

and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm. Edited by Ruth B. Bottigheimer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. 149–63.

Taggart, James. *The Bear and His Sons: Masculinity in Spanish and Mexican Folktales*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.

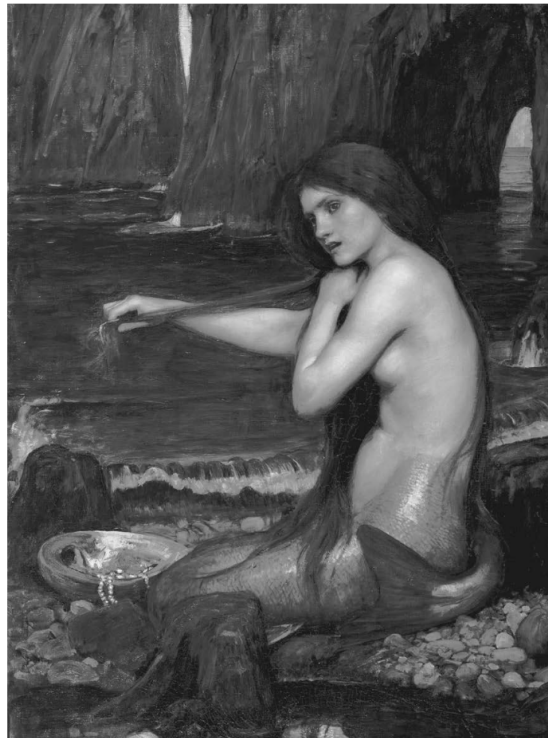
Tatar, Maria. “Born Yesterday: The Spear Side.” *The Hard Fact of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. 2nd edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. 85–105.

Zipes, Jack. “Spreading Myths about Iron John.” *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994. 96–118.

Mermaid

A mermaid—half human, half fish—is said to be an especially beguiling water creature whose beautiful voice lures seafarers to their deaths. Inhabiting an underwater world otherwise identical to that of humans, a mermaid may surface to sit on rocks while admiring her blue eyes in a **mirror** and combing her golden or greenish locks of hair. The mermaid possesses no immortal soul, casts no shadow, and cannot shed tears. These characteristics appear in **folklore** and fairy tales of mermaids as seductresses, protectresses, or the incarnations of woman’s sacrifice in patriarchy.

The mermaid known today is of mixed ancestry and a somewhat confusing lineage. Many scholars suggest the classical mermaid developed her physical attributes from various semizoomorphic figures, such as the Babylonian sea god Oannes (the half-man, half-fish principal deity of the Sumerian creation **epic**) and the Semitic fertility/moon goddess Atergatis/Derceto. Mermaids also trace their ancestry to various Greek sea creatures (the Nereides, Tritons, and Tritonids), with their most important ancestors being the alluring Sirens of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Those woman-faced birds, themselves descended from the ancient Egyptian Ba (demons of death sent to capture souls), account for the mermaid’s captivating, often-fatal song and her preoccupation with the human soul. Physiologus’s early Christian bestiary (second-fourth century) provided her first description: “a beast of the sea wonderfully shapen as a maid from the navel upward and a fish from the navel downward, and this beast is glad and merry in tempest and sad and heavy in fair weather.” Later medieval bestiaries cemented her



A Mermaid (1900) by English painter John William Waterhouse. (Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images)

accoutrements (comb and mirror) and her image as a siren-songed, vain, and beautiful temptress dangerous to the human soul. Paracelsus’s treatise on the elementary spirits, *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de ceteris spiritibus* (*Book of Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies and Salamanders and Other Spirits*, 1566), introduced the idea of the mermaid’s longing for an immortal soul she could gain through marriage to a human; his opining precipitated the mermaid’s shift from seductress to a water creature in need of Christian help—a shift that would inform many later literary reworkings.

In maritime folklore, a mermaid was a harbinger of storms and sea disasters, or a mariner’s protectress. She could be helpful—bestowing gold, silver, cattle, great shipbuilding skills, bountiful catches, or healing powers—or vengeful—her captor might be drowned and whole towns washed away. At sea, a sighted mermaid was carefully watched: if she followed a ship,

sailors feared disaster; good fortune ensued if she turned away. Her tossing of fish (a symbol of the abducted Christian soul) toward the ship portended some crewmembers' doom; tossing fish away from the ship signaled deliverance. For centuries, respected seafarers, historians, and scientists—from Pliny the Elder to Alexander the Great, Christopher Columbus, and Henry Hudson—confirmed the existence of mermaids, based on sightings or captures (and dissections) from Ceylon to the Arctic Ocean. There have been reports of a mermaid washed ashore as recently as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Mermaid tales are known around the world, often transmitted through maritime influences. In Asia, the Javanese mermaid goddess Loro Kidul aids men collecting birds' nests from cliffs. In west-coastal Sumatra, the **legend** of the mermaid Sikambang has impacted local **storytelling, dance,** and music traditions. Ma, the creation goddess in many African **myths,** inspired numerous tales in the black and mixed-race communities of the Cape Verde Islands; Black Portuguese immigrants brought them to North America, where they circulate in the West Indies, the Sea Islands, and along the coast to Cape Cod. **Native American tales** tell of mermaid worship along the Pascagoula River in Louisiana and Lake Mashapang in Connecticut. Mermaid tales are also common in Iceland and the Faeroe Islands, Norway, Denmark, Scotland, and among the Lapps, the Orkneys, and Shetland Islanders, with the greatest concentration in nearly all-coastal areas of Ireland. It is this northern group of tales that accounts for many of the numerous mermaid **motifs** in Stith **Thompson's** *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*: namely, Motif B81.2 (Mermaid marries man); D1410.4 (Possession of mermaid's belt gives power over her); F611.1.14 (Strong hero son of woman of the sea); F611.2.2 (Strong hero suckled by mermaid); and R138.1 (Mermaid rescues hero [boy] from shipwreck). Accounts of mer-lineage among financially and politically powerful families are still an active belief in contemporary Ireland and Greece.

Mermaid lore found its way into **literary fairy tales** (another case of mixed ancestry), where mermaids, **Undines, Melusines,** nixies, selkies, nymphs, water sprites, and kelpies often merged. The mermaid shifted from a powerful, siren-voiced temptress to a

mute, shadowless, soulless creature in need of human aid for her eternal redemption. Many Elizabethan writers, including William **Shakespeare** and John Milton, made reference to mermaids, but the most influential literary interpretations began with German writer Friedrich de la Motte **Fouqué's** 1811 "Undine" (drawing on the Romantics' interest in Paracelsus), which in turn inspired Hans Christian **Andersen's** "Den lille havfrue" ("The Little Mermaid," 1837), the best-known literary mermaid tale, due in part to the animated film **adaptation** by the **Walt Disney Company.** Andersen's and subsequent tales have become a site of feminist critique. The mermaid's plight in the patriarchal world—her glorified female masochism, her self-mutilation in her transformation, and the willing silencing of her once-powerful voice—have all been problematized. Some of the most interesting reworkings are by female writers who explore the disaster for the mermaid through human contact. Many twentieth-century feminist writers shift the voice of the siren song to **men,** luring **women** to subjugation and subservience in the patriarchy. Interestingly, in Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature,* there are far fewer motifs associated with the merman, the mermaid's male counterpart, than with the mermaid herself, suggesting the very **gender-based** issues in folktales that feminist writers seem to address with their rewritings.

The mermaid has had a rich tradition in the visual and performing arts, with four centuries of ballets, numerous **operas,** stage plays, and a century of feature and animated films. Portrayals of mermaids appeared in medieval **art** in wall paintings, carvings, roof bosses, and other architectural features. The mermaid has also been an important image in **advertising** and in **cartoons and comics.**

Shawn C. Jarvis

See also Animation; Feminism; Film and Video; *Secret of Roan Inish, The* (1994); *Splash* (1984); Swan Maiden

Further Reading

Benwell, Gwen, and Arthur Waugh. *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin.* London: Hutchinson and Co, 1961.

Phillipotts, Beatrice. *Mermaids.* New York: Ballantine, 1980.