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DISNEY'S SUB/VERSION OF ANDERSEN'S THE LITTLE MERMAID

By Roberta Trites

1 Although Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," published in 1837, contains many patronizing nineteenth-century attitudes toward women a value system that at least acknowledges the legitimacy of femininity shapes the fairytale. Unfortunately, Walt Disney's 1989 film version of "The Little Mermaid" eliminates the values that affirm femininity in the original story. Disney's changes result in characters, images, and conflicts that rob women of integrity, making the movie even more sexist than the original story.

2 In both versions of the story, the little mermaid is the youngest, and loveliest, of the mar-king's daughters, but her motivation for wanting to become human in the original tale differs significantly from her controlling motivation in the movie. In Andersen's tale. when the mermaid does not understand her own dissatisfaction with mer-life she turns to her grandmother, a wise mer-woman who serves as the mermaid's role model. The grandmother tells the little mermaid that mermaids live 300 years but have no immortal souls. Mermaids do not go to heaven after they die: they dissolve into sea foam According to the grandmother, the only way a mermaid can gain a soul is for a human to love the mermaid so much that part of his soul flows into her and creates a soul within her. After listening to her grandmother, the little mermaid realizes that she has been discontent because she does not have an immortal soul. Thus, Andersen's mermaid quests for a soul, but Disney's mermaid, Ariel, quests for a mate.

3 Early in the movie, Ariel is characterized as being obsessed with humans. Mermaids are forbidden contact with anything human, a stricture that Ariel's father, the sea-king Triton, reiterates specifically to Ariel. Collecting human artifacts becomes a way for Ariel to rebel against this parental repression. But the more Ariel rebels against her father, the more dissatisfied she becomes with her own identity. Ariel repudiates the voice of acceptance, the crab Sebastian, when he counsels her to enjoy life "under the sea," because she believes humans have identities that allow them more: freedom than she does. She yearns for legs so that she might dance as humans do without recognizing that she is herself dancing a uniquely mermaid dance. Disney's message is obvious: If children are needlessly repressed, they may rebel by developing obsessive behaviors that cause them to reject their identity. This didacticism is directed more to adults than it is to children, which is a recurring tendency in Disney movies.[1]

4 The original mermaid in the Andersen tale, unlike Ariel, is allowed the freedom of the surface once she turns 15. She is never forbidden contact with humans. She experiences no parental repression because the story centers not around the mermaid's growth to maturity but around her quest for a soul. The original mermaid does not even

consider becoming human until she sees the prince and discovers from her grandmother that through their mutual love she might gain heaven. Ariel--who already possesses a soul that she is willing to wager with Ursula, the sea-witch --wants to become human before she ever falls in love because she "just [doesn't] see how a world that can make such wonderful things can be bad." She sings about the "neat stuff" that to her represents mankind. Ariel's original motivation to become human seems very materialistic.

5 Ariel's materialistic motivation diminishes once she falls in love-at-first sight with Prince Eric. Ariel then interprets being forbidden contact with anything human as being forbidden both love and an identity separate from her father. When Triton decides to teach Ariel a lesson by displaying in full force the tyrannical power with which any parent can dominate a child, Ariel does not assert herself. Instead, she hides behind a statue of Eric. Once she leaves this shelter behind the figure of a human male, Triton reminds Ariel that his strength is greater than this other man's by destroying the statue. Ariel feels that her father has betrayed her.

6 The value system that controls the plot has been established: Ariel must choose between these two men. Ariel never considers running away to a life that does not include male protection; she rejects her father's culture to embrace Eric's culture. She seems intelligent, resourceful, and courageous but incapable of autonomy. Disregarding the motivation of Andersen's original mermaid, who wants human form so that she can gain an eternal identity, Disney has its mermaid take human form so that her identity can be defined by mortal love. The underlying message creates a startling incongruity: Children, especially girls, can gain an identity independent from their parents by becoming dependent on someone else.

7 To the Andersen mermaid, love is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Three times in the story the mermaid predicates gaining an immortal soul on gaining the prince's love: She decides she will risk everything "to win him and an immortal soul"[2]; when the enchantress names the terms of the spell that will make the mermaid human, the mermaid bolsters her courage by thinking about "her prince and how she would win an immortal soul"[3] and when she finally has human form, the mermaid dreams "of human happiness and an immortal soul"[4] The mermaid equates the ideas of "love" and "soul" because she believes immortality depends on first gaining human love. In all three instances that "love" and "soul" are coordinated, the soul is placed last, in the climactic position, because the mermaid considers happiness in eternity more important than happiness on earth.

8 Ariel, on the other hand, wants only to gain marriage, which she equates with love, so she channels all of her strength and energy into pursuing marriage as a goal. This establishes the movie's superficial values regarding marriage. Before Ariel sees Eric, she is obsessed with the entire human culture, but love narrows her focus to just one member of that culture. Ariel's new obsession becomes the type of worship that makes the individual seem somehow larger than life and better than the rest of humanity. This implies that the only beings worth marrying are those who are perfect and that perfection is not only somehow attainable but is actually necessary for a man to be loveable. The collapse of Ariel's obsession with human artifacts into the pursuit of one perfect man indicates,

moreover, that no goal matters as much as hunting for a mate. Furthermore, Ariel is manipulative and dishonest in pursuing this goal. For example, after she has landed on shore in human form, she clings dependently to Eric while grinning and winking back at her friends in the sea to show that she is faking her weakness for the sake of the prince's ego. Even worse than presenting a spouse as someone who is ensnared through guile, the movie presents marriage as a goal to be achieved rather than as a process to be experienced, as if once a female has bonded with a male, her life is complete. Because Ariel perceives herself as being somehow incomplete without a man's love, Ariel thinks Eric is the panacea that will make her life perfect. She therefore considers any means by which she can entrap him to be legitimate.

9 The terms of the bargain that the mermaid makes with the sea-witch to become human reinforce the opposing values each story promotes. In the original version, the mermaid can live as a human until the prince marries someone else. She has the leisure to develop her love slowly into an intimate relationship. The mermaid's reward will come only if the prince marries her. Disney, however, turns the process of human love into a rushed affair that requires only three days. Ariel will be rewarded if the prince kisses her within that time, which reduces love to no more than physical sexuality. The Disney witch blatantly equates love with sexuality, telling Ariel the prince must "fall in love with you--that is--kiss you." Disney's representation of love lacks the basic integrity imbued in Andersen's representation of it.

10 The contrasts between the male love interests in the Andersen and Disney versions further illustrate the differing values in each of the stories. The two princes' motivations for marrying differ drastically. The prince is never aware that a mermaid has rescued him from the shipwreck. When the prince awakens onshore after the wreck, he is discovered by a young girl at a convent. This is the girl with whom the prince falls in love, but because he believes she is a novice at the convent, he considers her inaccessible. (She is, in actuality, a princess who is only at the convent to be educated.) The triangle that forms the plot's blocking action is thus completed by a character with an existence separate from the enchantress, yet the little mermaid is not competitively jealous of this woman. Validating the prince's values, the mermaid admires the human princess's delicacy and gentleness, even though this princess has displaced her in the prince's affections. That the mermaid can admire the princess makes the prince's decision seem sound.

11 In contrast, the third person in the Disney story's triangle is essentially an illusion. Eric falls in love with his memory of the physical beauty and the voice of the maiden who rescues him. Eric never considers this girl's personality. Since Eric's infatuation is so shallowly based on beauty rather than on personality, he is easily deceived by Ursula's disguising herself as the raven-headed ingenue who possesses the little mermaid's voice. Eric loves the imposter as he has loved the image in his mind: for her physical attributes and for nothing more. Eric's motivation for love is as superficial as Ariel's reason for wanting to become human.

Not only does Disney weaken the values that determine the dramatic motivations of the Andersen characters, Disney also massacres Andersen's strong imagery. Much of Andersen's imagery symbolizes the mermaid's burgeoning sexuality. The little mermaid has been slowly preparing for human sexuality, for she alone of all the daughters in her family has cultivated a garden of red flowers. These red flowers are a standard image; they prefigure the human genitalia the mermaid will seek. The enchantress educates the mermaid about human sexuality using similar images. When naming the terms of the spell, the enchantress tells the little mermaid that she will be subjected to great pain: "every time your foot touches the ground it will feel as though you were walking on knives so sharp that your blood must flow."^[5] 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. All of these images indicate that the mermaid must be a menstruating adult before she will be given a chance to realize her love, unlike her Disney counterpart, who seems to grow up precisely because she has experienced love. Andersen depicts human love as a product of maturity, whereas Disney depicts it as a cause of maturity.

The Andersen mermaid's becoming human is in itself an important image. She makes a simple decision to seek out the sea-witch, unprovoked by any manipulation on the enchantress's part, with the hope that the enchantress can assist her. Andersen's enchantress thinks the mermaid's decision is foolish but helps the maid anyway. The mermaid irrevocably trades her tail for human feet in order to be with the prince, and she suffers the resulting pain willingly because she hopes to gain eternal life by self-denial in this life. Andersen's mermaid is no stranger to suffering. The physical pain of humans is contrasted to the emotional pain of mer-life: "mermaids can't weep and that makes their suffering even deeper and greater."^[6] Because physical pain is described as less devastating than emotional pain, the self-inflicted physical pain the mermaid endures is not simply a stereotypical image of women as masochistic. The pain is something the mermaid chooses as the only way she knows to gain an immortal soul. Her pain has a purpose: Through her suffering she will earn an eternal identity. Disney's mermaid, however, makes pain-free sacrifices so that she can become attractive to a man.

12 Much of Disney's imagery focuses on demonstrating Ariel's malleability. This is especially apparent in her decision to become human. No beguiling temptress entices the Andersen mermaid; her decision to become human is self-determined. But Ariel depends on characters who are stronger than she to shape her destiny for her. This enables Ursula to tempt Ariel in an allusively Miltonic style. Contact with humans has already been established as Ariel's "forbidden fruit," and Ursula's eels evoke the tempting snake in the Garden of Eden. Ursula has the same revenge motive that Satan has: Just as Satan is jealous of God's power in *Paradise Lost*, Ursula covets Triton's power. Ursula scornfully comments on how different life is at Triton's palace than it was when she lived there, much like Satan comments on heaven after he has fallen. No explanation is ever given as to why Ursula has been displaced from her former home, but clearly she has had a falling out with Triton and has decided she would rather rule in the hell she has created than serve in Triton's "heaven." Ursula has the same interest in seeing Ariel fall that Satan has in Adam's fall. Ursula hopes that Ariel's downfall will be "the key to Triton's undoing," just as Satan hopes that tempting

Adam will injure Adam's father. Furthermore, Ursula will be able to keep Ariel's soul in her hellish garden, just as Satan gathers souls for hell from mankind. Ursula's predatory nature provides the perfect foil for Ariel's weakness.

13 Frighteningly Freudian images proliferate in Ursula's castle, further typifying mature women as predatory. Whereas the palaces of Triton and Eric are built of many juxtaposed long, cylindrical towers, Ursula's place of power is cavernous. Ursula's palace is entered through the mouth opening of a skeletal animal, and the swimming entrant must traverse the long neck of the animal before penetrating the womb-like inner chamber where Ursula resides. In the rear of this inner chamber is a conch shell, its lips spread open to reveal a gaping hole leading to some unknown place. This gynophobic image is a grotesque parody of the female anatomy.

14 Ursula's breasts, too, figure prominently in the bargain scene. One especially memorable sequence involves a "zoom-in" on Ursula's cleavage, so that her ponderous bosom occupies the entire screen. Ursula's breasts seem suffocating, rather than nurturing, which is a perversion of the biological function of breasts. Disney portrays the mature female body as ominously menacing.

15 Disney makes Ursula's personality even more threatening than her body. Ursula is devious, cruel, and manipulative. In order to gain power over Ariel, Ursula must convince the young girl that she is in need of the witch's services, so Ursula capitalizes on the mermaid's immature motivation for loving Eric. Twice Ursula sways Ariel's decision by evoking the face of Eric--once when Ursula's eels flick the almost-shattered visage of Eric's statue toward the grieving girl and again in the smoke over the enchantress's crucible. It is as if Ariel is not firmly resolved to pursue love and so a reminder of her love must be provided for her. Ariel accepts these physical reminders as tangible evidence of her love because, like Eric, she bases her love on physical attributes rather than on personality. When Ariel agonizes over the conflict of choosing between Eric and her family, Ursula agrees that the choices are "tough" and placates the maid by consoling her: "at least you'll have your man." Ursula uses the same logic to convince Ariel to give up her voice: "she who holds her tongue gets her man." [7] The sea-witch's comments are calculatedly self-serving, despite her spurious claims to the contrary.

16 Disney gives its sea-witch an interest in the mermaid's relationship with the prince that the original witch does not have. Ariel's love affords Ursula an opportunity to compete with Ariel for the possession of the mermaid's soul, which Ursula perceives as a weapon to use against Triton. Therefore, whereas the plot of the Disney version centers around Ariel's motivation to gain a man, the subplot centers around Ursula's motivation to gain the power of a man. And Ursula scans to think the only way she can gain power over Triton is by callously using another female. In contrast to Ursula, Andersen's enchantress has only the power to take the little mermaid's voice. She does this mechanically rather than magically by cutting out the mermaid's tongue. After the bargain is made, the Andersen enchantress plays only a minor role in the remainder of the story because she has no stake in either the mermaid's success or failure. The Andersen seawitch's tacit support of the little mermaid delineates a bond between women entirely absent from the movie. Disney's witch has far greater involvement in the story than in the original because

Disney always relies on women to create the conflict between good and evil in feature-length fairytales. The conflict in *The Little Mermaid*--as in Disney's other feature length fairytales *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*--pits one woman against another.

17 The Disney-constructed conflict in *The Little Mermaid* is between an overweight, ugly woman and a doe-eyed heroine with a figure less realistic than a Barbie doll's. Once Ursula transforms herself into a rival love-interest for the prince, the conflict is between a dark-haired anorexic and a fairer one. The stereotyping of evil as dark and good as fair is traditional, but only recently has Disney associated corpulence with evil. Disney's villainesses before the 1970s look predatory because they are so thin: *Snow White's* and *Cinderella's* stepmothers, *Maleficent* the *Magnificent* and *Cruella de Ville* are all emaciated. In the 1970s, Disney begins to reflect the cultural emphasis on weight consciousness. Ursula, with her delusions that she is "practically starving," is much like the overweight villainess in *The Rescuers*. Ursula's portrait of "poor souls" (who are both impoverished and pitiful) reemphasizes the movie's weight consciousness: the poor souls Ursula paints in the smoke over her cauldron are an underweight male and an overweight female who have been granted well-toned bodies. The movie's portrayal of good as fairer and thinner than evil presents a bigoted distortion of the human body.

18 There is no conflict between good and evil in the Andersen tale, but in the Disney version, predictably, the conflict centers on evil's attempt to usurp the power of the good. Ursula is power hungry; she wants to rob Triton of his power, just as the Medusa, a woman with snakes growing out of her head, robs men of power by turning them to stone. Distinguished from other mer-folk by a lower body made of eight tentacles, Ursula seems to be an inverse Medusa figure. The snakelike appendages also make Ursula a perversion of femininity; her tentacles could be interpreted as eight phalluses. That Disney considers the myth of Medusa to be a story about power robbing, "unsexed" woman is clear; Ursula's overweight predecessor in *The Rescuers* is named Madame Medusa.

19 The final confrontation between good and evil in the movie version defines male power as positive and female power as negative. Evil comes in - the form of a woman who covets the of the male phallus. Ursula lovingly caresses Triton's trident while he is holding it. Her penis envy is stereotypical. Once Ursula gains possession of the trident, the phallic symbol of Triton's power, she grows to monstrous proportions. Her potency is represented as if she herself has become a mighty phallus, emerging erect from the water. Her voice becomes heavy and masculine as she sadistically toys with the trapped Ariel, zapping the mermaid with ejaculatory bolts from the middle prong of the usurped trident and sarcastically taunting the mermaid, "So much for 'true love.' " The prince then kills Ursula by aiming for the sea-witch's groin with a long, jagged beam that protrudes from a sailing ship. The beam is aimed first for the area of traditional male vulnerability, but because Ursula is not male, at the moment just prior to penetration, the thrust of the prince's phallic symbol is diverted to the area just beneath Ursula's gargantuan breast. Despite its G-rating, the movie is very sexual in its sexism.

20 Even though the Disney mermaid has suffered much more at the hands of the sea-witch than the prince has, it is the prince who kills the witch. This is Disney's most annoying reworking of Andersen's plot. If Disney must insert a good versus evil conflict into every feature-length fairytale, why--since the studio rewrites the whole story anyway--can't the maid kill the witch herself? The answer: because nice girls are not supposed to have that much power.

21 After the Disney hero has slaughtered the Satanic woman, he and Ariel still cannot be united. Ariel has reverted to her mermaid form because Eric did not kiss her within the allotted time. Watching Eric forlornly, Ariel sits on a rock in the pose of the little mermaid statue in the Copenhagen harbor. She despairs. Because she looks so defeated, Triton finally takes pity on his daughter. "She really does love him," the sea-king admits. His counsellor agrees with him: "Children got to be free to live their own lives."

22 The counsellor's statement is as admirable as it is accurate; unfortunately, in this context, it is hypocritical. Triton does not grant Ariel human form simply because Ariel is interested in humans and wants to explore their culture; the king only "frees" Ariel to "live her own life" so that she may live under Eric's power. The final scene, as Triton kisses his daughter goodbye and she turns with subservient awe to Eric, carries overt approval of female dependency.

Compare the cliché-ridden ending of the movie with the conclusion of Andersen's original story. After the princess from the convent reappears, the prince marries her. The little mermaid is supposed to die, but the allegedly irrevocable spell is made revocable at the last moment. The mermaid's sisters have sold their hair to the enchantress to buy a knife. If the mermaid will use the knife to kill the prince on his wedding night, the original enchantment will be broken and she can assume a mermaid's body again. But accepting responsibility for her own actions, the mermaid chooses instead to die herself.

As the dying mermaid is dissolving into sea foam, the "daughters of the air" come to her and tell her that they, too, do not have souls, but they can acquire souls by performing good deeds, such as cooling children who suffer from heat. The little mermaid then becomes a part of the wind. For the first time she can cry, indicating that her emotional suffering has come to an end. She kisses the forehead of the prince and smiles at his bride, minimizing the conflict between women.

The overtones of Christian allegory are strong in Andersen's tale. The original little mermaid discovers that grace through a man's love is not the only means to salvation. Although it takes longer, salvation can also be achieved through the self-sacrifice of good works. 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. Andersen wrote to a friend in 1837: "I have not . . . allowed the mermaid's acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being... I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, more divine path."^[8] Andersen offers women

several paths toward self-realization, so the message to children is much more far-sighted than Disney's limited message that only through marriage can a woman be complete.

Disney attempts to define self-realization as resulting from the archetypal separation of the adolescent from the parent. Disney shows both a male and female authority figure who abuse their power. The negative figure that Bruno Bettelheim might label the "female Oedipal figure" is permanently destroyed, while the positive parental figure becomes less threatening when Triton accepts Ariel's maturity.[9] Moreover, the adolescent's archetypal initiation into adulthood is presented in beautiful birth imagery as Ariel emerges in human form from the water.

23 But Disney's use of the fairytale as an initiation myth eventually falls apart. Berland accurately defines the structure of a fairytale: "overall fairytales present a character with a problem of conflict that character must overcome. As the character masters the situation, he or she grows up."[10] Since Eric kills the witch for Ariel and since Triton makes her marriage possible, Ariel does not solve her own problems. Ariel is not really initiated into adulthood because she is not self-empowered. She does not earn independence; her father only grants her the right to transfer her dependence to another man.

Even though the Andersen tale does not focus on growing up, the story's many positive female figures provide a more accurate portrait of what it is to be a woman than the movie does.[11] Remember, for example, that in the original tale the grandmother serves as a source of information and as a positive role model for the little mermaid. In the Disney version, this role model is replaced by a male bird who misinforms the maid. Second, unlike the Disney witch, the Andersen enchantress supports the little mermaid's search for an immortal soul; she never attempts to foil the mermaid's plans and even contributes blood from her own breast to make the potion that transforms the mermaid into a human. Third, the sisters of the mermaid in the original story sacrifice their only treasure to help their sister; Ariel's sisters do nothing. Fourth, the prince's beloved is someone whose femininity the little mermaid respects. Finally, femininity gets its ultimate affirmation from the daughters of the air. They teach the little mermaid about charity, and they exist only as females. The grandmother, the enchantress, the princess, the sisters, and the daughters of the air are all strong, beautiful, supportive, and feminine. But by changing their gender, by making their motivations anti-feminine, or by editing their function from the story, Disney destroys all of these characters.

24 Disney's most destructive changes, however, involve the characterization of the little mermaid. Both the Andersen and the Disney mermaids agree to be voiceless, to give up their physical forms, and to separate themselves from their cultures, although their motivations for doing so differ significantly. Both of them believe that they can gain love by suppressing their true identities. But because they have no verbal communication skills and are illiterate, they can express their personalities only by relying on their appearances. In the Andersen version, since the mermaid has forfeited her ability to articulate her identity, the prince regards her as an object of beauty rather than as a person to be loved. The mermaid is so self-effacing that she cannot win love, but she redeems herself by

earning for herself the capacity for an eternal identity. Disney subverts the little mermaid's process of self-actualization. Ariel effaces herself and wins. She gets her man.

25 In a 1987 issue of Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Lucy Rollin writes that critics fear Disney because the studio rewrites the fairytale to reflect American values.[12] This is precisely what is so frightening about Disney's The Little Mermaid. The movie depicts women as either self effacing or evil, incapable of creating their own responsible power without either depending on men or stealing power from them. Thus, Disney's interpretation of Andersen's story perpetrates sexist values by teaching those values to a new generation.

NOTES

[1.] David I. Berland discusses this tendency in "Disney and Freud: Walt Meets the Id." *Journal of Popular Culture* 15 (1982), pp. 93-104.

[2.] All references to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" are taken from *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard (New York: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 57-76.

[3.] Andersen, p. 0

[4.] Andersen, p. 72.

[5.] Andersen, p. 68.

[6.] Andersen, p. 61.

[7.] Although some viewers might perceive those of Ursula's statements that capitalize on Ariel's inexperience as ironic and as an intended tribute to feminism, these comments are voiced in the midst of too much gynophobic imagery to honestly promote feminism.

[8.] As quoted in *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. and trans. Patricia L. Conroy and Sven H. Rossel (Seattle: University of Washington, Press, 1980), pp. 250-251.

[9.] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 66-75.

[10.] Berland, p. 101.

[11.] Disney invariably erases positive figures of women from its feature-length fairytales; women are either reduced to the status of servants (e.g., the servant who is the only human woman in *The Little Mermaid*) or else they are elevated to an unattainable position above humanity by their possession of magical powers (e.g., Cinderella's fairy-godmother).

[12.] Lucy Rollin, "Fear of Faerie: Disney and the Elitist Critics." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12 (1987), pp. 90-93.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ariel demonstrates her obsession with the physical when she gazes adoringly at Prince Eric after she has rescued him from drowning.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ursula's corpulence underscores the anorexic appearance of Ariel's figure.

CARTOONS

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