the same purpose.

The little mermaid demonstrates her love for the prince, and her willingness to do good deeds, by refusing to save her own life by sacrificing the prince’s. When the little mermaid makes a bargain with the Sea-Witch to become human, the witch warns her, “The first morning after the Prince marries someone else, your heart must break and you become foam on the water” (37). The little mermaid’s sisters, however, make a new bargain with the witch: they trade their hair for a knife. If she kills the prince on her deathbed, she can return to mermaid form and join her family once again. Considering her opportunity while “the pink dawn glowed brighter and

brighter,” the little mermaid “looked at the sharp knife in her hand...but then flung it far out into the waves; they glimmered red where it fell, and what looked like drops of blood came oozing out of the water” (51). Though the little mermaid refuses to sacrifice the prince’s life, the color red indicates her willingness to sacrifice her own. The pink dawn and glimmering red water are not the only significant examples of the color red. At the beginning of the story, the little mermaid chooses for her garden “only . . . flowers that shone red” (9). When she first comes to shore as a human, “the sun, streaming over the sea” wakes her up (41). Even when she thinks she is about to die, she sees “the bright sun” illuminating “hundreds of lovely creatures” who are “hovering above her” (52). Then “the little mermaid raised her crystal arms toward God’s sun” and “climbed to a rose-red cloud that was sailing in the sky” (53). Massengale points out that “the sun is used by Andersen elsewhere as a symbol of divinity” (567). The sun is ultimately significant because it is “God’s sun,” and the mermaid reaches her final destination by climbing to a red cloud, indicating the direction of her journey is upward, toward heaven, a soul, and God. This climb is her last in the story, but she has been climbing towards heaven since before she became human. Her first journey as a human is to “climb the magnificent marble steps” toward the prince’s castle (38). She also “went climbing with the Prince up high mountains, and although her delicate feet bled so that others could see it, she only laughed” (42). The color red and pattern of climbing are often coupled, but the little mermaid is not only climbing toward the prince; by leaving him behind, she proves her ultimate goal is God.

Rhoda Zuk argues, “When the prince fails to recognize her extraordinary merit and anguished love, omniscient providential authority, which does acknowledge her worthiness and sacrifice, monitors a continued rise through he ranks to paradise” (166). The red trail the knife leaves behind in the sea indicates the little mermaid’s willingness to take complete responsibility

in her quest for a soul. She no longer desires the soul the prince may have to offer her; neither does she desire to murder in exchange for her life. Instead, she imitates (even unknowingly) the actions of Christ who

Made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death. (Philippians 2:7-8)

The little mermaid is not a Christ-figure; her willingness to die does not spring from a desire to save mankind, but rather to ensure the well-being of one man, the prince. She forsakes her reputation and position as the king's daughter to become nothing more than a servant to the prince. As a human, she humbles herself, even to the point of death. Her good works lead up the stairway to heaven until at last she joins "children of the air," where she "shall float for three hundred years, till at last [she comes] into the kingdom of heaven" (53).

Andersen's mermaid does not struggle without sacrifice or without reward. Andersen's audience, too, does not exit the story empty-handed. Not only does Andersen's story reveal the value of good works and the rewards that accompany evil avoided, but the story ends by encouraging children to respect their parents and to avoid bad behavior. Though the prince could not, Andersen's young audience has the opportunity to help the mermaid reach her final destination. The children of the air instruct the little mermaid, along with children reading the story,

. . . every day we find a good child who makes father and mother happy and earns their love, God shortens our time of trial. The child never knows when we fly through the room and, if that makes us smile with joy, then a year is taken away from the three

hundred. But if we see a child who is naughty or spiteful, then we have to weep tears of sorrow, and every tear adds one more day to our time of trial. (53)

3. THE DISNEY *LITTLE MERMAID*

By garnering two Academy Awards in 1989, “Best Score” and “Best Song,” Disney Studios (Walt Disney himself had died in 1966) proved that songs from the sea could still win the hearts of humans. Americans flocked to the theaters, spending about \$84 million dollars on ticket sales. The popularity of the movie led to a Disney television show, a “prequel” featuring Ariel before she became human, then a straight-to-video sequel, *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*. Though the sequel never saw the success of its predecessor, the title, perhaps, was fitting for the *Little Mermaid* phenomenon itself that swept the US during the late eighties and early nineties. Audiences returned to the sea: the Disney movies popularized mermaids much as the mediaeval churches regenerated interest in mermaids during their time. The effects of time, place, and cultural expectations once again reshaped the role of mermaids, and the reaction to the new *Little Mermaid* narrative reflects a change in religious and popular trends. Hans Christian Andersen’s clearly-stated moral, well accepted in mid-nineteenth century Europe and America, was ill suited for the modern baby-boomers and their children. Still, Disney’s animated mermaids are as seductive as ever, but instead of symbolizing pagan gods, (overt) sexual temptation, or (like Andersen’s) the desire for a soul, the Disney mermaids seem to address a lack of interest in religion altogether; they rather invoke confused post-modern ideas of love, equality, power, and beauty.

Disney did not adapt Andersen’s story in order to warn small children not to cry, to be good, and work hard to earn an eternal soul. Instead, the Disney film was created from the genius of marketing experts. Pamela Colby O’ Brien, author of “The Happiest Films on Earth: A

Textual and Contextual Analysis of Walt Disney's *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*," noted, "the Walt Disney Company needed *The Little Mermaid* to be a financial and critical success in order to restore Disney's image and profitability" (170). Not only did Disney intend to "develop movies designed for an adult audience...to increase profits"; the company also realized that their youthful audience had money and the desire to spend it (169). In fact, young Americans lavished a total of "\$55 billion in 1988, a figure equal to the GNP of Turkey" (170). Though Andersen's European and American contemporaries were certainly materialistic—he would not have written short stories instructing children to disvalue items such as pretty red shoes if materialism were not a problem and taboo—and Americans in the late eighties were still clung to religious loyalties, the differences between the cinematic adaptation and the literary prototype mark an important shift. Priorities had changed. Not only did Andersen write an instructional religious short story and Disney produce a moneymaking film, but the characters pursued different goals as well. Andersen's mermaid desires a soul and human love; Disney's mermaid is interested in material items and human love, but she cares little for her own soul, and she seems indifferent to her effect upon others.

Some critics have derided Andersen's self-sacrificing mermaid, but others argue that the updated Disney mermaid, now named Ariel, takes one step (once she has legs, that is) back from feminist values. Roberta Trites maintains that Andersen's story "at least acknowledges the legitimacy of femininity" but unfortunately Disney's version "eliminates the values that affirm femininity in the original story"; she asserts, "Disney's changes result in characters, images, and conflicts that rob women of integrity, making the movie even more sexist than the original story" (145). Lauren and Alan Dundes, aware of problems feminists have encountered even with Andersen's version, affirm Trites's beliefs that Disney's may be "worse," because the main

character is a “passive mermaid,” and, most significantly, the Disney movie’s alternate ending, which includes “the addition of the final wedding scene,” the Dundeses say, “has further incurred the wrath of feminists who see it as an insidious continuation of a patriarchal conspiracy to keep women enslaved” by men (120). The newer mermaid continues to represent conflict and duality. Despite her problematic characterization, she honestly depicts struggle—she struggles to change herself, her environment, and the prejudices of two groups (land and sea folk) who cannot understand each other. Whether intentionally or not, Disney pokes fun at Americans, and any other people, who believe they can actually achieve an understanding of other cultures while still believing that their own culture is superior. The film suggests that it is *not* a small world, after all.

Ariel is the most obvious character whose intentions to study another culture are admirable but ineffective. This material girl could make Madonna proud (whose song “Material Girl,” had been released in 1985). Ariel even labels herself “the girl who has everything.” O’Brien believes that Ariel “collects artifacts from sunken ships to further her education” and that “although this marks the beginnings of her materialism,” “her curiosity is intellectual” (172). Andersen’s mermaid has a garden, curiously different from those cared for by her sisters; this garden, however, does not represent an intellectual effort but rather the expected duty of a mermaid-princess—and a middle-class European girl at the end of the nineteenth century. Disney’s Ariel collects human artifacts in attempt to understand the human world. Her songs even indicate a successful effort to acquire words unique to the human world, such as “feet” and “street.” Ariel struggles to remember these words, singing, “I wanna see/ Wanna see ’em dancin’/ Walkin’ around on those/—Whad’ya call ’em—oh, feet,” and “Legs are required for jumping, dancing/ Strolling along down a/—What’s that word again?—street.” Not all her

linguistic efforts are so successful, partly because she seeks information from a self-assured but not-so-intelligent seagull. Ariel, gullible herself, is misinformed that the word for “fork” is “dinglehopper” and that the word for “tobacco pipe” is “snarfblat.” Once she enters the human world, her misunderstandings mark her as a foreigner: she uses a fork to comb her hair and tries to play music with a pipe. Her lost voice is certainly not her only obstacle to communication. Instead, her “dumb” state reflects the inability of the two worlds to communicate with each other altogether.

Emerging on the big screen two years before the end of the Cold War (and end of the Soviet Union) in 1991, and three years before the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, which reinforced the crippling United States embargo against Cuba, Ariel—red hair and all—represents the liminal space established by politics. Her father, King Triton, enforces the political boundaries in the film. Ariel breaks the boundaries without even breaking surface (though she is punished for this too) simply by collecting items made on land. Before seizing and destroying her human artifacts, her father reminds her, “Contact between the human world and the mer-world is strictly forbidden! Ariel, you know that. Everyone knows that!” Ariel chooses to break the rules in her successful attempt to save a human life. Triton condemns her philanthropy, believing his daughter to be a hopeless and naïve romantic, not a caring lifeguard. When he reprimands Ariel for rescuing a human, she responds, “he would have died.” Unmercifully, Triton replies, “One less human to worry about.” Ariel, once again trying to promote an understanding between cultures, argues against authority and ignorant bigotry: “You don’t even know him.” Triton’s answer reaffirms his position as a prejudiced and dogmatic authority—“I don’t have to know him. They’re all the same. Spineless, savage, harpooning, fish-eaters, incapable of feeling—.” Especially in using the word “savage,” Triton elevates his own race and

dehumanizes another. Unlike his daughter, he (initially) makes no effort to understand another culture. His own values and political ideology threaten the safety of his family, “nation,” and crown. Until Triton is forced to side with the human world to fight off a greater evil, he makes enemies with the human world to retain authority and enlarge his own power beneath the sea.

The elements of forbidden love and forbidden territory do not enter Andersen’s short story. His mermaid follows the rules. She does not surface until allowed to do so. With age comes privilege. Once fifteen, the mermaid may go to the surface. Her family does not penalize her for falling in love with a human, and they expect her to be ready for sexual encounters. By requesting that she abandon her comfortable childish decorations for oysters that pinch, mimicking her sisters and grandmother, her family dresses her as an adult. Trites believes “Andersen depicts human love as a product of maturity” and “the enchantress’s image of flowing blood prepares the girl for menarche, while the image of knife-like pain warns the girl about the potentially hymen-breaking phallus” (148). Also, Andersen’s mermaid has reached the age of consent, not just with love and sex, but also in regards to religion. As an adult, she has the free will to pursue a soul, an impossible prospect to a young and perhaps immature and selfish child not allowed to visit the surface. Unfortunately, the little mermaid’s object of affection never recognizes her sexuality. Instead of dressing her like a woman available for marriage, “he had boys’ clothes made for her, so that she could go riding with him on horseback” (43). The little mermaid may understand her sexuality, but the prince does not; the clothing he makes for her infantilizes her body, suggesting that she was reborn on land, and must repeat the maturation process there. Disney’s Ariel, however, does not mature under the sea, though given the chance to; therefore, she can hardly mature on land. Her family, friends, and enemies, and even the prince, do not know how to treat her. The first glimpse of mermaids in the film takes place at a

concert, which functions as a “coming-out” party for Ariel. Her six older sisters announce themselves in song, and then sing, “And then there is the youngest in her musical debut,/ Our seventh little sister, we’re presenting her to you.” Ariel, however, never shows up to her own debut; she is unwilling and not ready to enter into the adult world. Unlike Andersen’s little mermaid, who makes the necessary preparations, Ariel literally does not rehearse for her next stage in life; even the crab-conductor Sebastian admits she would be the most talented of all the sisters “if only she’d show up to rehearsals once in a while.” Ariel is, in simple terms, a teenager: part-child, part-adult. She is divided, not just between one world and another but between stages of life.

This confusion is not necessarily representative of a general increase in confusion among young women in the 1980s, but it does represent a new kind of confusion, a confusion the media was ready to acknowledge. What should a woman strive for, when is she old enough to know what she wants in matters of love, and when should she legally be allowed to consent to sex? Ariel is actually one year older than Andersen’s mermaid, and though she believes she is grown-up, her father does not. When arguing over her privileges, she reminds her father, “I’m sixteen—I’m not a child anymore.” To reestablish her role as a child, Triton lashes out, “Don’t take that tone of voice with me, young lady.” Ariel is not simply a female, and therefore always a child in a patriarchal world. Instead, she is a teenager, and therefore expected to rebel against authority. She’s trapped between the space of a child and that of an adult. She is also caught in a historical era following the feminist movement. O’Brien believes that Ariel is a typical younger woman of the 1980s, claiming, “in this wave of postfeminist thinking, young women were moving away from feminist ideas that challenged traditional gender roles while embracing more traditional views of women’s roles even while retaining some economic/ career goals for women” (170).

She seeks independence from her father and desires intellectual satisfaction for herself, but she still ultimately desires marriage and is willing to make sacrifices for the relationship.

Ariel's father eventually condones her crossing over into the human world, but he does not completely let go of her as a child. The word "child" can be complicated itself, for it not only designates "young people,"; it also signifies "descendants": *all* people, regardless of age, are someone's "child." Yet, in the closing scene of the movie, when Sebastian advises Triton, "Children got to be free to lead their own lives," the implication is that Ariel has not grown up yet. Triton gives her free will by transforming her into a human. Some scholars believe that Ariel never actually achieves free will, arguing that power, and will, belong to men. Men can exchange power, lose power, and gain power, but women are merely pawns. Lauren and Alan Dundes state, "The Little mermaid is initially controlled by her father Triton, king of sea, who eventually hands her over to her husband Prince Eric. Never really free, Ariel is allowed only to transfer her allegiance from one male to another" (120). Certainly, Ariel wastes no time leaving her father's world in the ocean to join Eric on the beach, but she does *choose* Eric, who also has the autonomy to choose her. In Andersen's story, the prince is simply never interested (erotically, romantically, or matrimonially) in the little mermaid. In contrast, Disney's Eric, upon meeting human-Ariel, immediately finds his interest aroused. In his excitement, he announces, "You're the one! The one I've been looking for!" He changes his mind when Ariel cannot prove she is the possessor of her voice, but he quickly rekindles his affection. Eric must also develop his own sexual readiness before he can admit love for Ariel; she is not the only character caught between the world of adults and children.

In the opening scene, Grimsby presents Eric with a statue of himself, admitting, "I had hoped it would be a wedding present." Instead, the present is given in honor of Eric's birthday.

Though he's getting older, Eric is still unwilling to accept the adult responsibility (not to mention political responsibility) of marriage. According to Grimsby, "The entire kingdom wants to see [Eric] happily settled down with the right girl." Eric, however, does not regard marriage as a power position, as some critics suggest; if he does, then he does not choose to seek more power through marriage. Even his initial hesitation over Ariel fades away. After little more than one day into their courtship, Eric has begun to fall in love. His feelings are strong enough to threaten the sea witch Ursula's power. Ariel is more of a pawn to Ursula than to her father and lover. Not only does Ursula thwart a potential kiss between Eric and Ariel; she interrupts their budding love later that night. As Ariel stands at her bedroom window, combing her hair in traditional iconic mermaid-fashion, Eric stands outside ruminating on his feelings. Before he can abandon his dream of marrying the girl who saved him to love Ariel (who *is*, unbeknownst to him, the girl who saved him), along comes Ursula in disguise. She casts a spell on Eric so that he will desire immediate marriage with herself. She does not want the mermaid to live happily ever after, and she only "helps" Ariel along the way in order to "catch a much bigger fish." Momentarily, Ursula does rule the sea. Andersen's sea-witch is much less malevolent. Though somewhat unappealing physically, Andersen's Sea-Witch has just one function in the story, to help the little mermaid become human. She becomes a step on the little mermaid's way to salvation. This witch even makes a later bargain with the little mermaid's sisters: for their hair, she will offer the little mermaid one last chance to return to her family under the sea. Disney's Ursula, on the other hand, enslaves other creatures. First, she captures the little mermaid, who is bound to a hopeless contract. Next, she puts Eric under a spell. Unlike Andersen's prince, who chooses another bride because he mistakenly identifies her as the woman who saved him, Eric exercises his own free will. However, Eric is powerless against Ursula's magic. He is also relieved of the moral

opprobrium of rejecting the little mermaid. Unlike Ariel, he may marry whom he chooses; perhaps the same parental control or influence that stifles Ariel could have saved Eric. Without parents around to protect him, he falls victim to worldly deceit and evil. “Good,” of course, eventually triumphs in all animated Disney classics. Once the spell is broken and peace is restored, Eric and Ariel choose to marry each other as consenting adults.

Andersen’s mermaid does not battle evil. The Disney characters do battle evil, and they triumph without the need for a God or devil to intervene or disrupt. Good and evil, in Disney, is a condition limited to earth; Ariel is unaware of or uninterested in religious salvation, and perhaps she already has a soul. Trites believes so—that Ariel “already possesses a soul that she is willing to wager with Ursula” (146). Sure enough, Ursula calls Ariel a “poor unfortunate soul.” Andersen’s mermaid, from the beginning, is interested in life beyond the water or earth and therefore beyond her own limits. She “depends on a power outside her” (Andersen 52). This mermaid achieves happiness in religious fulfillment, just as Ariel realizes happiness in marital satisfaction. Ariel is not interested in a soul because Disney’s audience was not interested in a religious message. According to O’Brien, “the 1980s marked a movement away from religion. Fewer [white?] college graduates and people under the age of 30 (32%) described themselves as holding strong religious beliefs, compared to their older female (47%) and African-American (61%) counterparts” (172). Not only do such statistics suggest that “audiences would have difficulty identifying with Andersen tale’s appeal to Puritan religious ideals,” a blatantly Christian instruction on gaining salvation through good works could have alienated large groups of people. Even Protestants who believe that salvation is achieved through faith, not good works, might have shunned the movie (and Disney) if it had followed Andersen’s credo. Other religious groups might have labeled Disney Studios as a Christian evangelical organization, a charge that

was sometimes made anyhow (at least in the way of secular Reaganesque “Christianity”). By removing religious import from the movie, Disney satisfies the masses. (Disney movies generally sticks to an “all magic, no religion” rule.) Of course, by 2004 Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion* was the third highest grossing movie of the year, taking in over \$340 million; by then, religious movies could occasionally entice audiences. In a different time, however, Disney Studios was selling *The Little Mermaid* to a different audience, and many believe the movie deserves credit for revamping Disney’s reputation as well as financial standing. Risking religious alienation was not in the plan.

Disney’s reputation withstood the widely circulated rumors that hidden messages in the film flashed sexual images to Disney’s unwitting audience. On one of the original posters advertising the movie, a tower on Triton’s castle was said to resemble a phallus. Disney artists eventually replaced these posters and reshaped the castle’s towers. Also of interest is the “indecent” wedding scene between Eric and the disguised sea-witch. The wedding officiator, resembling a priest, gets a hard-on when Vanessa walks down the aisle—or is it just his knee? The explanations for the folklore of the poster and wedding scene are not as significant as the public’s reaction. The audience willingly believed that this film purposely included sexual references corrupting for children. The sexual images that perhaps carry the most potential hazard are not the blunders of a phallic tower or horny priest but rather the female bodies, which appear in nearly every scene. Mermaids, as sirens, are seductive: Ariel and her sisters all have body types consistent with a 1980s vixen. Regina Bendix critically approaches this sexual representation in “Seashell Bra and Happy End,” asserting, “Disney’s gender images stress body stereotypes that play right into the hands of plastic surgeons, diet programs and the fitness and clothing industries,” recalling that “Ariel and her sisters’ spindly waist is counterbalanced by a

well-endowed bust” (287). Bendix thinks “Ariel coyly wears a sea shell bra” (287) and that “the evil Ursula is fashioned like a well-endowed, but sexually alluring, elegant madam, using ample make-up and wearing expensive jewelry” (288). Disney, however, did not invent the sexual mermaid nor the partially naked one. In many versions of Andersen’s story, the illustrated little mermaid wears no bra; sometimes she drapes her breasts with her long tresses, but sometimes she bares all. True, nudity does not always correspond with sexuality. Often the little mermaid is depicted as a child, not a fifteen-year-old girl. Although Ariel possessed and further popularized the Barbie-body that women cannot achieve, and she is probably unhealthily underweight, like other mermaids in art she represents an ideal sexual female. She is also both a typical Disney heroine and a typical mermaid.

Logically, the idea of beauty cannot coexist with equality; if one character is beautiful, she is only so in comparison to other characters who are not, or who are less beautiful. Beauty signifies ranking; some will stand higher on the ladder of good looks, others lower. This pattern accurately represents boundaries enforced by real people; critics who attack Disney’s portrayal of unachievable or unrealistic beauty offer no solution to the problem. In fact, by stripping the religious lesson from the film, Disney attempted to create a “religiously equal” appeal: no single means to salvation was ranked above another. Equality, however, is usually an impossible ideal. King Triton believes merpeople to be of more worth than land people, but while the movie focuses on the sad limitations of Triton’s ideology, Disney manages to ignore American cultural problems in regard to equality. Aside from the gender equality issues many critics have discussed in the film, one highly significant issue is racial stereotyping. Although its controversial *Song of the South* had been re-released in 1986, Disney Studios has decided not to release the film ever since, indicating a heightened awareness of racial issues affecting the

company during the “*Little Mermaid*” era. Bendix believes that in *The Little Mermaid* “the viewer is duped into embracing a notion of ‘all things are created equal’—fish, crabs, dogs, mermaids and humans transcend the boundaries of species without effort. But underneath this cheerful communion . . . differences are expressed in powerful visual imagery” (287). As in many animated films, racial stereotypes are partially avoided by casting a homogenous animated crowd. The inclusion of a character who possibly represents a stereotype of African Americans, Sebastian, only distracts the audience from notions of equality. According to Bendix, “Disney manages to tacitly transport racial earthly stereotypes to the water kingdom” (288). Sebastian, whose composition “Under the Sea” earned an Academy Award, “is a lovable but nonetheless obvious caricature of a black Caribbean—his enlarged lips emphasizing a white stereotype of black facial features” (288). Although the crab may represent a non-white race, he remains a “powerful symbol of the limited access to power for minorities in American cultures” (288). Yet, while non-white people are underrepresented, the movie marks a turning point for Disney. *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1997), major Disney releases in the decade following *The Little Mermaid*, all attempt to incorporate other cultures and population groups into film. One curiosity about *The Little Mermaid* is that Ariel, who belongs to a group of people who consider themselves superior to humans, desires acceptance among the so-called inferior group but does not express interest in acceptance from her own cultural group. Ariel’s goals do not merely reflect teenage rebellion; instead, her wishes indicate a more complex interest. She has avoided inheriting stereotypes from her father’s generation. Her actions throughout the film ultimately revise her father’s opinion of land people. Unlike a doomed Juliet, Ariel—withstanding her rather selfish love ambitions—brings forth a greater good for the surrounding population.

Disney did not achieve perfect harmony between genders or among races in *The Little Mermaid*. To have done so, however, might have enticed critics to respond even more harshly. A modern audience may not easily digest an Andersen-like didactic ending. Instead, the disharmony that remains when the credits roll allows for a more complex satisfaction: Characters meet their obvious and intended goals, establishing a perfect moment but not a perfect world. Indeed, minor problems, such as the chef's need to capture and cook the crab who infuriates him, and the crab's need to survive despite a human's appetite, are not resolved. At the end of the film, Ariel and Eric's wedding ship sails off beneath a rainbow, reminiscent of Noah's ark and God's rainbow: absolute order between man and man, as well as man and God, has not been established onboard either ship, but all concerned characters are given the opportunity for a more peaceful and fulfilling existence.

4. AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ANALOG

Mermaids, and especially “The Little Mermaid,” enjoy an immense prominence in popular culture. A flourishing sub-industry of the Disney corporation markets “Little Mermaid” books, clothing, and myriad knickknacks. Not directly influenced by Disney, several dozen other children’s books are available that translate or adapt the story, as well as at least six films. In allusion and parody, the Little Mermaid character abounds. Mermaids not related to the Andersen story are ubiquitous as well. Several web sites are devoted to the discussion of general mermaid lore—and the vending of mermaid paraphernalia.

Nevertheless, mermaids figure hardly at all in authentic American folklore—with the exception, perhaps, of oral jokes and quips. Now I wish to discuss one exception to that absence—one in which mermaids per se do not specifically appear but some of the motifs associated with mermaids acquire great significance.

Not a single monument or plaque marks the spot just off the coast of St. Simons Island, Georgia, now adjacent to a sewage plant, where a group of united Ebo slaves, illegally imported from Africa, refused to set foot on their intended destination and so marched into the river, and according to some, back home to Africa. The legend of Ebo Landing remembers a specific tragedy, the death of a large number of slaves, along with the larger social tragedy of slavery in the United States. That legend overlaps with other legends, including the Flying African legend and the Biloxi and the Pascagoula tribes’ versions of the legend of the Singing River.

Narratives of the Flying African, usually set in the antebellum South, most likely originated in oral lore contemporaneous with slavery. One of the first written records appears in

the famous collection *Drums and Shadows*. Shortly after, an issue of the *Yale Review* (for 1942-43) published a collection titled “Folk Tales from Old Charleston” written by John Bennett, a man who describes himself as a former “transient resident in Charleston, South Carolina,” and “a white inquirer.” He claims to have first heard about the Flying African “forty-three years ago,” about 1900. He notes, “I first came upon traces of folk story and folk legend which up to that time had been unnoted by students, untouched by travelers, and entirely neglected by Charlestonians.” Bennett introduced the Flying African by registering his disbelief in the legend. Yet the very essence of legend is “belief”—or at least the possibility of belief among the folk groups to whom the legend belongs.

Michael A. Gomez stated in “I Seen Folks Disappeah,” a chapter of his book *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, that “the ability to fly was associated exclusively with native-born Africans who were believed to possess supernatural power capable of such a feat. American-born or country-born blacks are never depicted as having this ability or experience” (118). Disagreeing somewhat disagreeing with Gomez, Wendy Walters points out, “it is almost always only those slaves born in Africa who can fly” because “some slaves must always be left behind to tell the tale” (19). Usually African-born slaves are the only slaves who disappear or fly back to Africa, but in Bennett’s version, a newborn baby flies away with her mother; the privileged child, still dependent on her mother for life, is an American-born slave able to fly within her mother’s arms. Apparently, storytellers who inherited the story from their kin have the authority to believe, but most scholars do not. Gomez is not a believer; he refers to the legends as “folktales of so-called flying Africans” (117). Gomez chooses to manipulate the legend to his own purpose, “the purpose of establishing a more credible link between the Igbo and suicide,” his accounts relying

mostly on *Drums and Shadows*. His interpretation does not seek to represent the beliefs of sea-island inhabitants who have heard the legend from their grandparents.

Bennett reports, “Questions as to [the legend’s] nature and source brought the invariable reply [from white men]: ‘Just stuff and nonsense. A pack of foolishness. That is absurd: nothing of the sort ever occurred.’” Bennett further notes that “sometimes all that remained of these tales was the emptied husk.” Disbelief, according to Bennett, has created a new (mis?)understanding of the tale. He recollects, “The most incredible tale was often ended by the narrator’s saying earnestly, ‘De trouble is, some folks won’t believ dat troof is true.’” *Drums and Shadows* records one St. Simons ex-slave remembering the Flying African: “Ise heahd duh story uh duh flyin Africans an I sho believ it happen” (25). The interviewee states that he believes in the Flying African because he (most likely) assumes that his interviewer does not believe. Disbelief separates the listener from the teller. The two cannot come to the same understanding of the legend when one accepts the veracity of the story and the other does not.

While belief and disbelief continually butt heads in different reported versions of the Flying African, so does the idea of “loss” versus “not loss” in the discourse of studying the legend. Bennett certainly acknowledges loss, but Walters rejects the notion. Although she admits, “The second characteristic of social scientific discourse surrounding the legend of the Flying Africans is that of loss” (8), she disagrees with “many folklorists and linguists” who “view the Sea Islands within a typically Western linear time framework” because “they see the particular Africanisms which exist there as threatened, *disappearing*, due to the inexorable forces of capitalist economic development and exploitation of the land and its inhabitants and original owners” (8). She backs up her beliefs by asserting, “It seems wrong to assume that cultures which had survived the most violent of upheavals (centuries of enforced slavery) would so easily

vanish with increased commercialism and contact” (9). Walters specifically rejects Bennett’s “emptied husk” imagery in order to document the transformation of the legend within African American novels, such as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. She rejects “the method of preservation” found in texts such as *Drums and Shadows* (subtitled, interestingly enough, *Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*), which record 27 versions of the Flying African, to stress the perceived absence of movement. Instead of just reading the legend for what it was, Walters suggests acknowledging the legend for what it has become within African American literature. Both the idea of loss and the idea the progression of the tale under the pressure of time (thus the absence of Western linear time), suggest the dual needs to preserve and to progress.

Walters, among other scholars, questions the very intent of *Drums and Shadows*. Although the book contains “the largest concentration of this legend in one place,” *Drums and Shadows* is filled with inaccuracies. The project was birthed in a southern state recovering from the impact of the Great Depression. Commissioned by the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers’ Project, a unit of the Work Projects Administration, *Drums and Shadows* offered employment to job-displaced writers, who used tactics to collect their stories that clearly violate modern ethical codes established by anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and other writer-collectors. One such violation involves language usage. Consider the intellectual, distinguished, fluid language of the white writer/recorder opening up the “Possum Point” section of *Drums and Shadows*: “A winding tree-shaded dirt road leads from Darien up the Altamaha to the Negro community of Possum Point . . . Through the thickly-massed trees the sun filters dimly; a misty, unreal atmosphere overhangs the entire scene” (141). Throughout the book, any material coming from a white writer achieves a distinguished, educated, even “literary” style, and though various

writers are represented, no “uneducated” sounding Southern dialect or accent penetrates the white part of the narrative. Thus, a variety of what should be distinctive voices becomes homogeneous. The black voice also develops a homogeneous quality, except, unlike the always-educated white voice, the black voice is always trapped by how the recorders and writers perceived the dialect. A black voice, belonging to Rachel in *Possum Point*, sounds nothing like the white voice: “ ‘I alluz bun muh haiah combins cuz das wut mos folks make cunjuh outuh. Ef dey git yuh haiah, yuh hab to do any ting dey wahn yuh tuh” (132). The white voice in the book probably always appears more polished than it actually was, while the black voice is probably always scuffed up and recreated. The absence in understanding on the white writer’s part gives rise to doubts in authenticity and credibility to the white writer. In fact, the Library of Congress, home to all the Federal Writer’s Project documents, has a public-access web-page (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html>) titled “A Note on the Language of the Narratives,” which attempts to explain the language indiscretions, admitting, “What most interviewers assumed to be ‘the usual’ patterns of their informants' speech was unavoidably influenced by preconceptions and stereotypes.” The Library of Congress has also posted the administration files that include directions for field workers gathering slave narratives (a project separate from *Drums and Shadows*). One page lists 21 words and how to transcribe them into black English. The first example instructs the worker to substitute “ah” for “I,” partially explaining the consistency of ill-transcribed narrations. (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mesn&fileName=001/mesn001.db&recNum=28>). The 27 different versions of the Flying African in *Drums and Shadows* were preserved as white recollections; they do not represent original black oral narratives that were finally written down.

Bennett, in contrast to the writers who collaborated for *Drums and Shadows*, clearly rejected an attempt to preserve the dialect, perhaps in response to the unbelievable dialect present in the written legend's predecessor. If his choice to use his own voice instead of trying to duplicate the voice of the narrators he collected the story from was an intentional response to *Drums and Shadows*, Bennett memorialized the absence of authenticity with his own text. He claims, "I have endeavored in the tales that follow to retain the character, substance, and spirit of their narrators; the language is of necessity my own." He offers the additional note on language: "the tales that follow [do not attempt] to reproduce the original dialect, relying rather upon plain English." As if to evaluate the white man's practice of preserving the black man's voice, Bennett remarks, "Others might have retold [the legends] better. But they did not." Bennett also believes that an audience living outside of the "Black Border" would not understand the Gullah dialect or the puns and other rhetorical flourishes that go with it, admitting, perhaps, that his intended audience is not a Gullah-speaking community. If so, Bennett's motives are not just to preserve the legend, but also to offer access to the legend to a new audience.

Though Bennett was white, his work was, to some extent, appreciated by educated black writers. *The Book of Negro Folklore* published in 1958, edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, includes Bennett's previously published version of the Flying African. However, the written accounts of the Flying Africans do not all come from white writers. Wendy A. Walters certainly stresses the significance of black writers in her essay. Before the text of the essay begins, Walters includes three excerpts of the Flying African tale; all are from black writers, among them Robert Hayden, Esteban Montejo, and Ishmael Webster. Montejo, author of *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, was born into slavery in 1860. Hayden, notably, was employed by the Federal Writer's Project from 1936-1938 to study black history and folk

culture. Although most Georgia writers employed by the Federal Writer's Project were white, at least one, Edwin Driskell, was black.

Although the legend of the Flying African has also been found in the slave-trading communities in the Caribbean, most versions involve slavery in United States, often in Georgia, partly explaining why the Federal Writer's project was interested in the Georgia Sea Islands. The field workers apparently had previous knowledge of the legend, and often specifically asked for the story, such as a case on Wilmington Island where a writer records, "A sudden silence followed and we asked if any of the group had heard of flying Africans" (101). (Unfortunately, by requesting the story, the field workers could not analyze the context in which, and the audience to whom, the storyteller would usually narrate the legend.) Bennett's version, titled "All God's Chillen Had Wings," was based on an oral narrative told by Caesar Grant, of John's Island, South Carolina (about 12 miles west of Charleston), who claims to have heard the story from his grandfather, a witness to the event. Robert Hayden's poem "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home" refers to "Drifting night in the Georgia Pines" (1). The narrator of the poem, like the narrator of "All God's Chillen Had Wings," is connected to the story through his grandfather. In this instance, the grandfather did not tell the legend but was a Flying African himself: "My gran, he flew back to Africa,/ just spread his arms and/ flew away home" (12-14). In *Drums and Shadows*, Prince Sneed of White Bluff ends an account of the Flying African by affirming, "Muh gran see dat wid he own eye" (74). Versions of the Flying African passed on from "gran" also appear in *Drums and Shadows* at Possum Point, Darien, Sapelo Island, Yamacraw, St. Simons, Harris Neck and Tin City. The narrator in Hayden's poem grieves for the loss of his grandfather, who stands for the greater loss of Africa; mourning his native land, the narrator asks, "Do you remember Africa?"(10). Slaves lost not only their home country, but also their family, friends,

and community. The witnesses left behind to tell and retell the legend not only grieve for the absence of their homeland but also note the absence of those who were able to fly away.

Family takes on multiple layers of significance in “All God’s Chillen Had Wings.” The narration of the legend involves three generations: the grandfather, his absent son or daughter from which Caesar, the narrator, descends, and then Caesar, the grandson. Three generations also exist within this version of the legend. The main characters include “one young girl who lately had a child” and “an old, old man near her, the biggest of them all” whom the girl calls “Daddy.” The father and daughter are out working on the fields of a plantation for a “cruel master . . . who worked his people till they died”; the baby stays with her mother, “astraddle of her hip, sucking at her breast.” Although the mother works as much as her strength allows, she does not please her master, who beats her. Eventually, witnessing his daughter’s torment, the father says, “ ‘Yes, daughter, the time has come. Go; and peace be with you!’ ” and “with that she sprang straight up into the air and was gone like a bird, flying over field and wood.” Later the same old man calls to another tortured slave and that man “sprang into the air, and was gone, like a gull, flying over field and wood.” Finally, all “the Africans, young and old, stood up together; the old man raised his hands, and the all leaped up into the air with a great shout, and in a moment were gone.” The exodus begins with a three-generation intact family, and ends on the lips of a man who collected the legend from his three-generation-predecessor. The baby in this version suggests that even children born into slavery could fly away with their mothers; other versions reject this idea, claiming that only African-born slaves can fly away.

The old man apparently has the authority to permit or enable flight. Not all slaves could fly:

All Africans once could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their living wings were taken away. There remained, however, here and there, in the low country and sea-islands, some who had been overlooked, and had kept the power of flight though they looked like other men. (Bennett)

Wings allow flight, but they are not enough; secret words are also necessary. When the old man first speaks to his daughter, “the driver could not understand what they said.” The misunderstanding comes about due to a secret language, or magical words, not low voices or garbled dialect. Later, before the second man can fly off, the old man must call “to him in an unknown tongue.” The narrator does not reveal what the words from the unknown tongue are, claiming, “My grandfather told me the words he said; but that was a long time ago, and I have forgotten them.” Later, the narrator reaffirms, “I have forgotten what the old man said. But as he went over the last fence he made a sign in the master’s face and cried “Kuli-ba! Kuli-ba!” I don’t know what that means.” A few explanations can be envisioned for why the narrator forgot the magic words and their meaning. One explanation is that emancipation negated the need to fly to freedom, and so the absence of this type of magic came along with end of slavery. Forgotten words, however, appear in other versions of the legend, suggesting a great significance. Wendy Walters points out Virginia Hamilton’s story, “The People Could Fly” to cite the example of the words, “ ‘Kum . . . yali, kum buba tambe,’ Kum kunka yali, kum . . . tambe!’” (Walters 10). A variation of these words appear in a version of the Flying African recorded in *Drums and*

Shadows:

Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuz climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz

wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say “Wut dis?” an dey say, “**Kum buba yali kuni buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,**” quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye. (74, emphasis added)

Another account of confused language occurs in *Drums and Shadows*; in this version, the overseer whips the slaves because he cannot understand them:

"Mr. Blue was a hard overseer?" we asked.

"No, ma'am, he ain hahd, he jis caahn make um unduhstan. Dey's foolish actin. He got tuh whip um, Mr. Blue, he ain hab no choice. Anyways, he whip um good an dey gits tuhgedduh an stick duh hoe in duh fiel an den say '**quack, quack, quack,**' an dey riz up in duh sky an tun hesef intuh buzzuds an fly right back tuh Africa." (143, emphasis added)

Walters refers to both instances of confused language but asserts that the “quack, quack, quack” version derives from J. Mason Brewer’s *American Negro Folklore*; she does not acknowledge that Brewer’s version itself comes from *Drums and Shadows*, which was published first, but the duplicate entries signify the penetration of the legend. Walters believes that the confused language does not stand for forgotten words, despite the narrators’ claims. Instead, she believes “the secret magic words remain secret,” claiming that “rather than divulge them to a stranger, the story teller covers them up with ‘nonsense words’” in order to help the informant “fill in her notebook, without giving her the real information” (11). Just as the white, empowered overseer cannot understand the words of the slaves, the white, empowered story-collector cannot understand the black interviewees. Walters believes, “Here the legend of the Flying Africans could be seen as part of the ‘hidden transcript’ of disempowered groups. This hidden transcript is

what is spoken outside the earshot of power holders” (11). The empowered white people who simply cannot access the entirety of the legend but are instead halted by a magical-language barrier. Thus, even though *Drums and Shadows* employs absurd dialect, in the name of authenticity, to represent black people, the black people actually get the upper hand by using this misrepresentation to their advantage by intentionally employing nonsense words to keep secrets from the white interviewers.

But to move the discussion back toward the subject of mermaids: Mermaids, obviously, are hybrid creatures, and legends and literature about them commonly show their moving back and forth between the ocean and the land, between the piscatory world and the human world. In a somewhat parallel way, the Flying Africans move between land and the air, in some versions of the legend even acquiring wings to facilitate the movement.

Paradoxically, however, not all versions of the Flying African legend entail wings or flight, especially those in which the Flying African legend overlaps with Ebo Landing narratives. Those might, in a way, be seen as recounting the (more realistic) *failure* to fly or otherwise transcend human limitation in traversing the water to return home. Walters remarks, “Although the ‘Ibo Landing’ story does not contain flying, it is similar in many respects to several versions of the Flying African legend” (19). *The New Georgia Encyclopedia* does not distinguish between the legends of the Flying African and the Ebo Landing slaves, stating simply that “Ebo Landing” is “better known as the ‘Myth of the Flying Africans’” (Powell). Gomez notes, “Accounts of flying Africans and Igbo come together on St. Simons Island, at a place called ‘Ebo Landing’” (118). Although the two legends come together, often forming a single narrative, the legend of the Flying African does not always occur at, nor is it always related to, Ebo Landing, and narratives about the Ebo Landing do not always refer to flight.

Named for the Ebo or Igbo slaves who died at Dunbar Creek, Ebo Landing is located in Glynn County, just south of Savannah. After crossing the Middle Passage, a shipment of slaves from Igboland, Africa, were sold to two coastal planters who lived on the Sea Islands. After the transaction took place through a broker, the 75 Ebo were placed on the ship *York* and transported to their final destination. The *York* landed at Dunbar Creek in May of 1803. Rather than facing their fate as slaves, the Ebo rebelled against their captors. The slave overseer and two sailors were probably the first to die; they either jumped overboard and drowned or were killed outright by the Ebo; legends do not acknowledge the white men's possible suicide. Then the Ebo "went ashore, singing an Igbo hymn ("The Water Spirit brought. The Water Spirit will take us home") and walked in unison into the creek" (Sieber). More than 150 years later, in 1980, "information collected . . . in Africa and the United States, including a detailed account by the slave importer who had sold the Igbo . . . verified the factual basis of the legend and its historical content" (Sieber). Glynn county's website adds the following details to the conclusion of the story: "They all began chanting together. Chained one to the other, they came into port and were led toward the dock. But, instead of walking onto the bank and into a life of slavery, they all turned and followed their chief into the depths of Dunbar Creek" ("Ebo Landing"). Visitors still gather to mourn the loss of life at the waterfront, and now some researchers claim "Ebo Landing as the only known Plymouth Rock for an ethnically identifiable African group in the United States" (Hoffman). The painting, *Ebo Landing* by Dee Williams, was displayed at the Coastal Center for the Arts in St. Simons; the painting is one of the few visual reminders present in South Georgia of Ebo Landing.

Accounts of Flying Ebo occur only in black oral tradition. Gomez cites accounts in *Drums and Shadows* that resemble Ebo Landing legends; however, only one specific account of

the legend is offered to the field workers. After listening to an informant narrate one account of the Flying African, the interviewer responded, “Did he mean the Ibos on St. Simons who walked into the water?” but the interviewee denied the identification: “No, ma'am, I ain mean dem.” (143). The footnote explains, “A group of slaves from the Ibo tribe refused to submit to slavery. Led by their chief and singing tribal songs, they walked into the water and were drowned at the point on Dunbar Creek later named Ebo (Ibo) Landing” (143:1). The footnote corresponds to the account given by Floyd White of St. Simons Island: “Heahd bout duh Ibo's Landing? Das duh place weah dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbuh tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah. Dey gits drown” (175). Though Gomez reports, “This power [of flying] was not only the exclusive property of the African-born but also for the express purpose of returning to Africa” (118), Walters points out that in the footnote, “Africa is not identified as the destination” (20). Gomez establishes the relationship between the Flying African and Ebo landing, drawing primarily upon examples from *Drums and Shadows*, but he ignores that legends exist where Africa is not the destination. Floyd White recognizes a belief that the Ebo were on their way home, but he does not suggest that they could have arrived.

If the slaves could not reach Africa, even in the beliefs of a slave descendant such as Floyd White, then their presence still remains, to some extent, at Dunbar Creek, lingering like a ghost in a graveyard or place of death. Dr. Philip Aka, present at the Ebo Landing spiritual consecration in August 2002, claimed Dunbar Creek for a graveyard, announcing, “You thought your graves would be unmarked. How incorrect you were. Your graves have turned out [to be] one of the most marked monuments the world has known.” He continues, reaffirming that the absence of Ebo life and freedom creates a space that cannot be destroyed, claiming that the site

of their death “exists in human minds [with] markings no hand can erase” (Hoffman). Unlike a traditional graveyard that is subject to vandalism, destruction, and decay inflicted by both man and time, the Ebo grave absence creates a permanent memory. Although visual markers are absent from the site, some note a different sensory marker: *sound* marks Ebo Landing. According to the Glynn County website, “They say the Ebo tribe still haunts the landing and you can hear the chains and their chants ‘The Sea brought me and the Sea will bring me home.’” Current local practices also acknowledge the presence of the Ebo; for example, “some local fishermen on St. Simons . . . will not cast fishing lines or crab nets in the fecund waters of Dunbar Creek for fear of disturbing the ghosts of the Igbo” (Powell). The absence of fishermen along the Ebo Landing site is a contemporary sign of respect for Ebo, if not also a sign of contemporary belief in their ghosts. An event program for the August 2002 Ebo Landing commemorative service reminds those in attendance, “Igbo culture mandates that we accord proper respects to the spirits of these and other courageous departed ancestors so that their souls will finally get the peaceful repose they need”—“without which good harmony between the living and the dead . . . does not exist” (<http://www.biafraland.com/Igbo%20Landing%20Program.htm>). Proper respect exists, at least locally. Coastal Georgia recognizes Ebo Landing and has even incorporated the legend into local history taught by public schools.

The plot and situation of Ebo Landing are not, however, limited to the Georgia coast. Similar mass suicide legends have been identified among Native Americans, specifically the Biloxi and the Pascagoula, occurring at either Pascagoula Bay, the Mississippi River, and as far west as the Mexico-Texas border (Porter 169). Kenneth W. Porter documents early versions of this legend in his article “A Legend of the Biloxi.” The earliest that contain the motif of a group

of nationally united people singing while marching to their death in a river possibly predate the Ebo Landing legend. One version “said to have been current in 1727” recounts:

. . . shortly after De Soto’s expedition, a Catholic priest appeared among the peaceful Pascagoula and weaned them away from their earlier mermaid-worship to the religion of the Cross; the mermaid, however, presently appeared and by her singing lured the entire tribe to march, also singing, into the bay, whence their voices can still sometimes be heard. (Porter 169)

In both the Ebo Landing legend and this legend, a tribe marches to death, singing, after coming into contact with a foreign culture. The Catholic priest, in some respects, functions like the slave traders by imposing change onto another culture to the immediate detriment of that culture. The Ebo are in a foreign land when they march into the river: the uprooted Pascagoula march into a river in an alien territory. In both versions, a large group of people has been displaced—the Ebo from Africa, the Pascagoula from their native land and their system of beliefs and worship. An English traveler in the Mississippi River area cites another version of the Native American legend (possibly postdating the Ebo Landing legend) “already an old tradition in the 1850’s”:

“According to local tradition . . . the Biloxi . . . after an unsuccessful battle with a more powerful tribe, marched into the sea and perished as a nation” (Porter 170). The variables in this version change depending on who offers the narrative. Some storytellers identify the aggressive tribe as the Choctaw, and some identify the Biloxi as the aggressive tribe and the Pascagoula as the defeated tribe. Porter also notes that in some versions “the Biloxi drown themselves to avoid expatriation by the Whites,” while in other versions “the Indians . . . commit suicide . . . to escape domination by a rival Indian tribe” (Porter 170). The loss of freedom extends from the Ebo to the dominated Indian tribes; in fact, the presence of slavery also appears in the Native

American versions. For example, in “The Legend of the Singing River,” “the Pascagoula were out-numbered and faced with enslavement by the Biloxi tribe or death.” Much like the Ebo who marched into the river joined with chains, “the Pascagoula joined hands and began to chant a song of death as they walked into the river” (“The Legend of the Singing River”). Similar legends similar involving the local superstitions near Ebo Landing surround the Singing River. People report music coming from the river that “sounds like a swarm of bees in flight and is best heard in late evening” (“The Legend of the Singing River”).

Two possibilities occur (or a combination of the two) to explain how similar legends appear in geographically separate areas of the southeastern United States: what folklorists term *diffusion* and *polygenesis* (Brunvand 187). Diffusion would assume a common origin of legends (or other oral texts), which would have acquired variations as they evolved, geographically or temporally, from their source. Polygenesis would posit multiple independent origins of the same basic narrative. By the latter hypothesis, people of the Biloxi and Pascagoula tribes would have endured similar hardships as the Ebo and, in the process of developing an explanation, hit upon comparable plots and motifs, thus incorporating analogous legends into their cultural discourse. Porter, who came across the Native American legends first, believes the Ebo legend influenced the Native American legend. While researching the Singing River legend, he “encountered the Biloxi story among Seminole Negroes, many of whose ancestors were, no doubt, runaway slaves from Georgia and South Carolina,” and so deduced, “the possibility of an influence from Ibo tradition cannot be immediately and entirely set aside” (170). Tracing how one legend could have influenced or birthed another is impossible. Discovering or documenting a logical progression and evolution of the legend throughout the southern (no longer south-eastern) United States is likewise impossible, even to determine which legend came first.

In any case, the Native American legend (in most of its versions) contains what the scholar Kenneth Porter has bluntly called “mermaids”—though not, certainly, in the sense of fishtailed females whose comely faces, hair, and torsos lure hapless seamen to their destruction, or such a figure who comes to the rescue of a terrestrial in distress, but merely as a *voice*—that definitive attribute of Andersen’s Little Mermaid, the loss of which marks the irreversible change in her identity and destiny. After all, it is *language* and perhaps the use of language in song—not just bifurcated legs—that endows creatures with a human identity. We are reminded of the anecdote of Diogenes ridiculing Socrates’ definition of man “a featherless biped,” or King Lear’s realization that “unaccommodated man” is but a “poor bare forked animal.” We are speaking here of marginal existence, which links the mermaids in all three sea changes to the Ebos entrusting themselves to the Water Spirit. They engage our human sympathies with the destroying and preserving sea.

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