Feminist Appropriations of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ and the Ways in which Stereotypes of Women are Subverted or Sustained in Selected Works

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Introduction

According to Lewis Seifert, “Fairy tales are obsessed with femininity … These narratives are concerned above all else with defining what makes women different from men and, more precisely, what is and is not acceptable feminine behaviour” (1996: 175). This study, then, will demonstrate how certain patriarchal ideas associated with fairy tales are disseminated when fairy tale elements are reworked in film, visual art and the novel. The aim of this project, more specifically, is to show how certain stereotypical representations of women endure in works that could be read as feminist appropriations of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’. Stereotypical representations of women are numerous and may include: depicting females as fitting neatly into what is often called the virgin/whore or Madonna/whore binary opposition; ¹ depicting women as being caring and kind, but also passive, submissive and weak; and depicting older women as being sexually unattractive and evil (Goodwin and Fiske 2001:358; Sullivan 2010: 4). It must be said that the list of stereotypes relating to women given here is far from exhaustive.

I have decided to examine the appropriation of Hans Christian Andersen’s story ‘The Little Mermaid’, or ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ to use the original title,² for two reasons: (1) it includes several misogynistic ideas typical of popular fairy tales in the Western canon;³ and (2) it exemplifies the binary opposition of good woman/ bad woman in the characters of the Little Mermaid and the Sea Witch. As Virginia Borges explains, while the Little Mermaid offers “an oppressive mix of self-sacrifice” and “silence”, the “only fully fleshed out counterpoint” to the Little Mermaid in this story is “the sea witch” who is “grotesque sexuality incarnate” (2007:1 - 4).

My study will focus on four works which have intertextual relationships with ‘Den Lille Havfrue’: ‘Mermaids’, a film by Richard Benjamin; Tipping the Velvet, a novel by Sarah Waters; ‘The Imagenius Mermaids’, a series of digital montage artworks by Karin Miller; and The Undrowned Child, a novel for young adults by Michelle Lovric. The works that

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¹ I prefer to use the term ‘good woman/ bad woman’ binary because this appellation embraces a greater complexity than issues of sexual purity or impurity only. Ideas of so-called ‘good women’ and ‘bad women’ may also be combined with the binary oppositions of quiet/loud, submissive/controlling, helpless/powerful or young/old, to mention but a few examples.
² For the sake of clarity, throughout the rest of this dissertation I will use ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ to refer to Hans Christian Andersen’s story of ‘The Little Mermaid’ while I will use the name of The Little Mermaid to refer to the protagonist of this story.
³ Examples of these would include ‘Sleeping Beauty’, ‘Beauty and the Beast’ and ‘Snow White’.
appropriate Andersen’s tale have been selected because they are seldom if ever critiqued as rewrites of ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, unlike, say, Disney’s film version of ‘The Little Mermaid’ which has received much critical attention. For example, _From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture_, first published in 1995, includes a chapter by Laura Sells which critiques the Disney film (1995: 175). Her chapter is often cited in other critical works. Incidentally, the Disney version of ‘The Little Mermaid’ is very different from Andersen’s tale and the film has been described as “overly sweet” compared with the “terrifying” original, but this film version still dichotomizes women into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as is all too evident in Figure 1 (Nunnally 2006: 38).

![Figure 1](http://www.virginmedia.com/homefamily/kids/villains.php?ssid=4)

I have chosen works from different media and genres because I feel that privileging printed texts over visual media perpetuates certain hegemonies, as does privileging so-called literature over what is disparagingly termed popular culture; hence I will examine _Tipping the Velvet_, which is not only a printed text but might also be considered as ‘literary’, along with a children’s novel, digital images and a popular film. My decision to include works from

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4 This image exemplifies the good woman/bad woman dichotomy. Note that the villain Ursula is depicted as fat and old, as well as domineering and frightening, in keeping with the usual stereotypes of Western patriarchal society.
different media is not an unusual one as feminism tends to be interdisciplinary in its inquiry (Johnston 1999:19). Moreover, what Chris Weedon says about popular fiction also applies to other products of popular culture, whether Hollywood films, television commercials, joke emails or internet pornography: “[T]he fact that they are not defined as ‘literature’ does not detract from their discursive power to transmit meanings and values” (1992:171).

A Theoretical Framework of Feminist Poststructuralism

The theoretical and critical approach I have utilized for this dissertation is broadly that of feminist poststructuralism. According to Chris Weedon, feminist poststructuralism “is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (1992: 40-41). Furthermore, for Weedon, the tactics of feminist poststructuralism “can be applied to all discursive practices as a way of analysing how they are structured, what power relations they produce and reproduce, where there are resistances and where we might look for weak points more open to challenge and transformation” (1992:136). She goes on to claim that this theory “is able … to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it” (1992:41). For me, feminism is ineffectual if it cannot offer resistance to patriarchal dominance so feminist poststructuralism is an attractive theory. Weedon also points out, however, that the term ‘poststructuralism’ “does not have one fixed meaning but is generally applied to a range of theoretical positions” (1992:19). Feminist postructuralism, then, is diverse because it draws on the works of theorists who sometimes describe phenomena in very different ways.

One theorist whose work is of special interest to feminist poststructuralism is Jacques Derrida. Feminists have found deconstruction, the critical practice that is based on his work, very useful. As Tahira Manji puts it, binary oppositions help to “create the hierarchy of our society” (2005:4). But Derrida offers various techniques for undermining oppositions such as male/female or white/black, such as reversing oppositions or revealing “undecidables” in a text. An “undecidable”, put simply, is an ambiguous term that can neither be contained in a binary opposition nor constitute a third term. As Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin explain, “Undecidability disrupts the binary structures of metaphysical thinking. It displaces the either/or structure of oppositions … It leaves no certainty of privileged foundational term against subordinated second term” (2005: 48). The practice of deconstruction is vital to my
project, then, because deconstruction decentres or undoes the “hierarchical oppositions which underpin gender” (Weedon 1992: 165).

Along with deconstruction, it has been noted that feminist scholarship is indebted to psychoanalysis. As Mary Caputi points out, one contribution of psychoanalysis to feminist thinking is “its illustration of the fact that gender archetypes function as metaphorical interpretations of the world, discursive creations which powerfully influence empirical reality” (1993: 328). There are, in fact, also certain links between feminist poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, which are most apparent, perhaps, in the works of Julia Kristeva and the other so-called French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. It should be remembered, however, that psychoanalysis, too, includes several different theories. Also worth noting is that, much as feminists have found the works of Freud and Lacan useful, they have also criticised these theorists. As Melanie Feratova-Loidolt explains, “French [feminism] … argues that Lacan’s and Freud’s model aptly describes … patriarchal cultural processes … however, [it also claims that] psychoanalysis becomes prescriptive, because it refuses to recognise that it is historically determined like other disciplines” (2005). Taking a feminist poststructuralist stance in this dissertation, I accept the view that the discourse of psychoanalysis “is governed by and perpetuates dominant cultural phantasies”, rather than assuming it faithfully reflects objective reality (2005).

**Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, Imogen Tyler and Abject Criticism**

I find Barbara Creed’s and Imogen Tyler’s readings of Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1982) to be most useful for this study – specifically, Creed’s interpretation in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* and Imogen Tyler’s essay ‘Against Abjection’ (2009).

Kristeva’s concepts of the abject and abjection are famously difficult to pin down and define. Derek Hook examines what Kristeva says about the abject and abjection and explains the difference between them as follows:

Kristeva (1982) speaks of abjection as *an affectual response* …
directed against a threat … This threat – that of the abject – is
seemingly impervious to any kind of containment or assimilation …
[It is] an enemy of language and the Symbolic … Importantly,
whereas abjection is understood as a powerful, irrational, and disturbing reaction, the abject is taken to be the source of such affects. (2002:688)

He goes on to define the abject in more detail:

[The abject] is that anomalous, uncontained and undefinable “thing” which elicits fear, dread and horror. More than just this, the abject is to be known by the visceral or bodily responses (the abjections) it induces, typically those of retching, vomiting, spasms, choking … [the abject] constantly plagues and disturbs identity, system, structure … [It] is the radically jettisoned and excluded thing …

(2002: 688-689)

His fine distinction between the abject and abjection provides much needed clarity about how these terms should be used.

Although widely accepted, Julia Kristeva’s ideas about the abject have also been criticized by some. Imogen Tyler, whose essay I find helpful, critiques Kristeva’s Powers of Horror. If she takes issue with Kristeva’s theory of the abject it is because she questions “the matricidal premise on which it is grounded” and “the structural requirement that the maternal functions as the primary abject” (2009:78-79). Kristeva writes, for example, that, “The loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity …Matricide is … the sine qua non condition of our individuation” (1982:38). In fairness to Kristeva, Imogen Tyler notes that “whilst Kristeva grants the maternal a central and formative role within her theory of subjectivity … she uncouples ‘the maternal’ from any specific ‘maternal subjects’” (2009:81). The problem, as Tyler indicates, is that Kristeva’s theory of the abject has sometimes become more misogynistic in its implications as it has been taken up by various Anglo-feminists over time (2009:82). Tyler calls the “body of literature that applies [Kristeva’s] theory of abjection to specific areas of cultural production” abject criticism (2009:82) and she observes that Barbara Creed is a proponent of this form of criticism:

One of the most influential texts of abject criticism is Creed’s The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis (1993). Indeed, The Monstrous-Feminine is frequently cited as evidence of the purchase of Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The book analyses a genre which repeatedly produces maternal bodies
as abject – horror film – and employs close analysis to expose the violent gendered codes of abjection. In a chapter entitled ‘Woman as Monstrous Womb’, Creed cites Kristeva to argue that ‘the womb represents the utmost of abjection’.

(2009:83)

So the problem with Creed’s highly influential book, as Tyler points out, is that she is so taken with the idea of abjection that she appears to promote the idea of the female body as essentially disgusting and dangerous; an idea which is both misogynistic and deceptive as it sets up a binary opposition of good male body/bad female body. Creed’s work, in my opinion, could be seen as an instance of stereotyping women, especially women who happen to be mothers. As Tyler explains,

[T]he idea that the maternal abject can be positively embraced as a means of challenging ‘the inadequacy’ of psychoanalysis is central to Creed’s project … Creed fails to engage critically with Kristeva or question her account of maternal abjection. Indeed, Creed’s repetition and application of Kristeva’s claims risks affirming the universalism of this deeply problematic psychoanalytic account by furnishing the theory with empirical evidence – the maternal is monstrous.

(2009:84)

While the maternal is more-or-less a metaphor in Kristeva’s essay, Powers of Horror, in Barbara Creed’s writing the terms ‘matricidal’ and ‘maternal’ tend to become more literal. Creed herself claims, in an essay written after The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis, that her purpose in this book is to argue that a woman can be represented as an “active terrifying fury, a powerfully abject figure, and a castrating monster” in order to overturn Freud’s “image of woman as ‘castrated other’” (1998:16). In her depiction of woman as active, then, Creed also inadvertently promotes the stereotype of the active and evil woman, the opposite of the good passive female. Ultimately, I am in agreement with Imogen Tyler when she says that the “psychosocial association between the maternal and the abject is an historical condition and not an unchangeable fact. Maternal abjection, in theory and practice, is that which feminism needs to articulate itself against” (2009:91).

So Barbara Creed’s work, influenced by both Freud and Kristeva, is highly relevant to my study of the stereotypes that patriarchal society uses to control women. Barbara Creed makes the sweeping statement that “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (2007: 1). I
find it difficult to believe that all societies through the ages have viewed women and femininity as monstrous, because it cannot be proved that all societies, throughout time, have been patriarchal. Nevertheless, Creed’s discussion of the monstrous-feminine functions as a useful catalogue of the ways in which women are demonized when they are depicted in horror films. In fact, her categories – which include the witch, the monstrous womb, the vagina dentata and the femme castratrice – are invaluable for analysing stereotypical depictions of the bad woman across a range of media and genres, not only film.

**Feminism, the Visual Arts and Mermaids**

To examine the appropriation of ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, it seems obligatory to analyse how the story is connected with the visual arts. The connections between this story and visual media are several, but I will list only a few: firstly, as a story supposedly written for children, ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’ is often accompanied by illustrations of the type common to children’s picture books; secondly, the sculpture of the Little Mermaid by Edvard Erikson has come to symbolize the city of Copenhagen (Mortensen 2008: 437); and, thirdly, the story itself has ekphrastic\(^5\) elements in that a sculpture, of a young man, is depicted within the tale itself. This is not even to mention the far reaching effects of the story being taken up by Disney as an animated feature film. Evidently then, fairy tales are not only appropriated by producers of written works. As Sarah Bonner points out, “The fairy tale is being translated from literary text into visual culture” (2006). The internet is replete with images which have their origins in stories of mermaid, fairies, and witches, as a Google image search will show. Many of these images convey patriarchal myths (in the sense of disputable beliefs) about women.

At about the same time that fairy tales became a focus of feminism in the 1970s, feminists began to critique the patriarchal assumptions and prejudices of the canonical history of Western art. Along with feminist critical interest in art and art history, came feminist innovations in art by women. Initially, feminists were most interested in recovering forgotten or undervalued female artists; eventually, though, certain styles came to be advocated as suitable for a feminine or feminist art aesthetic. Even while some feminists warned against associating certain artistic techniques and styles with the feminine, others employed special

\(^5\) According to Anna Szczepanek, “Ekphrasis … is a term used to denote verbal representation of visual arts.” She adds that “ekphrasis is considered to be a descriptive work of prose or poetry dealing with any of the visual arts … even film” (2005:2).
techniques in an attempt to destabilize and deconstruct social prejudices that oppressed women. In keeping with this, some feminist artists began to include what they called vaginal, or central core, imagery in their work. Central core imagery is typified by: “apertures, rifts and cracks (thought to symbolize female genitalia); circular or repeated patterns; open, fluid forms; soft colours; [and] repetitive patterning” (Davies, Higgins, Hopkins, 2009: 270). Possibly the most notorious example of the use of central core imagery in feminist art is Judy Chicago’s ‘The Dinner Party’, a work of mixed media which includes a dinner table set with ceramic plates, each plate representing the genitalia of a well-known woman (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Judy Chicago (1974-1979), ‘The Dinner Party: Georgia O’Keeffe plate’. Available: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/core_imagery.php

Vaginal imagery and the influences of feminist aesthetics have not been absent from illustrations accompanying translations of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ as may be seen in Figure 3. Here Katie Thamer Treherne’s depiction of the mermaid’s palace includes a glowing, vagina-like entranceway that resembles many examples of central core imagery in feminist art.

During the 1970s, some feminist artists began to embrace depictions of things which are likely to provoke abjection, possibly influenced by Julia Kristeva’s belief that the abject is linked with jouissance. Leisha Jones praises the works of these artists with their “oozings of moist flesh, contagions of disease” and “effigies of violence” (2007:67). Some of these works also include central core imagery. Nevertheless, as I discussed earlier, linking images of female genitalia with the horrific and disgusting could be problematic as it could align the female body with the monstrous.
Another feminist tactic, the use of visual parodies, has existed alongside the use of central core imagery and abjection. Peg Brand defines a feminist visual parody as “a feminist satire” that involves “a complex imitation of an original work by a male artist”; this form of satire, she says, “expresses and values a woman’s point of view as it makes fun of prevailing artistic conventions and societal norms established by men” (2006). Feminist visual parodies, then, are ekphrastic, or specifically codified intertextual devices. They have been used to subvert various traditional genres, including the Western genre of the nude.

From the start of feminism’s second wave in the 1980s, feminist critics and women artists have addressed the genre of the nude, trying to deconstruct it in various ways. Some may see the nude as pornographic, while others see the nude as epitomizing a denial of female agency. In Western civilization, after the particular religious preoccupations of the Gothic period, women were depicted in art more for erotic than for spiritual reasons. John Berger in his ground-breaking essay ‘Ways of Seeing Women’ points out:

The first nudes in the tradition [of nudes in European painting] depicted Adam and Eve … In the medieval tradition the story was often illustrated, as in a strip cartoon … During the Renaissance the narrative sequence disappeared and the single moment depicted became the moment of
It seems significant that the tradition of the nude in European art has its roots in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. The female nude from the first, then, was associated with one of the more misogynistic myths of the Bible, according to which Eve, the first created woman, caused the separation of humankind from the holiness of God. It can be argued that this underlying misogyny continues throughout the tradition of the nude in Western European art.

Berger notes that “other themes also offered the opportunity of painting nudes” (1992:251), and of course among these themes were the various myths and legends of water goddesses, nymphae, sirens and mermaids. One particularly well-known and influential example of the nude in art is Sandro Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’: an image that pervades modern Western, or Westernized, culture almost as much as Leonardo Da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’ does. This painting makes explicit the goddess’s association with the ocean and it reinforces the idea of water spirits as passive nudes, or in more colloquial terms, sex objects. In fact, because this painting originated in the early Renaissance, it very likely influenced many subsequent depictions of Venus and various water spirits, whether they were nymphae, mermaids or sirens. It is hardly surprising then that both Karin Miller’s Imagenius series and Sarah Waters’s Tipping the Velvet allude to Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’ as well as mermaid figures.

John Berger establishes the difference between being naked and being nude thus: “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude … Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is put on display” (1992:254). In Berger’s terms, the nude exists to be viewed by men, for their pleasure. He points out several devices typically used by artists in the genre of the nude: the nude looks out of the painting at the spectator, who is implicitly assumed to be a heterosexual male, in a non-threatening if not coquettish way; she is characterized by a submissive, passive attitude, and, in keeping with this, she is often shown lying down (usually supine); she is not shown to be sexually active or desirous of sexual intercourse, she merely embodies sexual compliance; the nude often holds or gazes into a mirror and she is thereby, according to Berger, depicted as being complicit in treating herself as an object to be seen; and, finally, her pose is disingenuously arranged for the (usually) frontal display of her unclothed body (1992:251-255).
What John Berger does not make clear in his essay, however, is that the nude often looks away from the spectator: her eyes are lowered or she gazes at a point over the spectator’s shoulder. Very often, in fact, the nude’s eyes are closed. This, I believe, serves to emphasize the nude’s submission. To stare boldly into someone’s eyes may be considered an aggressive act. The idea of looking directly into someone’s eyes as an act of aggression, or dominance, may seem to be derived from contemporary communication studies, but as Griselda Pollock explains, “there is a long tradition of eye imagery in love poetry” in which “the eye is imagined to send out darts and arrows which pierce and penetrate the lover, with obvious phallic implications” (2003: 184). Such imagery is to be found in Thomas Campion’s poem, which was written around 1617, ‘There is a Garden in Her Face’:

Her Eyes like Angels watch them still;  
Her Browes like bended bowes doe stand,  
Threat'ning with piercing frownes to kill  
All that attempt with eye or hand  
Those sacred Cherries to come nigh,  
Till Cherry-ripe themselves do cry.

(Campion in Hart 1976:64)

For the comfort of the male spectator, the nude cannot be allowed to initiate any piercing or penetration, which would indicate that she possesses power. The illusion of the spectator’s position of power is vital in the genre of the nude, and the male gaze is normative.

What Berger also does not discuss specifically is that, in typical examples of the genre, the nude’s breasts and the V-shape at the front of the vulva are highlighted through various compositional devices, one of the most common being their partial concealment. Ineffectual attempts to conceal the breasts or the V-shape draw attention to the condition of their also being partly revealed. Nevertheless, in most depictions of nude women, the V-shape, made up of the folds at the top of the legs, where the thighs join the torso, is de-sexed; no labia are revealed. There could be different reasons for this: the prudery of the Christian church, or other censoring organizations, could cause artists to be wary of including too much anatomical detail; or the actual genital area of real women could be perceived as too ugly to be represented as part of an aesthetically pleasing work of art. In the past, in order not to offend the mores of Christian society, depictions of nudes tended to include some pictorial justification for the presence of a naked woman in the scene of the picture: she may be naked because she is Eve in the garden of Eden, because she is a goddess, because she is bathing
and admiring herself in her bedroom, or because she is from a ‘primitive’ culture that permits public nakedness (Berger 1992:251-255).

There are many water spirit nudes (mermaids or otherwise) in the history of European art, some of which are unclothed human women in form and some of which are fish-tailed. Early pictures of mermaids tended to depict them in relation to religion or early science, in bestiaries, for example, or to illustrate certain principles of alchemy (Drewel, Houlberg, Jewsiewicki, Nunley and Salmons 2008; Lao 2007: 98-135). But certainly by the time of the pre-Raphaelite movement, fish-tailed mermaids and sirens (sirens are basically mermaids with legs rather than tails) were portrayed as nudes in the strictest sense of the term. Two well-known examples from this era are Waterhouse’s oil paintings, entitled ‘Mermaid’ (Figure 4) and ‘Siren’ (Figure 5) respectively.

His generally well-liked works have probably influenced many contemporary depictions of mermaids. John William Waterhouse’s mermaid shows common features of the nude tradition in European art: she looks away from the spectator, her left arm partly conceals and partly reveals her breast, and her long hair (as in Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’) covers her genital area. In contrast to his ‘Mermaid’, Waterhouse’s ‘Siren’ signifies somewhat differently, in that she belongs to the nude tradition but she represents the monstrous-feminine as well because she is depicted as a *femme fatale*. She looks down coldly while a
young man drowns in his impassioned attempt to reach her. Waterhouse’s pictures show how mermaid figures may be associated both with the desirable, passive nude and with the monstrous-feminine.

The tradition of the nude continues both in contemporary art and in the contemporary ‘girlie’ pictures of popular culture; likewise, many contemporary mermaid images are ‘girlie’ pictures, or nudes, thinly disguised as fantasy art. These contemporary images show many features of the nude tradition that developed over centuries of European art. It may be noticed, for example, that the mermaid depicted in Figure 7 shows many features of the nude tradition: although here the wet, white garment is used, rather than hair or hands, her breasts and the V associated with the vulva are simultaneously emphasized and partially concealed, she is inactive and supine, and her eyes are closed. In some images it is the nude mermaid’s buttocks that are emphasized, framed as they by the lines of the mermaid tail. With the nude mermaid, though, it is usually the breasts that are emphasized.

Figure 6: Marco Busoni (circa 2006) ‘The Stranded Mermaid’. Available http://www.allposters.com/-sp/The-Stranded-Mermaid-Posters_i1979912_.htm

Packaging the female body into appealing parts like this turns it into an object, a commodity for consumers. As should be clear from the above descriptions of partitioning the female body and de-sexing the vulva, a depiction of a nude is no celebration of female anatomy as it really is. A nude is a woman parcelled so that she appeals to the sexual gaze of a subject typified as heterosexual male. The nude – with her representation as a static, tractable object – operates as a myth (in Barthes’s sense) of female passivity and sexual compliance.
Mermaid figures lend themselves to the nude tradition for several reasons: mermaids and sirens conveniently provide their own justification for nudity because they are half animal (and water creatures, moreover) so they cannot reasonably be expected to wear clothes; the form of the mermaid, with the partitioning of her body into upper and lower halves, provides isolation of the breasts as objects of the male gaze; the partitioning of the body also forms a dualistic separation of the good upper body and the evil lower body; the scales beginning more-or-less from the waist show a salient lack of the phallus in the genital area, which is the ideal of the castrated woman; and, lastly, mermaids are associated with mirrors, and thereby female vanity, just as nudes often are.

Figure 7: J. Scott Campbell (2010)’The Little Mermaid’. Available: http://www.jscottcampbellstore.com/the-little-mermaid-2010-encore-edition-print-signed.html

Traditionally, as a figure from children’s story books, the Little Mermaid’s sexual appeal has not been emphasised in illustrations, so one may wonder what the nude genre has to do with the appropriation of Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’. It is important to note, however, that some recent depictions of the Little Mermaid are more overtly sexual than earlier ones. In searching for images on the internet I found two recent additions to the Little Mermaid
category. One is an advertisement for Campari, which shows the Little Mermaid as a black *femme fatale*, and the other is an image which shows the influence of Disney’s animated feature film, ‘The Little Mermaid’: the mermaid here has a green tail and red hair just as Disney’s Ariel does. Here Ariel has been transformed into a pinup girl, however (see Figure 7). Even without this obvious link, perceptive viewers and readers may notice that the passivity of the nude is echoed in the passivity of Andersen’s Little Mermaid, and vice versa. With regard to female passivity and compliance, both cultural products embody the stereotype of the good woman. So, given its association with the visual arts and cinema, Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ invites an interdisciplinary analysis that takes art history, film studies and visual culture into consideration. Besides this, the novels which I examine in this dissertation are filled with intertextual devices, including ekphrasis. In addition, the film ‘Mermaids’ alludes to certain paintings and book illustrations, as I will discuss in Chapter One.

**Feminist Criticism and the Rewriting of Fairy Tales**

To contextualize this study, it is important to trace the history of women’s rewriting, or revision, of fairy tales as well as feminist criticism of fairy tales, and to note that the two have often gone hand in hand. But first, I will focus on the revision of fairy tales.

Donald Haase points out that, “Already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women writers in France – the *conteuses* – had identified the fairy tale as a genre with something to say about gender and sexuality” (2004: vii). These *conteuses* (or female story tellers) included Madame d’ Aulnoy, Louise d’Auneuil, and Catherine Bernard, among others (Seifert 2004: 54). Later, in the nineteenth century, women writers such as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Christina Rossetti also appropriated and sometimes subverted elements from fairy tales in their novels or poetry, as Haase describes (2004: viii). This appropriation and revision of the fairy tale for feminist purposes has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the works of writers like Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Nalo Hopkinson and Donna Jo Napoli, and many others besides (Sellers 2001: vii; Crew 2002: 77-93; Bacchilega 2006: 205) Writers still apparently find that the fairy tale is a genre with “something to say about gender” (Haase 2004:vii).

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6 Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid was seldom, if ever, portrayed with red hair before the Disney full-length animated version of the story was released. A search through earlier illustrations will show this.
Fairy tale appropriation, as it has occurred over the last few centuries, is a complex cultural phenomenon which may be described in several ways. One way of distinguishing between works which employ appropriation of the fairy tale is to take note of the extent to which they rely on published versions of traditional tales. At the one extreme, in this continuum, is the story which is clearly based on a well-known fairy tale, such as ‘Sleeping Beauty’ for example, but which includes subversively altered details. In this type of tale the original characters usually appear, probably with the same names as in the original, or with jocular versions of the original names (Jane Yolen’s *Sleeping Ugly* comes to mind). Towards the other extreme are newly written fairy tales; that is stories which are not recognisably based on any traditional tale, but which exhibit certain features of the fairy tale genre. Jack Zipes collected such rewritten fairy tales in *Don’t Bet on the Prince*, which was first published in 1986. Both types belong to the genre that is sometimes termed the anti-fairy tale. Clair Massey gives the following definition of the anti-fairy tale: “Rarely an outward opposition to the traditional form itself, the anti-tale takes aspects of the fairy tale genre and re-imagines, subverts, inverts, deconstructs or satirizes elements of them to present an alternate narrative interpretation, outcome or morality” (2010:1). Another form of fairy tale rewriting is the intertextual film or novel that alludes to, and subverts, elements of fairy tales (sometimes several different fairy tales at the same time) along with allusions to, and subversion of, various other genres and media. Often a product of postmodernism, at first glance such a work may bear little resemblance to fairy tales at all. *Tipping the Velvet*, one of the novels that I explore in this dissertation, is an excellent example of a work that alludes to different genres; later I will discuss the complex intertextuality and subversion employed in *Tipping the Velvet* in more detail. Though not as polyphonic as *Tipping the Velvet* is, Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’ and Michelle Lovric’s *The Undrowned Child* also show a complex use of intertextuality that goes beyond simple fairy tale pastiche.

So, evidently, women writers have used fairy tale revisions to comment on gender issues from as early as the seventeenth century and various writers have offered opinions about fairy tales and their suitability for children from at least the nineteenth century onwards. Jane Stafford offered “rules for telling fairy stories to children” which included the injunction: “Pleasant stories like Sleeping Beauty are better than ones filled with witches and ogres” because stories “for children should have happy endings” (1934: 278).

Nevertheless, feminist criticism of fairy tales only began to emerge in the 1970s. Interestingly, this is about the same time that feminist theorists began to pay particular
attention to psychoanalytic theories (Weedon 1987:43). Much of the work done on myth and fairy tale has been informed by the theories of Freud and psychoanalysis, which is hardly surprising because Freud himself referred to myths and fairy tales in his writings. Bruno Bettelheim, a follower of Freud, was also highly influential. Bettelheim’s well-known book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, played a role in linking fairy tale studies and psychoanalysis. His work centres on the idea that Oedipal conflicts are resolved, at least partially, through children’s exposure to certain fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976). Various theorists, including Barbara Creed and Bracha Ettinger (Creed 2007:162-166; Pollock 2009:18-25), have challenged traditional psychoanalysis because they do not accept the Oedipal paradigm in its entirety. In this study, I will also take the stance that the Oedipal paradigm is not necessarily an absolute and universal truth.

Understandably, subtly oppressive cultural practices were not the focus of early feminists, such as the suffragettes of the early 1900s. The feminist study of fairy tales arose out of feminism’s so-called second wave (Haase 2004: ix – 5; Zipes 1986: 2-11). Some may even claim that feminist fairy tale criticism began with the “Lurie-Lieberman debate” (Haase 2004: 2-3). In 1970, Alison Lurie’s article “Fairy Tale Liberation” was published in the *New York Review of Books*. Her view is that fairy tales often have strong female protagonists that are potentially worth emulating. Marcia K. Lieberman, however, soon published a riposte to this argument in her article of 1972, “Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the fairy tale.” In her opinion, the most popular and most frequently published fairy tales, foster traditional and restrictive social roles for females. From the beginning, then, feminist criticism of fairy tales has been characterized by a lack of consensus. But, as Jack Zipes claims, varied as feminist literary critics of fairy tales may be in their approaches, they generally emphasize a need to: reform current “male-female arrangements”; attempt to expose how fairy tales support patriarchal systems; and suggest ways in which these cultural products may be altered to “counter the destructive tendencies of male-dominated values” (1986: 4).

Since Alison Lurie’s and Marcia Lieberman’s debate, more feminist works critiquing fairy tales have been published. Many feminist writers contend that myth and fairy tale are genres of acculturation that maintain the patriarchal status quo by, for example, encouraging female passivity, submission, and self-immolation. Sarah Bonner claims “It has been accepted

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(through decades of psychoanalytical, socio-historical, and feminist theory) that fairy tales … present a picture of sexual roles, behaviour and a way of predicting the outcome or fate according to sex” (2007). In Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’, for example, the mermaid of the title is a passive character who submits to various kinds of ill-treatment before she is spiritually rewarded. As Karen Rowe explains, in stories the “use of enchantment can subtly undermine feminine self-confidence. By portraying … magical redemptions, enchantment makes vulnerability, avoidance, sublimation, and dependency alluringly virtuous” (1986: 218-219). While passive, dependent girls are cast as good and are rewarded in fairy tales, active and independent girls or, as is often the case, older women, are generally depicted with disapproval. Lieberman has this to say about characters depicted in fairy tales: “The moral value of activity … becomes sex-linked. Women who are powerful and good are never human; those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive” (1993:197). So, the most popular fairy tales in Western culture tend to characterize women as either the passive-rewarded or the socially-sanctioned powerful. It is plain from this that whether or not fairy tales are potent agents of acculturation, as Marcia Lieberman claims, the ones that are prevalent in the Western canon tend to divide women into the binary opposition of good and passive/bad and powerful. Breaking down binary thinking is often one of the roles of poststructuralism, which again justifies my choice of this theoretical framework.

When fairy tales became the focus of feminists, several works which drew on fairy tale metaphors as a basis for cultural criticism were written as well. These included: Madonna Kolbenschlag’s Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models (1979), Colette Dowling’s The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence (1981), and Clarissa Pinkola Estez’s Women Who Run with the Wolves (1992). These works of feminist cultural criticism included Dorothy Dinnerstein’s The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, first published in 1976, which is a work relevant to my dissertation.

Dorothy Dinnerstein posits that in Western society women are equated with the idea of the mermaid. Put differently, the way Western society typically characterizes women makes them appear to share certain traits with mermaids – mermaids as they appear in typical Western myths and fairy tales, that is. “The treacherous mermaid,” as described by Dinnerstein, is the “seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic
underwater world” (1976:5). Mermaids, then, according to Dinnerstein, are a kind of metaphorical representation of all women, while men, in her view, are unfairly associated with the aggressive and terrifying Minotaur. Her description of mermaids and their association with women calls to mind Roland Barthes’s concept of myth. In his definition, any normative cultural product may be considered a myth. A myth, in his terms, is a seductive relationship between signifier and signified that comes to be accepted as fact by readers or audiences; in this way a myth functions as a semiological representation that sugar coats an ideology. As Barthes says, “[W]hat allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one … he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship… the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts” (1972: 131). If Barthes is correct then the patriarchal values that appear in many fairy tales will be read not as values but as facts: the natural and inevitable way for things to be. If there are parallels between Western society’s characterization of women and its characterization of mermaids, then this too will be perceived as only ‘natural’. So women are seen as intimately connected with the ocean and water. If one considers this idea dispassionately, however, why should women be associated with water and the ocean more than men are? There is certainly no scientific basis for this. A body with female genitalia is no more watery than one with male genitalia. Semen, that emission from the testes and penis, is no less a liquid than emissions from the womb and vagina, after all. Moreover, the erect penis – which approximates the phallus that Freud and Lacan posit as so essential to human psychic development – is erect because it is swollen with yet another water-based fluid: blood. Such facts are swept away in the wake of the mermaid archetype and women, according to patriarchal society, are supposedly ‘watery’. The so-called watery nature of women is a misleading idea, however.

Unfortunately, the symbol of the mermaid which associates women with water is ubiquitous, recurring from ancient times, in many cultures across the world, to the present day. It is true that the mermaid is only one of many different water spirits in world mythology – spirits which, bewilderingly, include nereids, oceanids, sirens, selkies, kelpies, nacks, asparas, merrows and rusalkas, among others – but it is the mermaid (a fish-tailed woman) that is the most well-known of a very popular group of mythical creatures (Potts, 2000; Lao 2007). Although the mermaid myth is pervasive in many different cultures, Western versions

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8 Some cultures have depicted mermaids as being more benign (Potts 2000: 150-154).
of mermaid stories and images tend to prevail and dominate in the aftermath of colonization and globalization, as I will discuss in Chapter Three.

The one story that has most shaped Western society’s ideas of mermaids in the last century and a half must be Hans Christian Andersen’s perennially popular, ‘The Little Mermaid’, or to use the original title, ‘Den Lille Havfrue’. Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ was first published in 1837, along with several other short stories generally classed as fairy tales, and it was first translated into English by Mrs H.P. Paull in 1872 (Zvi Har’El 2007). Although he has long been so considered, Andersen did not see himself as a children’s writer. He wrote poetry, novels, plays and accounts of his travels, initially seeing his fairy tales as a temporary sideline. It is for his fairy tales, some based on folktales and some original, that he is usually remembered, however (Lewis 2002: 681; De Mylius 2006: 166-167). Hans Christian Andersen’s tales have often been afforded critical acclaim. He was lauded by his contemporaries. More recently, Tess Lewis has praised him as “the last great writer of fairy tales”; she also posits that Andersen has “created original symbols that have entered our cultural consciousness as deeply as any primal myth” (2002: 679). The symbolism of Andersen’s mermaid is perhaps less than original but his fictional character certainly has boosted the ubiquity of the mermaid-as-woman cultural myth. His creation, the Little Mermaid, has also promulgated the idea that a good woman should be silent and self-sacrificial; for this reason, the story has frequently been criticized by feminist writers. ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is probably the most controversial of all Andersen’s works.

Although he wrote many original fairy tales as well, ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ was partially based on stories by other writers. Finn Hauberg Mortensen points out that “part of the plot is borrowed from B.S. Ingemann’s De Underjordiske” which was published in 1817 (2008: 439). According to Heidi Anne Heiner, Andersen’s tale was influenced by the stories of ‘Undine’, ‘Melusine’, ‘Agnete and the Mermaid’ (a Danish ballad) and ‘The Mute Queen’. She cites Friedrich de La Motte Fouque’s ‘Undine’ as the main influence, noting that, “Andersen admits to his familiarity [with] and consideration of Undine while writing his Little Mermaid” (2003). She also claims that there is no story from the oral tradition on which ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is based. Nevertheless, in my opinion it does have echoes of the Irish legend of Liban.9 These influences indicate the intertextuality of Andersen’s work.

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9 In this tale, God turns Liban into a mermaid so that she can be saved from imprisonment in a sea cave. In mermaid form, Liban lives in the lake for 300 years, after which she is converted to Christianity, undergoes
'Den Lille Havfrue’ could be said to belong to the innocent persecuted heroine genre of fairy tales, and this is worth mentioning because the three narrative works studied in this dissertation – ‘Mermaids’, *Tipping the Velvet*, and *The Undrowned Child* – also contain elements of this tale type, in a more or less subverted form. ‘Mermaids’, discussed in Chapter one, for instance, splits the role of innocent persecuted heroine between the young protagonist and her mother. According to Steven Swann Jones, in the typical pattern of this genre the story is divided into three parts: in the first part “the heroine is persecuted or threatened in her family home; in the second, the heroine is “interfered with … in her attempt to be married”; and in the third part, which is sometimes omitted, she is “displaced … or calumniated after she has given birth to children” (1993: 17). The innocent persecuted heroine genre lends itself to explorations of female agency and the monstrous-feminine. This is because, in the first instance, the maturation of a young girl and the ways in which she deals with adversity are depicted (and in this kind of story she is generally good and passive); and in the second, the antagonist is usually another woman, often an older woman, possibly a witch and/or a stepmother who represents the monstrous-feminine. Obviously, the Little Mermaid herself is the innocent, persecuted heroine in Andersen’s tale and the Sea Witch is her antagonist. Even though Heidi Anne Heiner claims that the Sea Witch is not a villain in the traditional sense, it is clear that she is on the powerful and evil side of the good woman/bad woman binary so often found in fairy tales, while the Little Mermaid is on the opposite side of the dichotomy (2003).

Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ sometimes attracts psychoanalytical readings. For example, Jorgen Dines Johansen identifies Andersen’s Sea Witch as the “phallic castrating mother” (1996). According to Krin Gabbard and Glen O. Gabbard, the “omnipotent pregenital phallic mother” is “born out of the male child’s fear of a castrating, penetrating, all-powerful mother who may take advantage of his vulnerability” (1993: 421). I agree that the Sea Witch in Andersen’s story is a particularly brutal castrating figure: she slashes her own breast to use her blood for a magic potion, cuts out the Little Mermaid’s tongue, threatens with destruction the phallic polyps that grow in the forest around her home, and later in the story, she has the little mermaid’s sisters cut off their hair. Phallic women, castrating women and witches are all categories of the monstrous-feminine as identified by
Barbara Creed. So it could be said that the Sea Witch epitomizes the monstrous-feminine in Hans Christian Andersen’s story.

Outline

In Chapter One, Richard Benjamin’ film ‘Mermaids’ (1990) will be examined. In particular, how the film engages with stereotypes of the good woman and the bad woman will be explored. This film, released soon after Disney’s ‘The Little Mermaid’, subverts many ideas associated with mermaids, such as the mermaid as femme fatale, and it includes subtle allusions to Andersen’s story. True to its milieu, the film includes several feminist ideas and tactics but it perpetuates stereotypical thinking about aging women. The ‘watered down’ version of feminism that the film shows is typical of many Hollywood productions.

Chapter Two will introduce Sarah Waters’s novel, Tipping the Velvet. This story, too, includes allusions to ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, but it goes much further than Richard Benjamin’s film in its subversion and the Little Mermaid is made ‘queer’. The term ‘queer’ is contested and its definitions tend to shift; for the sake of convenience I will take ‘queer’ to mean typified by a nonconforming sexuality, especially lesbianism or homosexuality. Though, as Berthold Schoene explains, one does not have to be homosexual in order to identify with the category of ‘queer’ (2006:283-290). Queerness is typified by the undecidable, which is demonstrated in the character of Nancy, who is a lesbian although she sometimes engages in oral intercourse with men when she is disguised as a man herself. For all its liberating queerness, my examination will show that this novel, which deconstructs gender and categories of sexual orientation so thoroughly, still includes negative portrayals of older women. It also promotes the idea of the woman as femme fatale.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss a series of four digital artworks, which I will refer to as ‘The Imagenius Mermaids’, that were created by the South African artist Karin Miller. In these, allusions to ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ are combined with portrayals of both unknown black women and Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. I will explore how the social category of race enriches and complicates the reworking of Andersen’s tale in contemporary South Africa.

Chapter Four concerns the second novel in this study, namely The Undrowned Child by Michelle Lovric. This novel, a fantasy written for young adults, has mermaids as characters, unlike the parody of realist modes with a postmodern frame in Tipping the Velvet. Lovric’s novel also shows narrative strategies which promote feminism but, even though it shows
more favourable depictions of older women than the other works do, these are still problematic and may be more stereotypical than they appear at first.
Chapter One: ‘Mermaids’

Introduction

The film ‘Mermaids’ directed by Richard Benjamin and released in 1990 was based on the novel of the same name by Patty Dann, while the screenplay was written by June Roberts. The film was produced at a time when there was something of a backlash against feminism in Hollywood movies as was indicated in the popularity of the slasher genre and the resurgence of film noir (Benshoff and Griffin 2004:277). ‘Mermaids’, in contrast, is a mixture of romantic comedy and family melodrama which mocks slasher movies and film noir in some scenes. Rather than being a feminist film, however, ‘Mermaids’ is a film with a feminist potential constrained by the influences of the socioeconomic realities of its milieu. Hollywood is driven by money-making and films that promote feminist interests too blatantly simply do not sell very well. As Christina Lane points out, “Even if a questionable [film] project makes it through development, executives may decide (consciously or subconsciously) to drop it mid-stream for fear of losing approval from those in power above them” (2000:34). It could even be argued that ‘Mermaids’ is a backlash film in that it “simultaneously incorporate[s] and de-politicize[s] feminism” (Lane 2000: 39). Although it was not one of the most popular films of its time, ‘Mermaids’, as a Hollywood film may still be considered influential, as Hollywood films reach worldwide audiences, not only through cinemas but also through television screening. In fact, the SABC has broadcast ‘Mermaids’ more than once in the last four years. So the film continues to disseminate messages about women. In spite of this, ‘Mermaids’ has received very little critical attention.

The story of ‘Mermaids’ centres on a single mother, Rachel Flax (played by Cher), and her two daughters, Charlotte and Kate (played by Winona Ryder and Christina Ricci respectively). It is suggested during the course of the film that all three of the female leads are the ‘mermaids’ of the title. The story of ‘Mermaids’ could be described as a young girl’s coming of age tale, just as ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is. Like Andersen’s fairy tale, the film has elements of the innocent persecuted heroine fairy tale genre. As is typical of this genre, the film shows the young female protagonist’s difficulties in her relationship with her mother and her “anxieties about acquiring a mate and adjusting to her developing sexuality” (Swann Jones 1993:26). Although the typical tale from this genre might also show the protagonist’s
struggles in coping with life as a wife and mother, ‘Mermaids’ rather shows Mrs Flax’s difficulties in adjusting to these roles. If read as a parody of ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, the elder daughter Charlotte (Winona Ryder) plays the part of the Little Mermaid who must come to terms with becoming an adult, while Rachel Flax could be interpreted as the Sea Witch. The dualism of Madonna/whore has Charlotte on the side of good woman and Rachel on the side of bad woman, just like the Little Mermaid is the good girl and the Sea Witch the evil woman in the binary constructions of ‘Den Lille Havfrue’. It must be said, though, that in the beginning of the film Charlotte is shown to be excessively good – to the point where she identifies with various Catholic saints and aspires to become a nun or saint herself. So her extreme goodness is derided in the film to some extent. In this way, of course, the film also interrogates the religious pretensions of Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ where the Little Mermaid is obsessed with gaining a soul and going to heaven.

Although it is no fantasy or fairy tale, the film evokes Andersen’s story in several ways. The audience’s attention is drawn to the importance of the mermaid theme by both the title of the film and by advertising posters in which Cher appears dressed as a mermaid (see Figure 9). It soon becomes apparent in the movie that all three of the Flax family members have mermaid qualities. The youngest, Kate, is an exceptionally talented swimmer who has “Olympic potential” according to her coach; she is also preoccupied with the ocean and water creatures. She attends a Halloween party dressed as a goldfish and, ironically, as she is nearly drowned later, she longs to know what it feels like to sleep at the bottom of the ocean.

Charlotte is the story’s approximate equivalent of Andersen’s Little Mermaid, though. She is the young girl coming of age and falling in love just as the Little Mermaid comes of age and falls in love in ‘Den Lille Havfrue’. Like the Little Mermaid, she too is preoccupied with spiritual matters alongside her desire for her ‘prince’. Charlotte is also about the same age as Andersen’s protagonist. By visual allusion, in one scene she is shown sitting on a rock at the seaside, where she very much resembles the statue of the Little Mermaid in Denmark. Rachel Flax is the character most blatantly cast as a mermaid, though. In publicity posters for the movie, Cher appears in a mermaid costume, which establishes her metaphorical connection with this mythical figure (see Figure 9). She is also often shown sitting in the bath in the course of the film, like a modern day Melusine: the fish- or snake-tailed woman who literally flew away from trouble in the European myth. She also wears a mermaid costume to a fancy dress party at one point in the film.
The film ‘Mermaids’ breaks down the binary opposition of Charlotte and her mother as good Little Mermaid and villainous Sea Witch to some extent. Unfortunately, though, the film also sustains certain stereotypes about women, especially older women, as I will demonstrate.

**Patriarchal Myths and Stereotypes of the Good Woman**

I will discuss the patriarchal myths and stereotypes of good women in ‘Mermaids’ using the categories of magical solutions, voice, punishing exhibitions of female force, the best woman is the housewife, dependence on the male hero, the female gaze, and the passive nude.

**Magical Solutions**

Karen E. Rowe claims that magical and miraculous solutions to problems undermine female agency. She explains that “Led to believe in … external powers rather than internal self-initiative as the key which brings release, the reader may feel that maturational traumas will disappear with the wave of a wand … This … use of enchantment can subtly undermine female self-confidence” (1986:219). Bingham, Stryker and Neufeldt (1995:204) have also been skeptical about magical solutions in fairy tales and the intervention of supernatural beings because they imply that women have no real power to change their own situations. There is no magic, as such, in ‘Mermaids’ as there would be in a fairy tale; the story does not stray far from a realist mode. At first glance, there seem to be no “miraculous solutions” to the characters’ problems either. There are, however, some solutions that defy plausible relations between cause and effect: Kate’s rescue from drowning is unrealistic. In real life she would in all likelihood have died before anyone reached her. The “external power” at work here is that of filmmakers’ flawed use of plot development. If verisimilitude had been maintained and Kate had drowned, Charlotte would presumably have remained a guilt-ridden and subservient ‘good girl’, with a mother more aggressive than ever. Following on from this, Rachel Flax’s change of heart when Charlotte confronts her also seems somewhat facile and contrived. All of this may affect the audience in one of two ways: the naïve may be fooled into thinking that “maturational traumas” will disappear easily; but to the more sophisticated, the improvement of the relationship between mother and daughter may seem superficial only. Reasoning from this film, the audience may be encouraged to believe that in real life good girls and bad mothers will remain irreconcilable opposites.
Voice

Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm claim that a “character’s voice serves as a metaphor for female agency” and that a “female protagonist is enabled if she narrates her own story” (2007:40). *Den Lille Havfrue* has third person narration and the Little Mermaid is also voiceless in the context of the story because the sea witch cuts out her tongue. In ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, the Little Mermaid’s lack of agency, then, is indicated (among other things) both by her physical lack of a voice and by her not narrating her own story; characters may be silent in the context of plot and still function as narrators, after all. On the other hand, Charlotte is the narrator of the film ‘Mermaids’ and her narration of her own story suggests some self-determination. The problem is that her ‘voice’ mostly remains at the level of interior monologue and, while she confesses her innermost thoughts to the audience, she finds it difficult to speak to those around her, especially about the things that she finds most troubling. In one scene, for example, Charlotte, in her admiration, rises to her feet to talk to a nun in Lou’s shoe shop. The nun says “Yes, dear” and looks at her expectantly. But while Charlotte in her role as narrator tells the audience, “I wanted to ask what colour her bra was and if she always had pure thoughts”, Charlotte the character is overcome by awe, so she says nothing while the nun stares at her in confusion (‘Mermaids’, 1990). Later, when Charlotte mistakenly believes she is pregnant, she becomes similarly tongue-tied with her mother; she tries to discuss her anxieties but remains silent while Mrs Flax, becoming impatient, shouts, “What? What?” (‘Mermaids’, 1990).

Besides her silence, certain instances of Charlotte’s speech actually show her lack of agency or power as well: her religious proclamations disguise her sexual desire, for example. Hannah Arendt claims that “power is actualised only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities” (Arendt in Allen 2002:137). Central to the climax of the story, then, is Charlotte’s eventual access to agency as she gives voice to her thoughts and feelings. Here Charlotte gains power of the kind identified by Hannah Arendt. In speaking out and standing up to her mother, Charlotte helps to change her family’s circumstances; she persuades Rachel to give up fleeing from the social sanction of community gossip so that she, Charlotte, can stay in Eastport and finish high school, and the family can live a more settled life.
It is disappointing, then, if one analyses the film from a feminist perspective, that Charlotte’s attainment of a significant voice, and the agency associated therewith, are closely connected, through plot development, with her engaging in an act of sexual rebellion and with her mother accusing her of being the “town tramp”. Here female agency, ill-judged sexual encounters and social condemnation are made to seem naturally linked, and this link serves patriarchal society in discouraging female sexual initiative.

**Punishing Exhibitions of Female Force**

The attitude of the authors of ‘Mermaids’ to female sexual agency seems tolerant at first, but this changes during the course of the film. Curiously, near the beginning of the film Rachel’s sexual confidence and sexual attractiveness are admired by both Lou and Charlotte’s schoolmate, Mary; and the audience, too, are apparently invited to admire her unabashed enjoyment of sexual relationships. But whenever Charlotte takes the initiative sexually, she is eventually punished for straying from her good girl identity. When she kisses Joe for the first time she is plagued with guilt and anxiety afterwards: she prays, fasts to the point of collapse, and unrealistically believes herself pregnant. Though she may be the agent of her own punishment at this point, Charlotte is punished nonetheless.

When Charlotte actually has sexual intercourse with Joe, later in the movie, the resulting punishment is even more severe. The scene cuts back and forth between Charlotte’s taking the sexual initiative with Joe and Kate’s falling into the weir on the river. This use of cinematography and editing sets up a close, if misleading, association between active female sexual desire and harm to children. So, Kate’s near drowning operates as a form of punishment for Rachel’s transgressions as well as for Charlotte’s. After the river scene, there is an extended sequence showing both Charlotte’s and Rachel’s intense emotional suffering over Kate’s accident while the child is under observation in hospital. For some time, neither Kate’s relatives nor the audience know whether she will recover or not. Vicariously, the film’s audience suffers too. The plot of the film establishes a false chain of causality that results in the punishment and suffering, thus indicating exactly what it is that Rachel and Charlotte are punished for. This chain of causality includes: Rachel’s rejection of Lou’s marriage proposal; Rachel’s flirting with Joe, a younger man; Charlotte’s sudden decision to imitate her mother’s seductive self-adornment and sexual assertiveness; and, finally, Rachel and Charlotte’s neglecting their responsibility in caring for a child. Their acts that are
punished, then, are all the typical things that patriarchal society discourages in women. Karen Rowe, in her feminist critique of fairy tales, says, “By punishing exhibitions of feminine force, [fairy] tales admonish that any disruptive non-conformity will result in annihilation or social ostracism” (1986:218). Likewise, the movie ‘Mermaids’ admonishes that non-conformity in sexual matters will result in social ostracism as Charlotte is gossiped about after her escapade, while Kate very nearly suffers annihilation. By the end of the film, Charlotte has changed from one kind of good girl to another even better one: a studious girl rather than one who is obsessed with God and religion, studiousness being more socially acceptable. All rebellion abandoned, she is an entirely good girl once again. Thus the film sends audiences a powerful message about what forms of female behaviour are considered appropriate, and female sexual initiative is definitely not one of them. Given the way the film begins, this seems to indicate, at best, an ambivalent attitude to female sexuality on the part of the filmmakers.

The Best Woman is the Housewife

Critics like Robert Moore have noted that many traditional fairy tales put forward the stereotypical idea that the best woman is the housewife and they have criticized this idea as antifeminist because it implies condemnation of women who wish to excel in other areas instead (in Zipes 1986: 5-6). Charlotte, as the young heroine of ‘Mermaids’, seems to fit into all the usual fairy tale stereotypes of the good girl: she is submissive, passive, silent, religious, virginal and a good domestic worker. It is only in the realm of domestic work that she is not shown to be relatively helpless as she is a competent little housewife who can cook, clean and take care of her younger sister. During the course of the film, Charlotte is shown to be a much better housewife than her mother is: Rachel Flax, for example, will only serve hors d’oeuvres, because she claims that anything else is “too big a commitment” (‘Mermaids’ 1990). The contrasting domestic styles of mother and daughter are illustrated very clearly when they have their first dates with Lou and Joe, respectively.

When she has her first date with Lou, Rachel reduces the bagels that he brings over for breakfast to kebabs; he is compelled to comment, with an expression of horror, “I’ve never seen a bagel treated that way” (‘Mermaids’ 1990). Later, when Charlotte devotedly tries to prepare what she thinks of as suitably ‘masculine’ sandwiches for Joe, Rachel Flax turns the sandwiches into star shapes with a cookie cutter, much to Charlotte’s irritation, in what is one
of the film’s most memorable comic moments. Of course, the irony of this is that cookie cutters are usually used by good housewives in carrying out the traditional female task of baking; so this indicates Rachel’s ability to subvert traditional female roles. The star shape of the cookie cutter operates as a kind of stamp indicating Rachel’s subversive power. In addition, stars are associated with magic and witchcraft. So Rachel is set up as a kind of Sea Witch to Charlotte’s innocent Little Mermaid. This impression would have been heightened for those watching the film when it was first released in 1990 because Cher, taking the part of Rachel, had recently appeared as a witch in the film *The Witches of Eastwick* in 1987.

**Dependence on the Male Hero**
The leading men in ‘Mermaids’ are shown to be somewhat feminized and they certainly do not fit into the traditional role of the active male hero. Lou owns a shoe shop and Joe works as a caretaker at a convent: neither of these is an especially macho occupation. While both men are shown to be enthusiastic about sport (Joe was a high school football star and Lou is a devoted baseball fan), their other interests tend to fall more in the traditional female realm. Lou has a talent for creating décor for children and Joe, by the end of the film, has devoted himself to growing and selling garden plants. Of the two male lead characters Joe is particularly quiet, gentle and passive. He is so lacking in voice that he is almost reminiscent of Andersen’s Little Mermaid, which is a complete subversion of the gender binary.

Certainly, neither Joe nor Lou fits into what Dorothy Dinnerstein identifies as the male ‘minotaur’ stereotype, with its violence and “mindless, greedy power” (1976:5). Joe’s passivity is underscored when a young nun rescued Kate. That a young woman performs a heroic act overturns gender stereotypes because good, quiet girls do not generally rescue anyone; on the contrary, they wait to be rescued. But even more than this, Joe, the strapping young man whom the audience would expect to perform heroic acts, remains in the background, saying nothing, while Kate is saved from drowning. So gender stereotypes are thoroughly disrupted in this scene.

Another way in which female dependence on the male hero is overturned in this film is through iconoclastic treatment of the all-powerful father figure. While Charlotte is not shown to be completely dependent on a certain male hero, she is depicted as hero-worshipping various men and women, such as: the nuns at the convent, Joe and even the middle class family who briefly take her in when she runs away from home. Chief among those she hero-worships, however, is her absent father. Charlotte’s self-deception is that her father will one
day return to live with them, and in the continued absence of her real father she depends on this false hope, even though he has not been to visit them for eleven years. Charlotte will only wear a pair of boots that he sent to her, although she has outgrown them; she is also shown to carry around a black and white photo of a man sitting on a car and she believes this to be a picture of her father. She treats the photo like a holy relic, keeping it in her hymnbook marking the hymn: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty”. Thus Charlotte, in her religious obsession, is shown to project her longing for her father onto the patriarchal God of Christianity. The irony of Charlotte’s momento of her father is that the top of the photo, which would show the man’s head, has been torn off; this suggests both an iconoclastic treatment of father figures in the film and Mrs Flax’s castrating or destructive ways as the audience can only assume that she has torn the photo in a fit of anger or spite. Later in the film it is revealed, however, that Rachel Flax has never owned a picture of her ex-husband; the only photographs ever taken were unprintable because of a problem with either the camera or the film developing process. Ironically, Charlotte has been inspired by a picture of an unknown man all along, someone who is not even her father. This emphasizes that her obsession with her father is based on delusions. By the end of the film Charlotte has outgrown her need for her father just as she has outgrown the boots he sent to her. In showing the folly of Charlotte’s dependence on a supposed male hero, in the form of her uncaring parent, stereotypes of the good girl are undermined. Good girls in fairy tales are usually subordinate to, and uncritical of, their fathers, as is the case in ‘Beauty and the Beast’ or ‘The Handless Maiden’ for instance.

The authors of ‘Mermaids’ seem to subscribe to Freud’s Oedipal paradigm of childhood development where the child gives up the mother emotionally to become attached to the father (1957a: 267-268). Charlotte, with her excessive love for her absent father and her resentment of her mother, appears to be trapped in an Oedipus complex. Nevertheless, ‘Mermaids’ shows that Charlotte is psychologically adaptable enough to develop and resolve her Oedipus complex without her real father even being present to participate in the process. Using a pair of boots, a torn photograph and a preoccupation with patriarchal religion she maintains a sketchy relationship with her father figure.

When Charlotte meets Joe she transfers her Oedipal conflict to him as is shown through the use of cinematography. Charlotte’s only memory of her father is depicted in the film as an interpolated black and white scene, with his face invisible because he is backlit by the sun, which shines into the young Charlotte’s eyes, temporarily blinding her. The first time she
sees Joe he is also backlit by the sun and she cannot see the details of his face because the sun is shining into her eyes. So, from the start of their relationship, we see that Joe is associated in Charlotte’s perceptions with her absent father. The suggestion of being blinded also recalls the Oedipus myth. Her sexual desire for Joe is given significance beyond simple attraction, then, and when Charlotte is furiously jealous when she sees her mother kissing Joe the suggestion of Oedipal rivalry is obvious. In her resulting conflict with her mother, Charlotte gains greater developmental maturity, and loses interest in Joe as a partner almost immediately. So the ‘prince’ here, seems to be no more than an instrument for Charlotte’s psychic development and the stereotype of the typical good girl is completely shattered as far as the good woman’s ongoing dependence on the male hero is concerned. Nevertheless, from a feminist perspective, it is somewhat discomfiting that the film promotes the Oedipal paradigm uncritically as an inevitable maturational process.

One of the film’s most radical departures from ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ and other fairy tales is its promotion of the idea that marriage, per se, is not compulsory for female happiness. This idea is underscored by Charlotte, Kate and Cher singing along to the radio at the end:

If you want to be happy for the rest of your life
Never make a pretty woman your wife
So from a personal point of view
Get an ugly girl to marry you.

(‘Mermaids’ 1990)

The misogynistic message of the song, that beautiful women are on the bad side of the binary opposition and thus no good for marriage, is mocked as Rachel and Charlotte mimic the words “get an ugly girl to marry you” while a male sings it. This undermines the lyrics and transform them into a taunt, because at this stage of the story Charlotte is not dating and Rachel is unmarried by choice, and they are happy with the status quo. But, although the film does not necessarily advocate marriage as the ultimate solution to a woman’s problems, it does imply that if a woman is the appropriate age (possibly around Rachel’s age of about 32) then a good relationship with a man is a stabilizing and improving influence in her life – even if they do not live together. Much of ‘Mermaids’ is devoted to showing how Lou is a good influence on Rachel. Her character improves greatly under his tutelage: she becomes kinder to her daughter Charlotte, sexually faithful, less sarcastic and less impulsive. On close
examination then, the film does not stray too far from the fairy tale or love story paradigm that an ideal heterosexual love relationship saves the day.

The Female Gaze


According to Laura Mulvey, “[P]leasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (1989: 19). Besides voice, then, Charlotte is endowed with that other feature of agency: the gaze. Charlotte’s pleasure in looking at Joe for the purposes of enjoying his sexual attractiveness is established in the film. But the way Charlotte’s gaze is depicted again shows an ambivalent attitude to female agency on the part of the filmmakers. In one noteworthy scene, Charlotte appears in the convent garden, which has two statues of female saints, but she leaves this sacred garden to spy on Joe as he stands beside the weir, pitching stones across the water. In the voiceover that represents Charlotte’s thoughts, she says, as she watches him, “I love the way he throws.” This indicates that she is experiencing scopophilia and appropriating the active male role in looking. Even before her act of voyeurism, in literally moving away from the realm of the good women (represented by the statues of the saints), it is suggested that Charlotte is about to transgress; and, almost immediately, it is
implied that there is danger is associated with such transgression: after all, this is the same weir that is later the site of Kate’s near drowning.

If what Laura Mulvey postulates is true, then this scene associates Charlotte’s rejection of the passive female role with her adopting the role of the bad woman. The woman who demonstrates sexual desire is the bad woman in the binary opposition of virgin/whore that pervades society; and once again, the filmmakers seem compelled to associate the straying of the good woman with punishment, even though Charlotte’s gaze remains, in many ways, different from the male gaze. For instance, the female object of the male subject’s gaze is passive while what Charlotte enjoys is watching Joe’s display of athleticism.

Going back into the history of illustrations that have accompanied Andersen’s tale, the female gaze has been associated with the Little Mermaid from early on, as may be seen in Figure 8; this is one of many children’s book illustrations that shows the Little Mermaid gazing longingly at a statue of the Prince, or at the Prince himself. The filmmakers, then, seem to be alluding to such illustrations in depictions of Charlotte’s desiring gaze, in what is a form of filmic ekphrasis. But, like Hans Christian Andersen and the artists who have illustrated ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, the filmmakers cannot resist a tradition that Mary Ann Doane identifies as “the process of narrativising the negation of the female gaze” where female desire “mobilizes extreme efforts of containment and unveils the sadistic aspect of narrative” (1982:84). Hence Charlotte’s gaze is associated with Kate’s near drowning, just as the Little Mermaid’s gaze of longing directed at the Prince ultimately leads to her watery demise. The female gaze and female desire tend to be punished in Western patriarchal society, and the film ‘Mermaids’ perpetuates this tradition to some extent.

The Passive Nude

‘Mermaids’ also employs filmic ekphrasis in depicting Lou’s painting and art works. These are incorporated into several scenes of the film and cinematic depiction of his painting is used to overturn the idea of the female as the mere passive object of the male gaze. In film criticism, little attention has been paid to filmic ekphrasis, according to Laura M. Sager. She believes that this is because of the hegemonic divide between criticism of so-called “high culture and its focus on literary and aesthetic phenomena” on one side and popular culture on the other; the latter, she says, focuses more on “political and ideological interpretations” (2006:237).
Although Rachel poses for Lou, she is shown to disrupt the role of the passive nude. Just before she models for Lou for the first time, she criticizes his paintings of his ex-wife: “Well, Lou, I don’t know what to say. They’re terrible.” Lou apologizes: “I said painting was my passion. I didn’t say I was good at it” (‘Mermaids’ 1990). In the Western tradition of male artist and female model, the woman is supposed to be passive and silent; she is not supposed to talk back to the artist and criticize his work. Ironically, Lou is better at interior decorating for children than he is at the more ‘male’ art of portraits in oil, which disrupts the usual division of fine art and decorative art along gender lines, with the more highly esteemed fine art presumably being more suited to male artists. In the history of Western art, female models’ opinions about the work of the male artists who have depicted them have generally been suppressed, art criticism being mainly the preserve of men, and occasionally upper class women (Betterton 1985:13-14). Rachel would be expected to have the kind of critical gaze usually associated with males, however, as she approximates the active, evil side of the good girl/bad woman binary in this film. But this stereotype is also later subverted.

After she has posed for Lou and has fallen asleep on his sofa, still in the Cleopatra costume she wore for the painting, Rachel becomes the passive object of a female gaze: her daughter Charlotte’s. Depicting Charlotte as the active observer again implies female agency. This disrupts the good girl/bad woman dichotomy because here we are shown both Charlotte’s agency and Rachel Flax’s vulnerability and helplessness; the film’s portrayal of them, in this instance, subverts typical traits of the good woman/bad woman dualism. As Charlotte covers her mother with a blanket, she says: “Sometimes I feel like you're the child and I'm the grownup. I can't imagine being inside you. I can't imagine being anywhere you'd let me stay for nine straight months.” This implies a kind of longing completely foreign to that implicated in the male gaze: the young girl’s desire for attachment to the mother. This scene hints at a different depiction of mother and daughter relationships from that which prevails in the rest of the film. As Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber explain, “According to classical psychoanalytic theory a girl does not favorably identify with her mother. Instead, a girl’s hostility and distrust nearly wipe out positive association” (2000: 124). The brief scene where Charlotte gazes at her mother suggests that a young girl’s attitude to her mother could be more favourable, in spite of the conflict between these two characters in the rest of the story. This conflict seems to have been carried over from the fairy tale genre to the film, because, as Fisher and Silber note, in “fairy tales the innocent, virtuous female protagonist
must reject identification with or empathy for her depraved maternal nemesis” (2000: 125). This supports patriarchy because women are encouraged to value males above other women.

Patriarchal Myths and Stereotypes of the Bad Woman and the Monstrous-Feminine

In analyzing this film it is useful to note which stereotypes of evil women are perpetuated.

**The Femme Fatale**

According to a Webster’s Online Dictionary, a *femme fatale* is “an alluring and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lovers in bonds of irresistible desire, often leading them into compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations. She is an archetypal character of literature and art.” Plainly, then, the *femme fatale* is one more variant of the evil woman in the good woman/bad woman binary.

While Rachel Flax is set up as a kind of *femme fatale*, in that she is shown to be highly alluring sexually, this idea is subverted in several ways. For example, the dictionary entry continues: “In some situations, [the *femme fatale*] uses lying or coercion rather than charm.” Rachel, on the other hand, is proud of her brutal honesty. She tells Lou on their first date: “Men lie about everything.” He retorts: “But women don't.” Rachel replies, “I don't know about women, but I don't.” (‘Mermaids’, 1990) In keeping with this, there is no evidence of Rachel ever dissembling during the course of the film.

While the *femme fatale* supposedly endangers or harms the men she ensnares, Rachel usually comes off second best in her relationships with men. We are shown, for example, that she is the one who travels from place to place to avoid the conflict and gossip resulting from failed relationships. While she is shown to hurt men’s feelings and show verbal aggression towards them on occasion, she and her daughters, particularly Charlotte, suffer more than her lovers do.

Webster’s Online Dictionary also points out that the *femme fatale* denies her lovelorn victims any “confirmation of her affection”. In this way, the *femme fatale* “drives” her lover “to the point of obsession and exhaustion so that he is incapable of making rational decisions”. Lou complains that Rachel will not show any true commitment to their relationship, but he is not ever shown to be “obsessed”, “exhausted” or “incapable of making
rational decisions”. He remains rational and equal to the task of coping with Rachel’s idiosyncrasies.

While the *femme fatale* is a powerful figure, the only power that Rachel Flax has is the power to intimidate her elder daughter and her main source of agency is fleeing from one place to another. In Rachel, then, we have someone who is sexually empowered, to some extent, but socially disempowered. Thus, it is Rachel Flax’s bad girl traits combined with her *lack of any real power* that is subversive and disruptive of the weak good woman/ powerful evil woman binary.

**The Phallic Woman and the Castrating Woman**

Theorists do not seem to entirely agree on the nature of the phallic woman. Barbara Creed notes that the term is often used in an uninformed way to describe women who have so-called masculine attributes (2007:156-157). Creed goes on to say that:

> [M]an’s fear that woman might castrate him either symbolically or literally is not necessarily related to his infantile belief that she is phallic. The penis, as such, is not an instrument of incorporation or castration but of penetration … It is the mythical vagina dentata which threatens to devour, to castrate via incorporation.

(2007:157)

Consequently, she claims, “the archetypes of the phallic and castrating woman are quite different and should not be confused” (2007:157-158). In contrast, Gabbard and Gabbard use a similar argument but arrive at the opposite conclusion, saying, “The male child may … fantasize that mother has orally castrated father and thereby augmented her own power with that of the paternal penis …in this view the phallic mother is both castrating and penetrating” (1993: 421). The director of ‘Mermaids’ conflates the idea of the phallic woman with that of the castrating woman in Rachel’s embodiment of Cleopatra when she poses for Lou; so he confirms the idea of the monstrous woman as both castrating and phallic. In the film the two ideas are associated in the costume that Rachel wears for her portrait as Cleopatra: she has a serpent diadem on her head and she carries another plastic snake on her arm; in a subversive moment, Rachel mischievously puts her plastic snake into Lou’s wine glass. This suggests that Rachel represents the phallic woman, as she is the possessor of serpents, which are
phallic in appearance. This also connects Rachel with Medusa, with her snake hair, whom Freud himself seems to have interpreted as being both phallic and castrated (1957b:105-106). Lou holds the wineglass, into which she drops the snake, and the wineglass could be read as symbolizing a vagina; this would imply that Rachel is tricking Lou into a feminine role, as the limp snake could be said to resemble a severed penis; hence, Rachel is also reminiscent of a female castrator.

The scene is polysemic, however, and it could be interpreted differently: Rachel, in what is an instance of undecidability, could be seen as giving up her ‘phallic’ status, symbolized by the snake, in submission to Lou; so, rather than castrating him (in the sense of depriving him of power) she could be castrating herself. Besides this, the phallic snakes she wears are all too plainly artificial (the cobra on Rachel’s head is made of tinfoil), though they are made to seem real in the context of Lou’s oil painting; this implies that women are not really either ‘phallic’ or castrating, but they are made to appear that way by patriarchal society. Rachel’s exotic costume and props have been provided by Lou himself, after all. Either way, in her role as *femme fatale*, Rachel is shown to lack any real power as a phallic woman, thus disrupting the good girl/ bad woman binary opposition, as the evil woman is supposedly powerful.

Incidentally, the idea of Rachel as both phallic and castrating is also set up humorously and then undermined when she wears another costume: her mermaid outfit for a New Year’s party. Rachel Flax unknowingly catches her fabric mermaid tail in her car door when she drives off to meet Lou, which makes the end of her phallic ‘tail’ appear severed; much to the amusement of Charlotte and Kate. Again the filmmakers suggest that she is self-castrating or self-destructive rather than someone who harms others.

Both Charlotte and Rachel wield knives during the course of the film, and this imagery, of course, possibly links them both with the phallic or castrating woman. On both occasions, though, the scenes are anticlimactic with regard to any violence being enacted. In the scene where Charlotte wields a knife, thinking that she would like to kill her mother (and the audience is privy to her thoughts which are spoken aloud in the soundtrack), it is a round tipped butter knife; later in the film, the knife that Rachel wields looks terrifyingly sharp and she advances on Charlotte threateningly, but then she merely uses the knife to cut a tray of fudge into blocks. These scenes mock the slasher films that were popular through the 1980s – films like ‘Fatal Attraction’ (1987) which featured murderous women. They also destabilize the good girl/bad woman binary to some extent as the audience is shown that the good
mermaid, represented by Charlotte, may have aggressive inclinations, while Rachel is not a Sea Witch about to cut out the Little Mermaid’s tongue after all. Charlotte controls herself and Rachel diverts her fury into preparing sweets for her family. In the scenes of knife-wielding women, then, patriarchal myths of the murderous phallic female are overturned and the audience is reminded that women generally have enough self-mastery to sublimate their aggressive impulses into nurturing behaviour.

The Bad Mother and Associating the Female Body with the Abject

![Mermaids Poster](http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_poster/mermaids_1990.htm)

Figure 9: Artist Unknown (1990) ‘Mermaids’ Poster. Available:


But, while the idea of the murderous, knife-wielding woman is overturned, a central idea in ‘Mermaids’ is that sexually active, attractive women are not good mothers. This is even suggested in one of the film’s promotional posters, which has the tag line: “This is our
mother. Pray for us”. This caption is accompanied by two photographs that exemplify dualism: one is of Charlotte dressed like a postulant, in a prayerful attitude and representing virginal holiness, and the other is of Rachel Flax epitomizing frivolity in her mermaid costume (See Figure 9). Kate clings to her mother’s waist in this picture but Rachel is ignoring her. She typifies the bad mother. For those who have seen the film’s poster without viewing the film itself, the binary opposition of Charlotte as good girl and Rachel as bad woman is reinforced without any mitigation. As is typical of Hollywood, the poster cashes in on society’s cherished stereotypes. As Nickianne Moody says, “Stereotyped images … contribute to the process of collusion, whereby the audience tacitly agrees with received ideas in order to … enjoy popular culture” (2006:175). So the poster draws potential audiences into colluding with the subtly misogynistic messages in the film.

Closely related to the myth of the murderous mother are myths of the female body as inherently disgusting and dangerous: variations of this myth are found in images of the vagina dentata and in society’s construction of the maternal body as aligned with the abject. In ‘Mermaids’ the maternal body is sometimes constructed as inducing abjection, as is shown in Charlotte’s extreme disgust and fear at the thought of being pregnant; while she thinks she is pregnant, for example, she gives up eating to atone for her ‘sin’. Acquiring a maternal body, with its supposed abject qualities, is posited as a suitable punishment for giving up the role of the good woman.

In the 1970s several women visual artists tried to overturn the idea of the female body as inherently disgusting through using vaginal or central core imagery. In ‘Mermaids’, in some scenes at least, the filmmakers seem to appropriate central core imagery from the visual arts. Their intentions in this are unclear, but the effect is that the imagery destabilizes the idea of the woman’s body as dangerous and aligned with the abject. In an early scene in the film the audience is shown a large shell that Mrs Flax keeps in her bedroom. This shell, shown again in later scenes, is always shown ventral side up, with its slit running from top to bottom rather than from side to side so that it resembles a vulva. Because seashells have the kind of structural integrity that precludes the abject and because they are aesthetically pleasing to look at, the idea of female sexual organs as inherently disgusting, commonly associated with the monstrous-feminine, is subverted by the image of the shell. The implied comparison suggests that the vagina and womb are protective, just as a shell protects the creature inside it. This hints that Rachel herself, at least when she was a pregnant mother, was protective rather than harmful, as this shell is so closely associated with her in several scenes; this idea
disrupts stereotypes of the monstrous maternal, even though Rachel is mostly depicted as a bad mother.

But the use of vaginal imagery is also ambivalent in this film in its preoccupation with bagels. In popular culture there are traditional jokes about the bagel representing female sex organs (jokes of the “it’s the hole that makes it special” variety). Rachel turns bagels into kebabs whenever she has the opportunity, making them appear phallic. This could suggest that she is asserting herself as a phallic woman; but it could also suggest that she despises female sexual organs and wants to alter them or that she envies and covets the penis, as Freud might say (1957a:271-272). Certainly, women’s self-hatred seems to be indicated here as even Lou is driven to comment, with an expression of alarm on his face, “I’ve never seen a bagel treated that way” (‘Mermaids’, 1990). Whichever way one may choose to interpret the bagel imagery, the film depicts violence acted upon a cultural symbol – albeit a sly symbol – of female sexual parts. The jarringly different uses of vaginal imagery in the film seemingly betray an ambivalent attitude towards female anatomy and its supposed link with the monstrous or abject.

**The Aging Woman**

Ageism combined with misogyny is rife in ‘Mermaids’. Stereotypes about older people are introduced early in the film with Rachel criticizing her daughter’s driving by saying: “Charlotte, you drive like old people make love.” Soon after this, Rachel says to her daughter, “You know, Charlotte, I think you may be old enough for a boyfriend now.” And Charlotte replies, “If I’m old enough, maybe you’re too old.” Although Rachel’s retort is “Don’t be ridiculous. A real woman is never too old,” the filmmakers hardly seem to endorse her view (‘Mermaids’ 1990).

Ageism operates even in the depictions of Charlotte and Rachel. Though Rachel is only in her early thirties; she is shown to be harsh and irresponsible compared with her daughter. This seems to affirm a study conducted in 1974 which found that aging is associated with evil (Vernon, Philips, Williams, Wilson 1990: 58). In addition, Carrie, the cosmetics sales lady in ‘Mermaids’, is ridiculed although she is a harmless character, and her chief fault appears to be nothing more than her age. Her being in her forties seems to be cause enough for her to be despised by Charlotte and Kate, and for Joe to find her foolish. Again, towards the end of the film, her being an older woman is juxtaposed ironically with the Bo Peep costume she wears.
to a New Year’s party; Bo Peep is usually depicted as a little girl in children’s books. The audience is shown that the younger man Joe, for one, finds her appearance and her behaviour at this party embarrassing as she makes an attempt to flirt with him. Her sexual desire is made to seem inappropriate and ridiculous, mainly because she is an older woman. On the other hand, while Lou is about the same age as Carrie, if not older, his sexual desire is not shown to be ridiculous or disgusting in any way. In fact, the filmmakers emphasize the much younger Rachel’s approval of him as a lover. This supports Michael N. Kane’s observation that, “While perceptions may be negative surrounding older males who engage in sexual behaviors, judgments appear harsher for older woman” (2006:875).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how the film ‘Mermaids’ promotes some of Western patriarchal society’s ideas of acceptable female behaviour. I have suggested that the filmmakers cannot give up the idea that women who take the sexual initiative are dangerous – both to children and to themselves. I have also tried to show how stereotypical representations of women endure in this film, in spite of the techniques used to undermine them. While Charlotte, for instance, does not remain a virgin she more-or-less retains her good girl status. The filmmakers seem to deride her religious pretensions while approving of her more secular good behaviour. Although the film appears to have feminist intentions and it successfully overturns much of the misogyny in ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, a discomfort with female sexuality remains, as may be seen in the ambivalent use of vaginal imagery during the course of the film.

It is in its depictions of older women that the film is most stereotypical, however. Women in the film are generally depicted as becoming more unpleasant as they age and Carrie, in particular, is ridiculed as an older woman. Moreover, the film depicts older men and their sexuality much more favorably than it does older women.

Feminism was highly topical in the 1980s and and the film shows some of the influences of feminism; but filmmakers are careful not to upset the patriarchal status quo and the feminist influences are tempered with conventional attitudes to women. A more radical film would have drawn criticism and made less money, no doubt. The ‘watered down’ version of feminism that the film shows is typical of Hollywood productions.
Chapter Two: *Tipping the Velvet*

**Introduction**

*Tipping the Velvet*, the novel by Sarah Waters first published in 1998, is a far more radical reworking of mermaid fairy tales than Richard Benjamin’s film. This postmodern novel parodies critical gender theory and reworks both fairy tales and Victorian fictional conventions, overturning heterosexual gender normativity. As in the film ‘Mermaids’, Sarah Waters appropriates various elements of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ and the mermaid nude in art.

Unlike ‘Mermaids’, which is set in the 1960s in the United States, this novel is set in England, in the early 1890s. The main character, Nancy Astley, who is also the first person narrator of the novel, is a working class girl who lives in Whitstable. Unlike the Flax family in ‘Mermaids’, the Astleys are a conventional family group, with a mother and father living in the same house as their children. Nevertheless, the novel largely ignores the Oedipal paradigm that informs Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’.

Here, the innocent-persecuted heroine genre is subverted mainly through the author transforming it into a lesbian fairy tale. Sarah Waters seems to indicate that being a lesbian does not necessarily disqualify a heroine from being innocent, and Nancy is depicted as innocent in the first part of the story. She falls in love with male-impersonator, Kitty Butler, whom she sees performing in a music hall. Nancy and Kitty become lovers and Nancy joins Kitty onstage as a fellow male-impersonator. Nancy’s happiness is short lived, however, because Kitty, opting for conventional respectability, becomes engaged to her stage manager, Walter Bliss. At this point, Nancy is shown to lose her innocence; she runs away from Kitty but she decides to go on disguising herself as a man in order to work as a male prostitute, targeting upper class men as clients. In spite of her prostitution, like a typical innocent persecuted heroine Nancy eventually finds love in a committed relationship – but her lover is another woman, Florence Banner.

Sarah Waters parodies literary realism in her novel. The realist technique that she employs is particularly gritty, involving sordid details from various aspects of Victorian life. There is a careful orchestration in the depiction of historical figures, historical events, Victorian technology, modes of dress and street slang so that all the details of the novel
appear to fit together neatly without any very obvious anachronism. The narrator refers to historical events such as the Dockers’ strike of 1889, and the Second Irish Home Rule Bill of 1893, for example (Davis 2009). In addition, historical figures contemporary to the events in the novel, such as Walt Whitman, Eleanor Marx and Oscar Wilde, are not only mentioned but are depicted as having an influence on the lives of the characters.

Though it is heralded on the dust cover of the 1999 Virago edition as historical romance, *Tipping the Velvet* is far more complex than that. Certainly, Waters mimics historical romance, but she cleverly uses the genre to comment on the social concerns of the late twentieth century, even while she describes and comments on the Victorian era. So rather than historical romance this is what Jane Hentges has identified as “historiographic metafiction”. As Hentges says, “Sarah Waters uses her fiction to play around with the past and bring the notion of history into question by showing facets which were ignored” (2005: 1). One neglected facet that Waters focuses on is lesbianism, which will become clear in my analysis. Besides historiographic metafiction, Sarah Waters utilizes other techniques that typify postmodern writing. These include intertextuality, the mixing of so-called high culture and low culture, and distortions of time (Harvey 1992; Lye 2008).

Intertextuality appears to be Sarah Waters’s postmodern device of choice. In *Tipping the Velvet*, literary allusion is taken to extremes. Various reviewers and critics have pointed out the similarities between her work and the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, with regard to their “sensational plots” and “grim nineteenth century scenarios” (Costantini 2006:18). She also appropriates twentieth century literary and cultural theory. For instance, she uses ideas from Judith Butler’s writings, exaggerating them and playing with them in keeping with the postmodern style. Facetiously, Nancy’s first love is named Kitty Butler. Judith Butler’s ideas around gender performativity are also evoked in *Tipping the Velvet* with all the cross-dressing and stage performances that the story includes. As Jane Hentges says, “all the exaggerated play around clothes [in *Tipping the Velvet*] could … be read as a … pastiche or even parody of feminist writing and feminist ideas on role play, masquerade and on gender being a social construct” (2005:12).

Using ekphrasis, Sarah Waters also appropriates and parodies various artworks in her novel. No stranger to art history, she wrote an academic article on the depiction of Antinous in Victorian art, which was published before *Tipping the Velvet* was (1995: 194-230). *Tipping the Velvet* is set in the fin de siècle era, a time when nude mermaids were becoming popular subjects of paintings; John William Waterhouse’s ‘A Naiad’ was completed in 1893, for
example. It is not difficult to find parallels between the characterization of Nancy and the characterization of the mermaids depicted in John William Waterhouse’s ‘The Siren’ and ‘The Mermaid’ (see Figures 4 and 5 in the introduction). Sarah Waters also refers specifically to Sandro Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’, and more generally to painted or sculpted depictions of Antinous, Perseus, Cupid, St Sebastian and Salome in Nancy’s series of *poses plastiques* (281). In the series of *poses plastiques*, Waters also seems to allude to the Victorian ekphrastic work ‘Sight and Song’ by Michael Field, the pen name of two lesbian writers who worked collaboratively to write poetry.

Sarah Waters often alludes to works by lesbian or homosexual writers. Besides allusions to works by Andersen (‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, ‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier’, ‘The Red Shoes’) and Oscar Wilde (*The Fisherman and His Soul*, *Salome* and *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*). Walt Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass’ is quoted extensively. This helps to destabilize received notions of sex, gender and sexuality. With regard to the appropriation of works by gay writers, Sarah Waters’s focus is mainly on Andersen and Wilde, however. It is beyond the scope of my dissertation to examine the entire web of intertextuality that is set up via appropriation in this polyphonic novel. My concern is rather with the subversion of the fairy tale within the text and how Waters destabilizes the stereotyping of women.

*Tipping the Velvet* may easily be read as ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’ made queer. The parallels between Andersen’s fairy tale and Sarah Waters’s novel are several. As far as plot is concerned, the heroines of both stories have the gift of a lovely voice which is eventually silenced, both leave home for love, both encounter a villainous older woman, (in ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’ this older woman is the Sea Witch, while in Waters’s work she is more or less represented by Diana Lethaby) and both are betrayed by the beloved for whom they sacrifice so much. In both stories, the cutting off of women’s hair is significant, and neither of the heroines marries the prince in the end.

Some critics have noted that there are parallels between Andersen’s own life and the lives of his fairy tale characters. Like the characters that he depicted, the Little Mermaid and the Steadfast Tin Soldier, he too suffered from unrequited love. Andersen was secretly bisexual, and, apparently, he identified with both his female and his male characters (Lewis,2002: 679; 684; Zipes 2006: 98; 102-103). In fact, at least one critic has commented on Andersen’s feminine identification with the Little Mermaid (Meyers 2001: 149-159). Sarah Waters takes the queer aspects of Andersen’s own life story and weaves them into her novel, celebrating the adventures of her lesbian protagonist. In addition, she develops the slight hint of the queer
that is evident in Andersen’s original fairy tale. In his story the Prince dresses the Little Mermaid as a male servant so that she can go riding with him (1967:242). In *Tipping the Velvet* this cross-dressing is magnified to the point where it dominates the story.  

Reading *Tipping the Velvet* as a subversion of typical depictions of mermaids is invited from the outset. Mermaids, the ocean, pearls and oyster imagery are leitmotifs sustained throughout the work. Jane Hentges notes that Nancy is “called a ‘mermaid’ on several occasions” (2005:9). Nancy, the main character, introduces herself thus the first page: “Although I didn’t long believe the story told to me by Mother – that they had found me as a baby in an oyster shell, and a greedy customer had almost eaten me for lunch – for eighteen years I never doubted my own oysterish sympathies …” (Waters 1999: 4). Not much later when she goes backstage to meet Kitty for the first time, Kitty claims that Nancy smells like a mermaid (Waters 1999: 33). The idea of Nancy as a water spirit is not only presented in the early stages of the novel; the author associates Nancy with mermaids and the sea all the way through *Tipping the Velvet*. For example, when Nancy meets Diana’s lesbian friends for the first time one of them exclaims, “Why my dear, you’re a mermaid! Diana, did you know it? A Whitstable mermaid!” (275). So Sarah Waters appropriates and thoroughly subverts ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, but while some misogynistic myths about women are dispelled in the novel others are upheld, as I explain in the next section.

**Patriarchal Myths and Stereotypes of the Good Woman**

In this section I will examine various patriarchal myths about good women and how these myths are dealt with in *Tipping the Velvet*. The overarching myth pervading patriarchal society is that good women are submissive, passive and dependent – and thus lacking in agency. I will examine the overturning or sustaining of the passive female stereotype in this novel. To do this, I will focus on depictions of the female protagonist’s agency and the patriarchal myth of the female nude and I will demonstrate that Sarah Waters has limited success in ascribing agency to her female protagonist.

**The Good Woman’s Lack of Voice and Agency and Her Dependence on the Male Hero**

Finn Hauberg Mortensen describes the Little Mermaid as “the embodiment of righteousness” (2008: 447), as Andersen certainly intends her to be. As is typical of many well-known fairy tales, though, his good female protagonist has severely limited agency. Leslee Farish
Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm claim that a “female protagonist is enabled if she narrates her own story” and that a “character’s voice serves as a metaphor for female agency” (2007:40). ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ has third person narration and the Little Mermaid herself is voiceless in the context of the story because the sea witch takes her tongue. In ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, the Little Mermaid’s lack of agency, then, is indicated by her muteness and by her not telling her own story. Nancy’s narration of her own story may suggest her self-determination. But an alternative reading of Tipping the Velvet suggests that Nancy’s independence and agency, in the context of the novel, are also quite limited.

In the first part of the novel both Kitty and Nancy are dependent on Walter Bliss, their stage manager. It is even Walter Bliss who first persuades Nancy to take up cross-dressing, the activity that she later finds so liberating. After leaving Kitty and Walter, Nancy does gain a certain measure of independence as a renter, or ‘male’ prostitute, although this form of independence hardly seems ideal. Nancy soon becomes both emotionally and financially dependent on Diana Lethaby. Moreover, in the third part of the novel, she hands herself over to Ralph and Florence, who are next to give her food, clothing and shelter. In her going from one home to another, she much resembles the innocent persecuted heroine of many fairy tales (such as, of course, the Little Mermaid herself), all of whom for one reason or another are forced to leave the parental home and seek shelter with strangers, either the good or the bad. So, while Nancy is not shown to be completely dependent on a particular male hero, she is depicted as being variously dependent on men and women at different times in her life.

In feminist revisions of the fairy tale, science fiction and fantasy genres, female protagonists are often recast as active heroes who fight physically against villains and win. Nancy’s attempt to be a female knight in shining armour has disastrous consequences, however. When she tries to rescue Zena from Diana’s sexual abuse she is physically attacked by her mistress and she quickly changes her mind about standing up to her. Nancy covertly has intercourse with Zena as an act of rebellion afterwards, but even in this she is discovered and punished. Karen Rowe, in her critique of fairy tales, says, “By punishing exhibitions of feminine force, tales admonish that any disruptive non-conformity will result in annihilation or social ostracism” (1986:218). Following a similar line of argument, here the novel Tipping the Velvet, seems to admonish that “non-conformity” (with a powerful lesbian’s wishes, in this case) will result in social ostracism, as Nancy is thrown out of Diana’s home and rejected by her entire circle of upper class Sapphist friends. Sarah Waters may recast the Little Mermaid as a lesbian and male-impersonator, but she does not allow her to be actively
heroic, as many female heroes in revised or rewritten fairy tales are. Rather like Charlotte in ‘Mermaids’ she is punished for rebelling and showing too much force.

Conversely, it is when Nancy becomes a housewife and child minder on Florence’s behalf that her life improves and becomes meaningful. She finds her fulfilment in the context of providing domestic service for the Banners. Nancy, the narrator, describes her choice in these terms: “I would be like a girl in a fairy story, sweeping out the dwarves’ cottage, or the robbers’ cave, while the dwarves or robbers were at work” (364). So here Nancy, who is a queer Little Mermaid, becomes a queer Snow White. Sarah Waters is probably being somewhat ironic here and she subverts Victorian ideas of the so-called angel in the house to some extent. Dr William Acton, writing in 1857, claimed that, “The best mothers, wives and managers of households know little or nothing of sexual indulgences …” (in Braid 2009:2). Nancy, who turns out to be a passable “manager of the household” has been shown to know plenty of things about sexual indulgences. Nonetheless, as a character, Nancy is rewarded for her domestic submission: her transformation from whore to good housewife is connected with the happy ending of the novel. So the myth that female submission to traditional roles leads to reward is partially upheld rather than fully deconstructed in this novel. This is inexplicable given the general subversion of gender roles in *Tipping the Velvet*. Moreover, Nancy’s decision seems especially perverse, given her talents as a singer and comic performing artist. Although she helps Ralph with his speech near the end of the novel, Nancy is mostly silenced in terms of having a public voice. If voice indicates agency as, Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm claim, then Nancy is shown to lose some of her agency by the end of *Tipping the Velvet* (2007:40).

Karen E. Rowe claims that magical and miraculous solutions to problems undermine female agency. She explains that “Led to believe in … external powers rather than internal self-initiative … the reader may feel that maturation traumas will disappear with the wave of a wand … This symbolic use of enchantment can subtly undermine female self-confidence” (1986:219). Robert Moore in (Zipes 1986: 6) and Bingham, Stryker and Neufeldt (1995:204) have also been sceptical about magical solutions in fairy tales and the intervention of supernatural beings. There is no magic in *Tipping the Velvet*, as there would be in a fairy tale. There are also no miraculous solutions to problems, in the religious sense at least; religion is conspicuous by its absence in *Tipping the Velvet*. There are, nevertheless, some solutions to problems that defy plausible relations between cause and effect. One is that, after the violent quarrel in which Diana throws the half-naked Nancy and Zena out of her house,
she gives all of Nancy’s clothes back to her (327). After such a furore it is unlikely that a wronged lover will pack her cheating partner’s possessions into a bag and give them to her. Diana’s thoughtful act saves Zena and Nancy at this point, because they are able to sell the clothes and find lodgings for the night. This convenient solution is reminiscent of the *deus ex machina*; so is Nancy’s getting her lost money back from Kitty at the end of the novel (468). Sarah Waters supplies her characters with an almost supernaturally happy ending. The novel concludes with the lovers Nancy and Florence kissing each other, which – except for the lesbian twist – is a happy ending typical of both the love story and the fairy tale genres. The ending is so perfect, in fact, that a reader may suspect Sarah Waters of allowing herself to be caught up the wish fulfilment of her own fairy tale. It is as though the author has assumed the role of fairy godmother, waving her wand to make everyone’s dream come true. This detracts from her character’s “internal self-initiative as the key that brings release” (Rowe 1986:219), with the author playing the role of the supernatural being who solves the trickiest problems. In contrast, the ending of Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’ is far more inconclusive and unconventional, and therefore more subversive of fairy tales, than the ending of *Tipping the Velvet*.

The Good Woman as a Passive Nude

One way of depicting women as passive is casting them in the role of the nude. Sarah Waters overturns the patriarchal myth of the female nude through using: ekphrasis; having Nancy, at the level of plot, perform *poses plastiques*; and representing the nude as queer.

As well as being portrayed as mermaid-like and depicted as such throughout the novel, Nancy is also closely associated with one of the most famous nudes of all, Sandro Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’. This Renaissance painting makes explicit the goddess’s association with the ocean and it reinforces the idea of water spirits as passive nudes, or in more colloquial terms, sex objects. At the beginning of the novel, Nancy recounts the story, jokingly told to her by her mother, that they had found her “as a baby in an oyster shell” (4). This alludes to Venus being born from a shell. Later in the novel the association is made more explicit as Florence tells Nancy, “[S]ometimes I think you must’ve been born quite grown – like Venus in the sea-shell, in the painting…” (417). What Waters is doing here, then, is making use of a particular type of intertextuality, namely ekphrasis, which Muller defines as “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (2004: 186).
Nancy is equated even more explicitly with paintings and with nudes in the scenes where she is required to entertain Diana’s guests by performing *tableaux vivant*, also called *poses plastiques*. In the *pose plastique*, a popular nineteenth century entertainment, performers were required to embody, or pose as, sculpted or painted figures from well-known art works, usually classical art works. The preferred depictions were those of nudes (although the posers themselves, usually, were not technically naked, often being covered with paint so that they appeared to be sculpted from marble). *Poses plastiques* developed a reputation for being risqué. Nicole Potter explains that, “Depending on what side of the controversy you were on, the stillness of these *plastiques* either distanced and tamed their erotic power or provided languorous and corrupting opportunities for the male gaze” (2002: 28). The characters Nancy poses as are all figures from well-known paintings or sculptures in the Western canon: Perseus, Cupid, St Sebastian, the French Marianne, and Salome (281). Nancy, in the context of the novel, thus becomes a kind of living nude in her “repeated stylization of the body” (Butler 1990:33). But there is also a certain grotesquery in Nancy’s *poses plastiques*. As Frances S. Connelly points out: “Grotesques are typically characterized by what they lack: fixity, stability, order. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasised the creative dimensions of this flux … describing the grotesque as a ‘body in the act of becoming’” (2003:4). So in her slipping effortlessly from male to female figures in *tableaux vivant*, Nancy embodies both visual art and the grotesque, in the sense of having a changeable identity. This subverts society’s repressive ideas about gender. Nancy also shows that male figures may be nudes as well; the role is not of necessity confined to females; the notorious male gaze may be focused on other men. In fact, some of the males that Nancy portrays are icons of homosexual desire: St Sebastian and Antinous, for example. St Sebastian has been described as a “fin-de-siecle homoerotic icon” (Ehnenn 2004: 217).

Ironically, Nancy embodies the nude in art for lesbian spectators rather than for heterosexual males. The episode in which Nancy performs these poses, then, highlights the idea of the lesbian gaze, as is evident when Diana and her friends enjoy gazing upon Nancy in her various guises. According to Marilyn Frye, when a woman is gazed upon by a lesbian, “she may … be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception … The lesbian’s seeing undercut[s] the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for women” is made “automatic” (in Ehnenn 2004:215). Far from emphasising submission to the heterosexual male gaze, then, Nancy’s *poses plastiques* are a kind of graphic rebellion against heteronormativity.
The lesbian gaze is not only emphasised in the depiction of Nancy’s *poses plastiques*. The gaze, particularly the lesbian gaze, is a trope throughout the novel. Sarah Waters alludes to and plays with theories of the gaze when she depicts the first time that Nancy sees Florence. The narrator recounts:

> I lit a cigarette and studied the scene: it was as good a thing to watch, I thought, as any. At length the girl behind the curtain ceased her intermittent fanning and rose … There were not more than twelve yards between us … I was only another shadow against my own shadowy chamber, and she hadn’t noticed me … The window and curtains framed her beautifully … She … gave a start, then squinted at me, then grew stiff … I recollected my gentleman’s costume. She took me for some insolent *voyeur!* The thought gave me an odd mixture of shame and embarrassment and also, I must confess, pleasure.

(220-221)

In this description of the characters’ first meeting, Sarah Waters alludes both to Judith Butler’s ideas around gender performativity, in subtly comparing this scene to someone watching a stage show and, anachronistically, to the experience of watching a film in a cinema. This is apparent in words like: “a thing to watch”, “the girl behind the curtain, “I was only another shadow against my own shadowy chamber”, and “the window and curtains framed her”. It seems that as well as alluding to Butler’s theories, Waters is referring to Laura’s Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze. The focus of Mulvey’s theory is male spectators looking at female characters in films (1989:16-20). Once again, here, the lesbian’s seeing undercuts conventional ideas of the male gaze as Nancy usurps the male role in looking. Through placing Nancy in the position of male spectator, Waters points out the fact that women too can take active pleasure in authoring the gaze. What is more, unlike Charlotte in ‘Mermaids’ and the Little Mermaid in ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, Nancy is not ever shown to be punished for taking pleasure in gazing upon the person she desires.

Besides the queer subversion of the traditional nude and her adopting of the gaze, Nancy breaks out of the passive nude mould with her very active sexual desire. Much of the novel is given to describing both her sexual desire and her sexual fulfilment. Unlike Andersen’s fairy tale, where oysters and pearls are associated with female suffering (1967:225), Sarah Waters uses oysters and pearls subversively as tropes associated with lesbian sexual pleasure. Here
she is appropriating a continuing tradition in lesbian writing, that of associating the oyster with the vulva and the pearl with the clitoris. Oysters feature in Nancy’s wooing of both Kitty and Florence. Still sexually innocent and ignorant in the first part of the novel, she teaches Kitty the art of eating oysters, telling her that, “the shell is full of liquor, and you mustn’t spill a drop of it, for that’s the tastiest part” (48). While Nancy the character is oblivious to the implications at this point, Nancy the narrator’s allusion to cunnilingus is obvious. Later in the novel, a worldly-wise Nancy revives Florence’s zest for life, and her libido, by feeding her oysters for supper. Florence is finally compelled to say, “I really think, that if there were one dish and one dish only, that had to be served in paradise, that dish would be oysters…” (384).

Pearls are significant in Nancy’s relationships with both Kitty and with Diana; Waters, in both instances, makes the erotic imagery of pearls explicit. Nancy gives Kitty the gift of a pearl necklace and this necklace becomes symbolic of the sexual relationship between them. The first time they make love Kitty is naked “except for the pearl and chain about her neck” (104). Later, when Nancy parts from Kitty to visit her parents in Whitstable, the pearl is again salient in their intimacies: “[Kitty] had been tapping at her tooth with the pearl of her necklace; when I put my mouth on hers I felt it, cold and smooth and hard, between our lips” (153).

In her relationship with Diana, pearls are even more blatantly associated with sex. The pearls in “Den Lille Havfrue” form white lilies; but, in an instance of stark subversion, Nancy wraps a pearl necklace around the dildo that she wears to simulate heterosexual intercourse and bring Diana to orgasm (267). The dildo with the pearls could also be interpreted as a symbolic fusion of the female clitoris and the male phallus, thus disrupting the dichotomization of male and female. Like H.D. and Virginia Woolf before her, Waters uses suggestions of cunnilingus and “clitoral metaphors strategically and subversively to resist dominant social and sexual imperatives for women” (Simpson 2004: 1). Sarah Waters successfully disrupts patriarchal society’s rigid ideas about gender divisions.

Patriarchal Myths of the Bad Woman and the Monstrous-Feminine

In this section I examine various myths of the bad woman, as they are shown in *Tipping the Velvet*. As when I discussed ‘Mermaids’, this section is indebted to Barbara Creed’s work,
The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis because her taxonomy is so useful, but I have added to and combined some of her categories of the monstrous-feminine. In analyzing *Tipping the Velvet* it is necessary, I believe, to combine the categories of *femme castratrice* and witch because they are so entwined in both *Den Lille Havfrue* and Sarah Waters’s novel.

**The Femme Castratrice and Witch**

Sarah Waters’s use of allusion and characterization overturn the idea of the woman as witch. At the level of plot, she includes Diana’s use of the dildo and Nancy’s *poses plastiques* and these subvert the idea of woman as *femme castratrice*. If Nancy is the parallel of the Little Mermaid in Waters’s appropriation of Andersen’s story then Diana Lethaby is the equivalent of the Sea Witch. Andersen’s witch is a combination of witch, *femme castratrice* and phallic woman; she uses both magic potions and a mutilating knife.

Sarah Waters makes Diana’s witch-like attributes clear from Nancy’s first meeting with her. Diana’s name alludes to the goddess Diana – the goddess associated with Wicca and witchcraft (Grimassi 2002: 120-121). When Nancy first visits Diana’s home, it is with a sense of foreboding: “This was the third and most alarming threshold I had crossed for her tonight. I felt a prick, now, not of desire, but of fear …” (238). The so-called “third threshold” recalls the magical number three of fairy tales, intimating that we should see Diana as a fairy tale villain; this idea is reinforced by the description of Diana that is inserted at this point: “her face lit from beneath by the smoking lamp, seemed all at once macabre, grotesque” (238). Nancy starts to have the kind of fear that Barbara Creed associates with castration at this point: “I wondered at this lady’s tastes … there might be ropes, there might be knives. There might be a heap of girls in suits – their pomaded heads neat, their necks all bloody” (238).

The entire scene is reminiscent of the Bluebeard fairy tale. It also echoes the Little Mermaid’s encounter with the Sea Witch, in Andersen’s story, as the Little Mermaid approaches the witch’s domain with fear and a sense of foreboding, which is described so: “Terror-stricken, the Little Mermaid stopped on the edge of this forest. Her heart beat faster with fear” (1967: 236). Later in the same scene, Sarah Waters makes Diana’s association with witches more explicit. As Diana strips Nancy of her male clothing, the narrator says: “I felt like a man
being transformed into a woman at the hand of a sorceress” (239-240). The reader who is familiar with Andersen’s story is led to expect some form of mutilation at this point (just as the Sea Witch cuts out the mermaid’s tongue), and this does take place as Diana removes Nancy’s “modest little cock”. But this “cock” is merely a rolled up handkerchief, hidden in her underwear and used to create the illusion of being male. After this harmless and playful ‘castration’, Nancy is given another better ‘phallus’: Diana requires her to strap on a dildo for their mutual sexual pleasure and Nancy is very much pleased with the change from cloth to leather cock. Hentges says, “[Diana’s] dildo … steals the show … Men and above all the penis … are brought down with a burlesque bump here because Nancy, as her fascinated scopic gaze shows all too well, obviously prefers the substitute to the real thing” (2005:9). All of this makes it clear that Diana is not a true femme castratrice.

The stereotyping of Diana as a witch is subverted in later scenes where Diana gives Nancy various lavish gifts. Like the fairy godmother in ‘Cinderella’, she gives Nancy beautiful clothes so that she may mingle freely with the upper classes. Nancy describes her joy at these gifts: “When she [Diana] had gone I fairly danced about the golden floor in pleasure. I took the suit and a shirt and a collar and a necktie and laid them all in proper order upon the bed. Then I danced again” (260). Whereas the Sea Witch’s giving of legs to the Little Mermaid causes her pain, Diana’s generosity delights Nancy. She dances without feeling like she is treading on knives. Diana’s dual role as fairy godmother makes her unlike Hans Christian Andersen’s Sea Witch. Nevertheless, the dildo-wielding Diana is a kind of phallic woman and phallic women are often associated with witches in films, novels and fairy tales.

Sarah Waters uses her character Nancy in yet another way to debunk the patriarchal myth of the woman as femme castratrice. When Nancy is required to dress up to entertain Diana’s guests, she plays two figures associated with symbolic castration: one is the ‘castrator’ of females, Perseus, complete with Medusa’s head, and the other is that ‘castrator’ of men, Salome, who had John the Baptist beheaded in the Bible story. According to Freud, decapitation is the equivalent of castration (1957:105). But these tableaux vivant point to the artificiality of notions of the female castrator; they imply that a woman who is stereotyped as a castrator is simply playacting a part imposed on her by others while, in fact, she is not guilty of castrating the male at all. Nancy, in this case, is depicted as being forced into playacting by Diana.

11 Of course, in keeping with the pseudo-realism of the novel, Diana is not an actual witch, as one would find witches in fairy tales and fantasy. Her witchlike traits remain at the level of allusion and metaphor.
The *Femme Fatale*

Many myths about women are debunked, in *Tipping the Velvet*. But the stereotype of the *femme fatale* seems to apply to Diana, and even to Nancy, although to a much lesser extent. This has the effect of breaking down the good woman/bad woman dichotomy.

Nancy is depicted as having some characteristics of the *femme fatale* in the way she tricks homosexual men into desiring her, a woman, through her cross-dressing. She deliberately seeks out clients who are “fretful, or wistful, or romantic” and she enjoys deceiving and cheating them (206). She says of herself, “I was like a person who, having once been robbed of all he owns and loves, turns thief himself – not to enjoy his neighbours’ chattels, but to spoil them” (206). Poverty forces Nancy to choose prostitution as a way of earning a living, which in many ways is not really a choice at all. But Sarah Waters shows that Nancy feels empowered by her clients’ vulnerability and she secretly laughs at them when they lose control of themselves in the throes of their pleasure. This makes Nancy rather like the cold-hearted mermaid in John William Waterhouse’s ‘Siren’ and its derivative, the smirking mermaid in Howard David Johnson’s ‘The Mermaid and the Sailors’ (Figure 17).

There is irony in this. As a *femme fatale*, Nancy is successful because homosexuals think that she is an attractive man – it is her pseudo-masculinity that attracts them, in other words,
not the femininity of the *femme fatale* at all – but she is portrayed as having certain attributes of the *femme fatale* nonetheless. Nancy even matches the stock character of the *femme fatale* in eventually changing her ways and becoming the good housewife; as Webster’s Online Dictionary states: “*femmes fatales* have also appeared as antitheroines in some stories, and some even repent and become heroines by the end of the tale” (Webster’s Online Dictionary, 2010). Sarah Waters uses subversion of gender roles to make the *femme fatale* queer, but this tactic may not be entirely successful in overcoming stereotypes about women who treat men cruelly.

**The Monstrous Female Body**

Sarah Waters uses the idea of the monstrous-masculine (Alegre 1996:490) to counteract the idea of the women’s body as monstrous. As Jane Hentges points out, Sarah Waters makes use of what Bakhtin terms ‘grotesque realism’, “that is to say a realism which gives a very bawdy, exaggerated … visual treatment of the human body in order to dismantle all the stifling orthodoxies” (2005:7). Sarah Waters’s use of the word “spendings”, in the sense of ejaculated semen, is an instance of this grotesque realism; Mary Russo points out that the grotesque body is a “secreting body” (1986: 219). Waters goes beyond the mere dismantling of “stifling orthodoxies” when she describes Nancy’s oral sex with her male clients, however:

> He had a newspaper shielding the fork of his trousers,  
> and when he took the paper away I saw a bulge there  
> the size of a bottle. I had a moment of panic; but then  
> he came and stood before me, and looked expectant …  
> I got his cock out, and studied it: I had never seen one  
> so close before, and – no disrespect to the gent concerned –  
> it seemed quite monstrous. But there are always jokes  
> about such things in the music hall …… ‘How thick and  
> long it is,’ I said then – I had heard it was every man’s  
> ambition to be spoken to thus … The fellow gave a sigh …  
> Afterwards I spat his spendings out upon the cobbles,  
> and he thanked me very graciously.

(199)
The scene is described in such a way that the male genitalia seem both ridiculous and disgusting. Here, as elsewhere in the novel Nancy talks about the “fork” of a male’s trousers (425). This refers to the forking of the fabric into two parts for the legs, but “fork” also implies a devil’s fork or an implement that is used for eating, as though the penis were to be used for devouring lovers (rather like the masculine equivalent of the vagina dentata). Comparing the penis to a bottle transforms it into an object and as the human becomes non-human the abject is called to mind. It also seems significant that Nancy calls the penis “monstrous” here, when it is usually women’s sexual parts that are depicted as monstrous in Western art, literature and popular culture. So Sarah Waters overturns the idea of the monstrous-feminine by evoking the idea of the monstrous-masculine. The scene ends with an image that is likely to produce abjection: “I spat his spendings out upon the cobbles” (199). This shows that the typical male body as well as the typical female body may be aligned with the abject. How different this is from the description of felatio in ‘Mermaids’, in which there is no use of the monstrous-masculine, and where the character Mary boasts smilingly: “We had oral sex by the railway trestle. I just love it when they groan, don’t you?” (‘Mermaids’ 1990).

Sarah Waters does not have much to say about menstruation, considering the explicit nature of her writing about sex. She does make it clear, though, that menstruation is not a barrier to Nancy’s sexual arousal, although in many cultures there is a taboo against sexual activity with a ‘bleeding’ woman. Barbara Creed posits that the bleeding vagina may fill men with dread because it reminds them of the vagina dentata (2007:112). The narrator at one point says: “I might be sore, at the hips, with the ache of my monthlies, but the opening of this box [the rosewood box in which Diana hides her sex toys and lesbian pornography] … never ceased to stir me – I was like a dog twitching and slavering to hear his mistress call out Bone!” (267). Nancy’s words here, besides emphasizing her robust sexual desire, also call up that aspect of the monstrous-feminine, the vagina dentata. The ‘bone’ with its phallic associations alludes to the dildo, no doubt. In the logic of the dog and bone metaphor, though, the dog will chew the bone with its sharp teeth; and at a time when Nancy is menstruating. Readers, at this point in the novel, already know that Diana and Nancy use the dildo for vaginal, not oral, penetration. Even if the “bone” is a dildo and not an actual penis, the vagina dentata is suggested. Here Sarah Waters seems to re-establish the idea of the female body as monstrous and devouring at the very moment she is trying to dispel it.
The Aging Woman

Unfortunately, Sarah Waters reinforces the stereotype of the powerful older woman as evil in her novel. Diana, the older woman and the most powerful character in *Tipping the Velvet*, is definitely portrayed as the villain of the piece, even though her villainy is mitigated to some extent, by, for instance, her temporary role as a kind of fairy godmother, as I have already mentioned.

Even more malice against older women is depicted in Nancy’s attitude to Diana’s friend, Dickie. This older lesbian is set up for ridicule in the novel. Nancy describes her so: “She did not know it – she would have been horrified to know it! – but she looked like nothing so much as a weary old mary-anne – one of the kind you see sometimes holding court … on Piccadilly: they have rented so long they’re known as *queens*” (285-286). Nancy also resorts to ageism when she verbally abuses Dickie during her final quarrel with her Diana. Nancy says, “Look at you, you old cow, dressed up in a satin shirt like a boy of seventeen. Dorian Gray? You look more like the bleedin’ portrait, after Dorian has made a few trips down the docks!” (315). The recounting of Nancy’s verbal abuse is uncalled for as Dickie, up to this point in the story, has not ever ill-treated her. The depiction of Dickie is similar to the depiction of Carrie in Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’.

In contrast to Diana and Dickie, the good older woman of the novel, Mrs Milne who is Nancy’s landlady, is portrayed as being kind but unintelligent, sexless and powerless. Even her name suggests all things benign as it is reminiscent of A.A. Milne, writer of the sentimental children’s book *Winnie the Pooh*. Silvia Sara Canetto points out that: “The nice grandmother stereotype may enhance older women’s likability, but may also lead to an expectation of care-giving, and possible disapproval of older women who do not fit the fuzzy grandmother type” (2001:184). Mrs Milne is not unlike the benevolent but ineffectual Mother Superior in Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter Two, I have attempted to analyse the techniques that Sarah Waters uses to parody, challenge and re-work certain myths about woman, as embodied in the mermaid figure. Sarah Waters deals very effectively with certain aspects of the stereotype of the woman as submissive, passive and dependent. She overturns the myth of the passive female nude, for example. The stereotype of the woman as *femme castratrice* is also subverted effectively.
Sarah Waters in less effective in her attempt to overcome the idea of the female body as aligned with the abject, I believe. Using the monstrous-masculine to counteract the monstrous-feminine is not necessarily useful, as the one idea does not automatically cancel out the other. Moreover, employing sexism against men seems to defeat the purposes of feminism, which one would presume is supposed to be an anti-sexist movement. What the use of the monstrous-masculine accomplishes, though, is the breakdown of the dichotomy of good male body/ bad female body.

In this chapter, I have also examined which patriarchal myths about women Sarah Waters upholds in her writing. In some parts of the novel, Nancy remains fairly helpless compared with the heroines of some fairy tale revisions. She is thwarted in her attempt to rescue Zena, for instance. In addition, Sarah Waters appears to have become entranced with the fairy tale ideas that good housewives are rewarded and that happy endings are easily orchestrated.

As in ‘Mermaids’, patriarchal society’s stereotypes of older women are upheld, with little or no attempt to dispel them. Sarah Waters’s depiction of Dickie, for instance, is gratuitously malicious; in this regard, she perpetuates similar stereotypes to those seen in Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’. The sexuality of aging women is made to seem ridiculous and, while good older women like Mrs Milne are weak, powerful older women like Diana are made to seem cold-hearted and cruel.
Chapter Three: The Imagenius Mermaids

Introduction

In contemporary literary theory there are two distinct meanings to the word ‘myth’: there is the older meaning of the term, in which a myth is a story from folklore that is more serious in tone than a fairy tale (such as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice); and then there is the kind of myth explained by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972:131). In his definition, any normative cultural product may be considered a myth. A myth, in his terms, is a seductive relationship between signifier and signified that comes to be accepted as fact by readers or audiences. Of course, in contemporary visual culture, including advertising, traditional myths or fairy tales are often blended with the kind of myths that Barthes describes. This results in highly persuasive images such as the example in Figure 18, where the mermaid is shown sitting on a rock with a wistful expression on her face, thus resembling the sculpture of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen (which, in turn, is based on Hans Christian Andersen’s literary fairy tale). The image promotes the idea that mermaids and, by association, women in general are, by ‘nature’, passive and helpless: the mermaid, with her useless fish tail, mopes on a rock, longing for jeans that will fit her (or perhaps a man who will ‘fit’ her) rather than doing something to change her situation. Of course, Andersen’s submissive and ill-fated Little Mermaid is called to mind as well. So here the idea of female helplessness, bound up as it is with the mermaid image, is a myth in the sense used by Barthes.

The owners of a gift and décor shop called Imagenius – which is in Long Street, Cape Town, and aimed at the tourist market – have used a series of mermaid pictures by South African artist Karin Miller to represent their company on the internet. They sell the same pictures as postcards and as framed prints. The pictures are also used as illustrations on some of their own branded goods, like soap, for instance. Karin Miller showcases these mermaid images on her own commercial website, KM Visuals, as well. I will discuss the Imagenius

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12 It should be noted that this is a polysemic image and it may be interpreted in other ways as well. The jeans for instance could have belonged to a male human lover who deserted the mermaid because she does not ‘fit’ him sexually, as she has no legs and vagina. Read this way, the poster is alluding to the so-called mermaid problem. The mermaid problem consists of the difficulty in having penetrative intercourse with a fish woman who apparently has no vagina. This is an old joke in popular culture. One answer to the problem is that the mermaid is more like a dolphin than a fish and female dolphins do have a suitable orifice. The mermaid problem is discussed quite thoroughly on Wikipedia, in the entry ‘Mermaid Problem’.
mermaid images because they evoke and debunk some stereotypes associated with both mermaids in particular and women in general.

![Image of mermaid](image)


Instead of simply operating as what Barthes would call myths the Imagenius mermaid images produced by Karin Miller are highly complex feminist visual parodies and they are subversive in a number of ways. Feminist visual parodies, according to Peg Brand (2006), mimic well known works of art by men but they use humour to criticize the original works and the patriarchal interests served by them. Some feminist visual parodies are relatively straightforward such as the famous Guerrilla Girls image, which is based mainly on a nude painted by Ingres, entitled ‘Odalisque’ (Figure 19). Here, the eponymous odalisque’s head is simply replaced with the head of a gorilla, a punning reference to the Guerrilla Girls themselves (Brand 2006: 11-13). The Imagenius mermaid images are far more complex and subtle than the Guerrilla Girls’ version of ‘Odalisque’ though. Rather than referring to a specific image by a male artist, the Imagenius works are a parody of: Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’; Russian religious icons; what Nerissa S. Balce (2006) calls “colonial postcards”, including the Hottentot Venus; Stothard’s ‘The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to
the West Indies’; and various typical depictions of mermaids in popular culture and fine art.\(^\text{13}\)

The Imagenius Mermaids will be analysed and critiqued in this chapter because they are used to subvert the stereotypes associated with Andersen’s characters, the Little Mermaid, who epitomizes the submissive and passive female, and the Sea Witch, who epitomizes the monstrous-feminine.

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\(^{13}\) The Imagenius mermaids also belong to a growing feminist tradition of subverting images of the Virgin Mary. In this, the images are similar to works like feminist artist Yolanda Lopez’s ‘Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe’ produced in 1978. Lopez’s image may be viewed in Lucy Lippard’s article of 2007 (see bibliography).
bare brown bosoms of indigenous women were markers of savagery, colonial desire, and a justification for Western imperial rule” (2006:89). The nudity of colonized women was associated with a lack of civilization.

One fairly early example of the nude as colonized woman was “The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies” by Thomas Strothard, an image which has drawn much criticism because it romanticizes the slave trade. This image glosses over the fact that black women from Africa who travelled from to the West Indies around this time went there in bondage (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Thomas Strothard, (circa 1801) ‘The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies’. Available: http://www.jungnewyork.com/venus.shtml

Michael Vannoy Adams describes Strothard’s work thus:

If any image is obscene, this is it. It is iconography as pornography …
The image is not a slave narrative but a master narrative … The image stylizes an ugly, coercive experience, the slave trade, and revises it
into a beautiful, consensual – and sensual – experience. Slavery is lovely … Slaves, however, were not goddesses enthroned on shells. They were women and men, girls and boys, confined on ships … They wore chains … there were no cherubs, dolphins, Triton, Cupid, and Neptune, and there was no Venus.

(2007: 6)

Put differently, Thomas Strothard’s image operates as what Roland Barthes would call a myth. The idea of Western superiority and the justification of slavery are presented to viewers in a deceiving, prettified way.


Later the tradition of depicting so-called sexualized savages developed into what Balce describes as the “‘colonial postcards’ of the nineteenth century that featured naked women from Africa, Asia and the Pacific” (2006:91). Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was depicted on colonial postcards. The Hottentot Venus in Figure 21 is an example of this trend. She is labelled beautiful here, but only ironically; black Venuses were actually thought grotesque and ugly, as explained by Janell Hobson, and held up for ridicule, even though the black male body “provided room for admiration” (2003:94). Nevertheless, she has some of the features of nude paintings, attesting to her status as an object of desire, albeit a
sly kind of desire: her breasts are framed by her arm and necklace; her eyes are turned away from the spectator, in fact she looks down and to her right like Botticelli’s Venus; and she passively accepts the Cupid – Cupid also being associated with Venus of course – riding on her rump (which suggests a limp indifference to sexual advances). Her so-called savagery presumably provides an excuse for both the graphic depiction of her nudity and her oppression by colonizers. The colonial postcard is the misogynistic myth of the nude in what is probably its most pernicious form. Yet these postcards are still sought after today, as Balce notes, “even in the twenty-first century” there are “Web sites such as eBay and [www.postcardman.net](http://www.postcardman.net) offering ‘vintage postcards’ of ‘nude woman’ from Africa and Asia” (2006: 92). The continuing popularity of colonial postcards could indicate a misogynistic attitude, or perhaps even an ongoing colonial impulse, in some collectors. An example of such a postcard is shown in Figure 22; here the black woman’s breasts are emphasised in a way that is typical of the genre.

![Image](http://www.postcardman.net/nude_africa_othercountries.html)

**Figure 22:** Artist unknown (circa 1900) ‘German East Africa (Tanganyika/Tanzania): Nude Woman’. Available: [http://www.postcardman.net/nude_africa_othercountries.html](http://www.postcardman.net/nude_africa_othercountries.html)

In her three Imagenius images, Karen Miller uses various techniques to subvert the nude tradition and the tradition of sexualized savages as well (see Figures 23, 24, and 25). In a striking example of feminist visual parody, Miller mimics aspects of Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of
Venus’ in all three pictures, though her allusive similarities to his work differ slightly between them. The similarities between her images and ‘The Birth of Venus’ are these: a female figure is shown rising from the sea (in ‘African Queen Mermaid’ and ‘Mermaid Baby’); a roughly circular area around the head and upper body of the female figure is lighter in tone than other areas of the picture (all three images, but especially ‘African Queen Mermaid’); a land mass on the horizon is partially obscured by the interposition of the female’s body (all three images); there are airborne plants in the picture, which are similar in form to the flowers blown by Zephyrus in Botticelli’s work (especially in ‘African Queen Mermaid’ and ‘Mermaid Baby’); and, though not a scallop shell as in ‘The Birth of Venus’, there are shells in at least two of the pictures, (‘Mermaid Baby’ includes limpet shells, possibly keyhole limpets, and there is a nautilus shell in ‘African Mermaid with Heart’). There appear to be cowrie shells in the hair of African Queen Mermaid, but because they are so small it is difficult to identify the shapes with any certainty. In spite of an impressive list of visual allusions, it must be said that Miller does not rely too heavily on Botticelli’s work – she only uses sufficient elements from his work to make the parody clear.

Karen Miller uses symbols associated with Venus and classical mythology deliberately; it is not a simple coincidence. On her website, she explains the meanings of some of the symbols that she uses: “The sea-star, or ‘stella maris’, which, although it is a star in its form, symbolizes divine love or the inextinguishable power of love, and is associated with Venus and the Virgin Mary. The Scallop Shell around her waist refers to Venus as well, who was borne [sic] of the sea” (2009). Karin Miller is also aware of how Venus is typically posed in art: she says, for example, of her ‘Sea Maiden’ that, “She holds her hair, in a Venus-like way” (2009).

Besides parodying Sandro Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’, Karin Miller is also parodying Strothard’s ‘The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies’, of course, which was itself a pastiche of Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’. Besides the obvious parallel that her mermaids are black like the Sable Venus, there are other elements, spread across all three Imagenius images, which evoke Strothard’s image as well as Botticelli’s. These include the depiction of pearls and fishes. Miller also alludes to colonial postcard depictions of Saartjie Baartman. The face of the mermaid in Figure 23 is similar to Saartjie’s in some colonial postcard-type portraits of her.

Figure 24: Karen Miller (2007) ‘Mermaid Baby’.
Available: http://www.karinmiller.co.za/Clients/works.html

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14 Here she refers to another mermaid image of hers, similar to the Imagenius mermaids, called ‘Sea Maiden with Stars’.
Having evoked the nude tradition and the traditions of the sexualized savage and the colonial postcard, Miller also subverts them effectively. The most obvious contravention is that her mermaids are not naked: they are enclosed in their fish tails from the waist down. As viewers, we would at least expect her mermaids’ breasts to be on show, as the breasts of mermaids and the breasts of the black Venus nearly always are, but they too are elaborately concealed. Another contravention of the nude tradition is that the mermaids in ‘African Queen Mermaid’ and ‘Mermaid Baby’ both gaze out of the painting at the spectator, which suggests they have the power of looking back at whoever looks at them: as Griselda Pollock might say, they have the phallic power of piercing others with their eyes (2003: 184). Mirrors are conspicuous by their absence in the Imagenius images, though we would expect them in both the nude tradition and the mermaid tradition: the message here is that women are not necessarily complicit in appearing as objects to be looked at. Finally, not one of Miller’s mermaids is found lying down, in the usual pose of the nude. Rather than conforming to the myth of the passive nude, there are indications, even at first glance, that these mermaids are self-possessed and powerful. Unlike the Sable Venus, they are not being led anywhere to work as slaves. They seem to have stationed themselves off the coast of Cape Town instead.

Interestingly, neither Botticelli’s nor Strothard’s Venus wears a crown. But in Karin Miller’s images the mermaids wear crowns, and the crowns seem to indicate that they have power, like kings or queens.

Some feminists have claimed that it is prudish to avoid nudity. They generally belong to the camp of feminists who are “in favour of unsanctioned freedom of expression, regardless of content”, as Peg Brand puts it (2006: 14). South African visual artist Tracey Rose certainly does not shy away from nudity in her work. In Figure 26 she uses a nude photograph of herself, enacting the role of Saartjie Baartman, to interrogate race and identity. In this self-portrait, she reclaims herself as a subject who has the power to create and control images. Here Tracey Rose appears to imitate a feline predator, stalking its prey, with the pose that she assumes; this allusion is intensified by her appearing in a natural setting in the midst of long grass. Thus she indicates that, unlike Saartjie Baartman, she has a certain physical power. She parodies, and thereby subverts, the predatory power of the colonizers who ill-treated the Hottentot Venus.

As a South African woman of colour portraying herself, Tracey Rose may depict herself in any number of ways without attracting too much controversy. As a South African white woman who is depicting black women, Karin Miller, however, is obliged to be more cautious. Nudity in her pictures of African women would be less appropriate because she could be accused of continuing the tradition of using “the bare brown bosoms of indigenous
women” as “as a justification for Western imperial rule” (Balce 2006: 89). Given the 
problematic nature of the nude in art, and the ramifications of depicting race in South African 
society, I find it unsurprising that Miller, in making compositional choices, decided to cover up her mermaids’ breasts and buttocks. As a white woman in South Africa, with its history of 
racism, it is understandable that she would not want to be complicit in treating black women 
as nudes, with their breasts or buttocks as “markers of savagery”. It is worth noting the 
special treatment that Miller affords the mermaid who resembles Saartjie Baartman in Figure 
23. Unlike the other mermaids, the Hottentot Venus mermaid has a coral shrub placed in 
front of her. Miller explains that, in her personal iconography as a visual artist, the coral bush signifies “a kind of protective shield, like the thorny rosebush growing around Sleeping 
Beauty's castle for her protection, keeping out intruders” (2009). Karin Miller gives her 
Hottentot Venus extra covering and protection, then, unlike the colonizing European artists 
who stripped her for male viewing. Simultaneously, she seems to align Saartjie Baartman 
with good but passive females in her allusion to Sleeping Beauty though.

Quite unlike typical nudes, Miller hints that her mermaids have a powerful sexuality that 
possibly includes both bisexuality and sexual autonomy. The Imagenius images include 
symbols that are often associated with the clitoris, vagina and phallus. First, pearls are 
included in all three pictures. Pearls may be associated with the goddess Venus but, as 
Kathryn Simpson points out, “[P]earls themselves are palimpsestic in structure” and they 
“also symbolize the clitoris in the work of lesbian writers such as H.D and Virginia Woolf” 
suggestively express what other public discourses repress or pathologise – namely, the sexual pleasure afforded by the clitoris and its significance for female sexual autonomy” (2004:38). 
The mermaids in ‘African Mermaid with Heart’ and ‘African Mermaid Queen’ are both 
crowned with unusually large golden pearls. So here one may reminded of the use of the 
pearl motif, and its association with lesbianism, in Sarah Waters’s Tipping the Velvet.

The stella maris or sea star that Miller explains as representing divine love appears to be 
used in a sexually allusive way in all three images as well, representing both phallus and 
vagina. Sea stars (or starfish) are placed strategically at the front of the mermaid’s vulva in 
two of the pictures, and in the third image there are sea stars along the hips of the mermaid. 
Peculiarly, all the sea stars that decorate the abdomens of these mermaids are upside down, 
even though all the other sea stars in these images, even those floating in the air around the 
mermaids, appear dorsal side up. Starfish cannot adhere to surfaces when they lie dorsal side
down, so their clinging to the mermaids’ abdomens is a kind of biological fantasy. But when starfish are upside down the central mouth orifice is exposed. So here Karin Miller seems to be using the inclusion of the starfish ‘mouth’ as a form of vaginal imagery, reminiscent of the vaginal imagery, or central core imagery, used by many feminist artists in the 1970s. However, the orifice that approximates the vagina has dwindled here so as to be nearly invisible and the phallic projections of the starfish rays are far more obvious. Although sea stars are generally either male or female, and not hermaphroditic, bisexuality or intersexuality is suggested in the context of the Imagenius pictures because the rays are phallic in form and they surround a vagina-like opening.

Evidently, Miller suggests that her mermaids have an anatomically complex and robust sexuality which includes a variety of ways of experiencing pleasure. This is a complete subversion of the sexually repressed nude. Of course, this imagery also disrupts the rigid gender dualism of male/female by introducing a queer element to the mermaid pictures. In this regard, the Imagenius mermaids have something in common with Nancy, the queer ‘mermaid’ in *Tipping the Velvet*.

Finally, the good Little Mermaid of Andersen’s story appears in parody, especially in Figure 25, where the mermaid resembles the well-known statue in Copenhagen. Besides being shown a black mermaid, we are presented with one who appears to be both sensual and sexually confident, whereas the Little Mermaid personified selfless chastity itself. Thus Andersen’s stereotype of the good woman is overturned.

**Patriarchal Myths of the Bad Woman and the Monstrous-Feminine**

In the sense used by Barthes, the so-called monstrous-feminine could be seen as a myth, – or perhaps two myths. One is that women, as signifiers, are equated with various threats to the well-being of men; the other is that the sexual organs and reproductive functions of women are essentially disgusting. Mermaids and sirens – and through them women in general – are associated with evil and death; examples of this association range from the Greek myths of sirens to various other myths and fairy tales, such as the French tale of ‘The Mermaids of La Rochelle’. The fatal allure of water spirits for men has often been featured in fine art and such representations are still common in popular culture.

Barbara Creed identifies instances of the monstrous-feminine that commonly appear in horror films, including the archaic mother, the possessed monster, the monstrous womb, the
vampire, the witch, and the *femme castratrice* (2007: 151). In various portrayals over time, mermaid-like beings in folk tales have probably exhibited elements from every type. But, the categories from Creed’s taxonomy that appear most useful in analyzing the Imagenius Mermaids are the *femme castratrice* and the witch. It should be noted that categories of the monstrous-feminine are not entirely discrete. Mermaids, or other female monsters, could easily, for example, operate as witch and *femme castratrice* at the same time. So, while Miller subverts the categories of *femme castratrice*, she addresses the idea of mermaid as Sea Witch as well and the threat of the so-called monstrous feminine is diminished or dealt with playfully. Miller also overturns the idea of woman as an evil temptress or *femme fatale*.

**The Femme Fatale**

At different times both mermaids and black women have been depicted as evil temptresses in Western society. Karin Miller debunks the idea that her black mermaids could be evil temptresses by deifying them. She does this by including features from Orthodox Christian art in the Imagenius images, in particular the religious icons of Russia. The sun appears to be behind her mermaids’ heads, so that each has a kind of halo. In ‘Mermaid Baby’ and ‘African Queen Mermaid’ there is also a circle of sea stars and stylized seaweed around the mermaids, again creating the impression of a halo – a double aureole implying that they are doubly sanctified. While the mermaid in ‘Mermaid Baby’, with her plump infant, resembles a Madonna (and thereby evokes innumerable depictions of the Virgin Mary with Christ in the history of European art), the mermaid in ‘African Queen Mermaid’ has her hands outstretched: a common gesture in icons showing Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints.

Unlike the mermaids and sirens, in many images, Miller’s mermaids are not shown to be death-dealing seductresses. They rather seem to exist in a world where men have no particular significance. Instead of being associated with death, they are associated with fecundity and life, as may be seen in the organic living haloes around them which are composed of sea stars, leaves and plants.

In connection with the deification of the mermaids the commercial context of the Imagenius picture is utilized. The mermaid images usually appear with the company name ‘Imagenius’ emblazoned above them. “Imagenius” may be read as a pun on ‘I am a genius’. The company makes full use of the more common meaning of genius, that of a highly intelligent person, but the other meaning of genius – that of a god (or goddess) of a particular place – is also brought to mind. As far as place is concerned, Miller’s mermaids appear to be
the goddesses of the Cape of Good Hope. In various ways, then, the mermaid – here a triple outsider as a mermaid, black and woman – has not only been rescued from being a temptress but she has also been afforded goddess status. With the nude tradition, the spectator is in a position of power, but with the Imagenius mermaids, ironically, the spectator is placed before Miller’s iconoclastic icons in a position of worship.

**The Femme Castratrice**

Although her work does not deal with mermaids directly, Barbara Creed describes the sirens of Greek mythology as female castrators (2007:126). Moreover, mermaids are connected with castration in certain images from the traditional cannon of fine art. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Edward Burne-Jones’s work, ‘A Sea Nymph’ (Figure 27).


This peculiar image shows the sea nymph holding one phallic-shaped fish aloft in her left hand while with her right hand she grasps another that appears to be bloody and decapitated. On the right side of this picture a third fish with an unnaturally gaping mouth falls back into the ocean (the mouth is red and wound-like), while beneath it a fish tail protrudes from the water, also resembling a severed penis as the rest of it is hidden beneath the waves. The
mermaid figure in ‘The Sea Nymph’ has long red hair that flows across the picture like arterial blood flowing into water.

In contrast, Miller’s mermaids are only shown to be associated with castration in the form of a visual joke. In ‘Mermaid Baby’ the mermaid Madonna appears to be holding a dildo or severed penis in her left hand. When the picture is enlarged (which is so easily done with the zoom function in computer graphics) the quasi-penis is revealed to be nothing more than a shadow on the shell that covers the mermaid’s right breast. Miller is playing a visual trick on her viewers. This trickery may remind her spectators that things are not always what they appear to be and that one should not jump to conclusions. Her visual illusion also implies that woman as *femme castratrice* is a mere illusion or myth put forward by society. Nevertheless, this is a disturbing visual pun, especially as the pseudo-penis is pressed up against the infant that the mermaid also holds – disturbing imagery in a country like South Africa where child abuse is rife. So, in what seems to be a case of undecidability, to use Derrida’s term, the mermaid’s monstrousness in Figure 24 is simultaneously debunked and re-established. This may remind sophisticated viewers that ascribing meaning is an unstable process in itself.

**The Witch**

The Sea Witch in Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is often depicted as a kind of monstrous mermaid; in this character, witches and mermaids are conflated. South Africa has its own version of the Sea Witch in the urban legend of the Balloon Woman. This monstrous and mythical creature is ‘endemic’ to Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. Using information gleaned from residents of the Northern Areas, Port Elizabeth, the journalist Reint Grobler describes the Balloon Woman as a “pitch-black mermaid” who lures children away and murders them for *muti* (in this context, African witchdoctor’s medicine made from human parts and supposedly possessing magical properties). Later in the article, he suggests that there are two distinct versions of the Balloon Woman: whereas some describe her as an obese, black woman who haunts Van der Kempskloof (a nature reserve close to Bethelsdorp in the Northern areas), others say she is a mermaid who inhabits the ruins of a house in the local saltpan. In the article, she is likened to the Pied Piper of Hamelin and, it is said, she can turn herself into either a horse or a bird (which links her with mythical beings like kelpies, or water-horses, and sirens, who were originally birdlike). In one reported anecdote she travels in a flying saucer (2008: page unknown). The Balloon Woman seems to be a conflation of
aliens, mermaids, bogeys like Jenny Greenteeth, African witchdoctors, and Hans Christian Andersen’s Sea Witch (especially in her fat Disney form). Stories about water-dwelling monsters such as Jenny Greenteeth (in England) serve as means of scaring children away from dangerous places such as ponds and, as the newspaper article confirms, stories of the Balloon Woman also have such a function in the Northern Areas community. Children may be warned off the dangerous saltpan area through stories of the Balloon Woman. Myths may be used in many different ways.

But, no doubt, the urban legend of the Balloon Women is also most convenient for the men who abuse women and children in the Eastern Cape. A mysterious female may be blamed for some of their crimes, deflecting suspicion from the guilty. The existence of an evil witch in the community may justify a certain amount of woman abuse too. The Balloon Woman tale reinforces the damaging stereotype that women are somehow inherently bad and deserve whatever punishment is meted out to them.

The illustration that accompanies the article, Pasop: die Balloon-vrou, produced by Morné Schaap, is composed of a computer generated drawing of the Balloon Woman superimposed on a photograph of children playing on a beach. The Balloon Woman looms over them menacingly, her hands outstretched as if she is about to grab them. There are a number of elements in the picture that portray the Northern Areas mermaid in even more antifeminist terms than appear in the text of the article. Unlike the descriptions of her in the article, the graphic Balloon Woman is enormous; not just fat, she is a giantess, easily 50 times the size of a normal human being. Other new features are her long claws and her slit-like eyes – standard features in depictions of monsters. She has large, sagging breasts, but no areolae or nipples; this indicates both a lack of sexual attractiveness and a physical inability to nurture children. Perhaps most tellingly, and quite unlike the story in the article, the children she menaces all seem to be boys. The message is clear: females pose a terrible danger to males. Given society’s conflation of women and evil and the ideological content of the image, the Balloon Woman illustration operates as a myth, as Barthes identifies myths, in its own right.

Karin Miller’s mermaids could be read as countering the urban legend of the Balloon Woman, especially in her ‘Mermaid with Heart’. Karin Miller seems to allude to witches in this image, as witches supposedly cut out hearts (as in the story of Snow White, for example) or perform other types of mutilation (as does the Balloon Women). Miller’s joke is that the heart held by the mermaid in her picture is a heart cut out in another sense altogether: it is a traditional heart shape only (which bears no relation to a physiological heart) and it appears
to be cut from paper. The artificiality of the heart is contrasted with the more photographic or realistic figure of the mermaid in this picture – which may remind viewers that this heart has only been cut and pasted in the bloodless, harmless collage of computer graphics, which involves no sharp instruments at all. This particular instance of collage shows us the absurdity of the idea of women as evil witches, suggesting that the only hearts that so-called witches have ever cut out are those that exist in the realm of the imagination. The technique used here is reminiscent of the tinfoil snakes adorning Rachel Flax in the film ‘Mermaids’, which also highlighted the artificial putting on of female monstrosity as a kind of accessory devised by patriarchal society. As Lucy Lippard says, “[C]ollage or montage has always been a particularly effective medium for political art. Humorous and hard-hitting, it can bring separate realities together in endlessly different ways” (2007:78).

Of course, the mermaid in ‘Mermaid with Heart’ resembles the statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen. So in this image the Little Mermaid and the Sea Witch appear to have become person, breaking down the binary opposition of good woman/ bad woman which is set up in Andersen’s story.

The Phallic Woman and Mammy Water

![Figure 28: Katenda (circa 1975) ‘Mami Wata’: Available:](http://pages.sbcglobal.net/joshsassoon/africa/painting.html)

Miller’s subtle use of snake imagery in her Imagenius pictures could undermine some of her apparent good intentions. The Imagenius mermaids’ tails have both fish-like and reptilian qualities. Like fish, their tails have caudal fins, but they have special snake scales called
gastrosteges on what, if they were animals, would be the ventral side (Basic Fish Anatomy 2009; Snakes 2006; Snake Scales 2009). Scales like these are not found on fishes. Snake imagery, by association, does somewhat link Miller’s mermaids with the idea of the phallic woman, who is often portrayed as monstrous.

Moreover, by associating her mermaids with snakes, she links them, intentionally or unintentionally, with the goddess Mami Wata, also known Mammy Water. Mammy Water is a mermaid-like goddess who is often accompanied by snakes (See Figure 28). It may, at first, seem politically correct to associate the Imagenius mermaids with Mammy Water, whom many consider an African goddess, but this allusion is problematic. Ifi Amadiume (2002: 49-52) and Barbara Frank (1995: 342) both point out that Mammy Water is actually a neocolonial construct. Mammy Water cults have flourished in West Africa fairly recently and, although her origins are disputed, this goddess has probably been imported into Africa from the Caribbean via trade routes. Many West Africans associate her cults with a selfish quest for individual wealth and the adoption of a Western lifestyle – a contravention of traditional values, in other words (Frank 1995: 340-342). She is “contextualized in capitalist materialism” (Amadiume 2002:49). This aspect of Mammy Water is apparent in Figure 28. She is shown to be wearing a watch and large earrings, which demonstrates her association with acquiring wealth and adopting Western ways.

If one interprets the Imagenius mermaids as depictions of Mammy Water – and as they appear to be African mermaids one could so easily do so – then their link with the capitalist takeover of Africa is disturbing. The link with Mammy Water, if ‘read’ sensitively, could remind viewers that Karin Miller’s mermaid images, in the capitalist scheme of things, are only products being sold in an upmarket gift shop after all. Moreover, the Imagenius mermaids are thin, young and pretty. Women who are fatter, older or less attractive do not make good commodities and Karin Miller, not to her credit, generally ignores such women in her art in favour of those who will ‘sell’. While Karin Miller does not reproduce the equivalent of Andersen’s grotesque Sea Witch, in her world older women, as is often the case in popular culture, are simply non-existent. Just as Mammy Water’s image has effaced “indigenous African matriarchs” (Amadiume 2002:63), so the Imagenius images serve to make older African women invisible.
Conclusion
Karen Miller, in her Imagenius mermaid series, subverts several mermaid myths, both myths in the sense meant by Roland Barthes and traditional myths, such as the myth of the *femme castratrice*. She also breaks down the binary of good woman/ bad woman that is so entrenched in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’. Her mermaids are not passive nudes, but they are not sanitized of all sexuality either; nor are they female monsters.

Furthermore, her work is feminist in terms of several theories of feminist aesthetics. I would say that Karen Miller’s Imagenius images meet the requirements of good art according to certain principles of feminist aesthetics for many reasons. In accordance with Marilyn French’s feminist aesthetics, Karin Miller’s work certainly suggests that things “are connected as well as divided” (1993:73). Miller’s combination of human, animal and spiritual imagery shows this. Also, in keeping with French’s ideas, there is considerable humour in Miller’s pictures. In harmony with Renée Lorraine’s views, Miller’s images evoke both the spiritual and the erotic: we have Madonna icons with suggested sexual features. Difficult as it is, Miller manages to imply the erotic without resorting to pornography – and here again, Lorraine would probably approve (1993:35). Miller also meets the criteria of Estella Lauter’s principles of feminist aesthetics insofar as her work refers to social and historical contexts (1993:32-33); as may be seen in her references to Saartjie Baartman, for instance, not to mention her appropriation of several traditions from the history of Western art.

It is the socioeconomic context of Karin Miller’s art that undermines it as feminist work, however. Although there are no nudes in her images, she is still a white artist tailoring black female bodies for consumption. Given their presence in an upmarket gift shop in Cape Town, it is unlikely that the wealthy tourists who purchase Imagenius products will think of them as instances of activism in gender politics. As Christine M. Cooper cautions, “[C]onsuming a production” is not necessarily enough to make one a feminist (2007:727).
Chapter Four: *The Undrowned Child*

Introduction

*The Undrowned Child* by Michelle Lovric was first published in 2009 by Orion. This book, written for young adults, is obviously meant to appeal to a wider age range. The adults who read this novel are likely to notice its feminist agenda. Michelle Lovric’s previous novels – *The Floating Book*, *Carnivale*, and *The Remedy* – do not fall into the realm of young adult reading, nor are they usually considered part of the literary canon, although *The Remedy*, possibly considered too ‘popular’ by some, was nominated for the Orange Prize for fiction in 2005 (Fantastic Fiction 2008).

With a brief description of a gondola accident that takes place in 1888, the story is set almost entirely in 1899, which makes it more or less coeval with the setting of *Tipping the Velvet*. Like Sarah Waters, Michelle Lovric mixes historical and fictional characters. The villain of the story is based on an historical figure – there was, in fact, a Bajamonte Tiepolo who attempted a coup d'état in Venice in 1310 (407). The novel is woven through with lessons on the history, geography and natural history of the city and it soon becomes clear that the setting of the novel is not arbitrary. Certain ideas that the city represents in Western culture are taken up in the themes of the novel. Judith Seaboyer associates Venice with Kristeva’s abjection and with the body of the woman. She says:

[Venice] recalls the ancient myth of the labyrinth, a fluid space of transformation and danger that has traditionally stood for the psychic inward journey … Distinguished by death and decay, it is a figure for Kristevan abjection: all border … Venice is a figure for two … inextricably linked psychoanalytic tropes: death and the body of the woman … Venice’s seductive, decorative beauty, its historical reputation for duplicity, and its topography, at once contained and enclosed by water and penetrated by it, has rendered it an ideal vehicle for the historical and cultural burden of ambivalence that inheres in the female body … a space that is at once productive and destructive … (Seaboyer 1997: 484)
Seaboyer perpetuates stereotypes about women in her interpretation of the symbolism of Venice. In contrast, one of the main points that Lovric makes in her novel is that “death and the body of the woman” are not necessarily “inextricably linked”.

The protagonist, Teodora, and her adoptive parents, who are scientists, live in Naples. They are invited to an “an emergency meeting of the ‘world’s greatest scientists’” which is to take place in Venice (11). When they arrive, Teodora visits a bookshop that specializes in Venetian history and esoteric literature. Here a book called _The Key to the Secret City_ falls on her head and gives her the ability to perceive supernatural phenomena. However, she also becomes so disorientated and feverish that she must be admitted to hospital. After a mysterious attack in the hospital ward, involving a moving statue and a mermaid, Teo loses consciousness and wakes up in a graveyard, with _The Key to the Secret City_ lying “heavily on top of her chest” (43). She soon realizes that she has been unconscious for several days as her photograph is on several ‘missing girl’ posters. She also discovers that she has become invisible to adults, although she can still be seen by other children and supernatural beings. In her new state, Teodora is befriended by a Venetian boy, Lorenzo, and a group of politically active mermaids, who are led by their queen, Lussa. Lussa soon recruits Teodora and Lorenzo to help protect Venice from a ghostly sorcerer, known as Bajamonte Tiepolo. After several adventures and a final epic military engagement between the forces of good and the forces of evil, Bajamonte is defeated. Ultimately, Teodora is restored to her former self and reunited with her parents.

I will explore the following patriarchal myths as they are dealt with by Michelle Lovric: the good woman is submissive, passive and dependent on the male hero; the female nude; and the good woman is silent. With regard to patriarchal myths of the woman as monster, I will explore the following: _femme castratrice_, witch, murderous mother, and older evil woman. I wish to argue that while some misogynistic myths about women are dispelled in the novel, others are upheld.

**Patriarchal Myths of the Good Woman**

Michelle Lovric uses various devices to overcome patriarchal myths of the good woman. Chief among these are her use of plot and characterization. She also uses allusive names for her characters, especially Teodora and Lussa. As Sarah Waters does in _Tipping the Velvet_,
she seems to make use of ekphrastic allusion as well, employing her familiarity with art history to overturn patriarchal ideas.

The Good Woman’s Lack of Agency and Her Dependence on the Male Hero
The story has two main female heroes, Lussa and Teodora, as well as female minor characters who behave heroically, like the mermaid Chissa, for instance. Michelle Lovric also refers to the legendary old woman who saved Venice with her mortar and pestle. Nevertheless, it is mainly through the characters Lussa and Teodora that she debunks the idea that good women should be passive, submissive and dependent. At the beginning of the novel Teodora is a typical good little girl – well-behaved, studious, obedient to her parents, and a model daughter. She resembles the innocent persecuted heroine of certain tales (Jones 1993: 17).

As the story progresses, Teodora soon discovers that being good is not sufficient if one is to cope with the challenges and dangers of life. After waking up in the graveyard she becomes the personification of helplessness, able to assist neither herself nor those dearest to her. For instance, she has to look on powerlessly, a mere invisible presence, while her distraught parents grieve over her inexplicable disappearance. Like the Little Mermaid, her lack of agency is manifested in her being voiceless; at least with her parents and other adults, Teodora is inaudible as well as invisible.

When she seeks out Miracoli, owner of the mysterious bookshop where she found The Key to the Secret City, hoping that he will rescue her, she discovers that he has gone missing and has probably been murdered. So she is forced to rely on her own agency rather than depending on male assistance. As many females probably would be in real life, she is disappointed and furious to find that male rescue is not forthcoming. In an act of displaced aggression, she viciously jumps on The Key to the Secret City, which is a kind of magical self-help book that prods its readers to take action against evil (76-77). The hard lesson that she has to learn in this is similar to the lesson Charlotte must learn in ‘Mermaids’: that no father figure is going to rescue her from any and every kind of harm.

In spite of resenting the maturational crisis in which she finds herself (having to progress from less to more agency, and from dependence on her parents to greater independence), Teodora soon learns ways of coping. Instead of falling into the clutches of the villains, or wasting too much time on those who cannot see or hear her, she finds allies in both Lorenzo and Lussa, without becoming too dependent on either. She also uses her inner resources of
courage, intelligence, learning and intuition to cope with her bizarre circumstances. Although there is magic in *The Undrowned Child*, there are no facile magical solutions and Teodora has to work hard both to improve her own situation and to help others.

Like Sarah Waters, Michelle Lovric uses her characters’ names for the sake of allusion; sometimes these allusions are purely ironic, and sometimes they are used to establish personality. Teodora, we are told explicitly, is named after Saint Teodoro, original protector of Venice (136). Like Saint George, Saint Teodoro was originally a slayer of dragons, and he has been depicted as such in some Christian icons (Citizendia 2009). This establishes Teodora’s similarity to male heroes with regard to courageous acts. Although she is timid and afraid at times, Teodora attacks and repels the monstrous, many-tentacled Sea Creature, for example, in an act of heroism worthy of her namesake. Along with Lorenzo, she also bravely tames winged lions, feeding them raw meat to subdue them (264).

Teodora’s courage is also stressed through an instance of attributive ekphrasis. Her being attacked by seagulls seems to allude to Italian artist Giovanni Segantini’s painting, ‘A Mermaid being mobbed by Seagulls’. While the mermaid in the painting is helpless, Teodora is not overcome, although she briefly despairs and considers allowing the birds to peck her to death. The narrator explains: “But Teo’s survival instinct was stronger …She kept beating at the gulls, protecting her face, and shouting at them …” (286). Again in this situation, while Lorenzo tries to protect her from the gulls initially, they are separated during the attack and it is Teodora’s own efforts that save her. In depicting a young girl behaving heroically, Michelle Lovric destabilizes the stereotype that females are weak, passive and dependent on men.

The mermaids in the novel are also active, heroic figures. The first time that Lorenzo and Teodora encounter the mermaids in their cavern, Teodora observes that they “showed no sign at all of sitting around gazing at themselves in mirrors like the mermaids in children’s stories … they were all busy with a complicated, highly technical task” (107). This overturns the idea of mermaid passivity and their agency is emphasized because their task (running a printing press) is “a complicated, highly technical” one. Lussa may appear somewhat passive at first, but it becomes clear that she leads the community of mermaids, and orchestrates their protection of Venice. The mermaid protagonists are also far from helpless. They are politically active, running the Seldom Seen Press, and denouncing the corrupt Mayor of Venice with their self-printed handbills. Readers are told, “The handbill would expose cheats …or it would warn of hidden dangers in terms that left nothing to the imagination” (48). So,
far from being mute and lacking agency, these mermaids denounce wrongdoing and announce retribution like biblical prophets, and they participate in social activism and subversive politics. While living as an independent community of fish women, they are resourceful and know where and when to find appropriate help from other groups, including men, when necessary. When Bajamonte Tiepolo has them outnumbered with his evil forces, for instance, they seek help from various sympathetic parties across the globe. Thus Michelle Lovric’s depiction of female independence is a plausible one: her female protagonists know when to be self-reliant and when it is appropriate to seek help.

The Passive Nude
Michelle Lovric overturns messages from visual art that cast mermaids, and also women, as passive nudes. Lussa has a dual identity. As well as being the queen of the mermaids, who lives in an underwater cavern, she lives in magical form as an animated illustration on the cover of The Key to the Secret City. So she doubles as a kind of visual representation of mermaids, but one that is embedded in the text of the novel, in an instance of ekphrasis that is somewhat reminiscent of Nancy’s poses plastiques in Tipping the Velvet. In fact, Lussa’s first appearance in the novel is in picture form, before we are presented with her as a character proper. The picture in which she appears is described thus: “[A] vivid little coloured picture inset on the front cover. It showed the face of a lovely girl or very young woman, just her head and the tips of her pale, bare shoulders” (14). So here the mermaid nude has been transformed into a mermaid portrait, as is indicated by only her head and shoulders being shown, and her breasts not being visible. While a person depicted as a nude is an object, a person depicted in a portrait is a subject. To appear in a portrait is to claim social standing and power (Day, Wallis, Marcus, Chave 1991: 25-26). This much is also made clear in The Undrowned Child when the ghost of Marin Falier wants his portrait put back into the Doge’s palace, from whence it was removed to punish him for his crimes (252). Marin Falier obviously equates his portrait with his social status. Thus Michelle Lovric makes it clear that she has transferred her mermaid figure from a debasing genre of visual art to a potentially empowering one. Like Nancy, who bursts out of her Antinous pose plastique to confront Diana’s predations, Lussa is a work of art that has a life of her own; this subverts the idea of the passive nude. As soon as Lussa is ‘seen’ in the novel for the first time, through Teodora’s focalization, Lussa performs the action of winking at her (14). Like the typical nude, Lussa establishes complicity with the person gazing upon her, but it is not the complicity of the sex
object, it is the complicity of an ally on the verge of war against a common enemy. Lussa is merely the first of several mermaids depicted in art and design who come to life in the novel: a wax mermaid doll speaks to Teodora next (16); and then a “large carrot carved in the shape of a mermaid”, which is used as garnish on a cheese-board, talks to her (17); a glass mermaid ornament moves of its own accord (18); a mermaid in an ironwork design that forms part of a stove warns Teodora about Maria and this mermaid of iron also rescues her from a supernatural enemy (36). Finally a chalice shaped like a mermaid holding a shell comes to life and communicates with Teodora, again to warn her of danger – then it fills up with “dark red liquid”, like blood (46). The blood emphasizes the danger that Teodora faces, but this bloody chalice is reminiscent of central core imagery, as well. Comparable with the imagery used by feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke and Judy Chicago in the 1970s, the chalice can be seen as representing the uterus and vagina (Jones 2002; Thompson 2006; Fraser 2008). What Michelle Lovric is doing here is using associative ekphrasis, but she also cleverly combines two different practices in the plastic and visual arts: one is the tradition of ornamenting various everyday items with mermaid figures and the other is the feminist use of central core imagery. Through having these usually inanimate objects come to life, Michelle Lovric gives agency and voice to the mermaid figure and, by implication, various women depicted in visual culture. So she subverts the myth of the passive women and, simultaneously, reminds readers that women may use art to convey political messages for the sake of their own empowerment. Similarly, the use of these heraldic mermaids hints at Teodora’s ultimate empowerment through her contact with Lussa.

The Good Woman’s Lack of a Voice

As previously discussed, Michelle Lovric overturns the idea of the voiceless Little Mermaid. But she goes further than simply having Teodora seek out those who can and will hear her. Lovric indicates that an important aspect of women having a ‘voice’ is their ability to write and have their writing published.

Lovric subverts arguments from Lacan and certain French feminists who claim that women are alienated from the symbolic order and language. Her techniques in this are similar to those used by Donna Jo Napoli in her novel of fairy tale revision, *Beast*, which was published in 2000. What Hilary S. Crew writes about Napoli’s character Belle, in her analysis of *Beast*, also applies to Teodora in *The Undrowned Child*. Like Belle, Teodora “has full
access to language in its spoken and written form, including Latin and the classics of
patriarchy” (2002: 86). Even more highly literate than Belle, Teodora has a talent for seeing
the spoken words of others instantly transformed into written language above their heads –
and this in fonts that suit their personalities. Besides this, she has a photographic memory:
after reading a page of writing, she can call it to mind in all its details. She also has the less
preternatural talents of being very good at reading things upside down and being able to learn
and decipher foreign languages without too much difficulty. For example, we are told
“[W]hen she put half of her brain into Latin mode, and a quarter into French, leaving the rest
for Italian … she discovered that she could understand the Venetian dialect quite easily” (31).

Lussa and the mermaids are also adept at using language. They learn to speak in human
languages simply by eavesdropping on pirates. They have extensive knowledge of Venetian
history, and their book, The Key to the Secret City, sends out a stream of whatever knowledge
is most needed at the time. Lussa’s book is better than any book produced by the patriarchal
order because it is alive. Moreover, it provides a kind of pathway back from symbolic to the
semiotic, to use Julia Kristeva’s terms. For example, the mermaid book releases Teodora’s
long forgotten memories of the gondola accident that caused the death of her biological
parents: “vast beautiful fish-tails thrashing around, a sinister white hand, something dark and
oily swimming right over her head, the creaking of wood” (13).

Michelle Lovric includes feminist observations on the ways in which the history of
women in literature has been obscured. Right at the outset of her novel, she paraphrases a
comment that is quoted in feminist Joanna Russ’s ground-breaking work, How to Suppress
Women’s Writing. A gondolier says to Teodora’s mother, “Why, Marta! The prettiest girl in
Venice and you went off and buried yourself in the Archives.” (2). He goes on to say of
Teodora, “You be careful or that baby of yours will grow up clever. And that’s no good in a
girl” (3). This echoes the anecdote recounted by Joanna Russ, in which Virginia Woolf’s
husband asks Florence Howe, “Why does a pretty girl like you want to waste her life in a
library?” (1994:12). By alluding to Russ’s work, Lovric reminds us of patriarchal prejudices
and the suppression of women’s writing through the ages. Like George Sand (Amandine-
Aurore-Lucille Dupin), George Eliot (Marian Evans) and Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (the
Brontë sisters) who used male nom de plumes in order to be taken seriously, the mermaids
use a male nom de plume for their publications, taking on the name of historical figure Signor
Rioba. Towards the end of the novel, Lorenzo asks Signor Rioba, who has come back to life,
“You don’t mind that they [the mermaids] use your name?” and he answers “Proud as a
galleon, actually” (257). This emphasizes the value of women’s writing, as Signor Rioba is characterized as someone who speaks frankly and who is difficult to please, and he is happy to be associated with the mermaids’ writing. The name of the mermaids publishing endeavour, the Seldom Seen Press, is another playful reference to the historical obliteration of women’s writing. After burgeoning in the 1970s, many women’s journals and feminist presses have disappeared over the years because of a lack of funding (McDermott 1994: 7-8). The narrator implies, however, that the Seldom Seen Press will go on surfacing whenever it is needed.

Michelle Lovric reminds readers of the appropriation of folktales and fairy tales by male collectors (like the brothers Grimm) who have often been attributed with authorship while the original female creators have been erased from history. The way the Grey Lady, a learned cat who speaks in a purring voice, tells Teodora and Lorenzo about Bajamonte’s spell collection connects magic spells with fairy tales. She says that Bajamonte’s Spell Almanac “is not the original work of Bajamonte Tiepolo. He was never crrreatively brilliant … he collected baddened magic from around the Mediterranean Sea and put it all together” (220). Lorenzo asks, “Like an anthology of poems?”, and the Grey Lady replies, “Like a verrry bad anthology of poems” (220). The assumption of authorship by men is another technique used to suppress of women’s writing, as explained by Joanna Russ (1994:20-24).

Michelle Lovric also uses a metaphor to show how folklore has been used to distort society’s perceptions of women. The Spell Almanac ends up being etched onto Teodora’s body, and we are told, “On Teo’s skin the Almanac looked like the worst and ugliest case of measles in the world (276). In the end, Lussa has to take the Almanac onto her own body to keep it from being misused by Bajamonte and his henchmen and “her beautiful face” is “ever after … disfigured” (379). Here Lovric’s use of imagery suggests the distortion of the female subject in patriarchal society.

**Patriarchal Myths of the Bad Woman and the Monstrous-Feminine**

Michelle Lovric uses various devices to overturn patriarchal myths of the powerful woman as *femme castratrice*, witch, and murderous mother. As a riposte to myths of the woman as monster she also makes considerable use of the monstrous-masculine, a technique used by
Sarah Waters in *Tipping the Velvet* as well, but to a much lesser extent. Lovric also refers to the aging woman in her novel.

**The Femme Castratrice**

The author uses allusion to counteract the myth of the *femme castratrice* and, in this regard, Teodora’s name is a subtle dispelling of the *femme castratrice* stereotype. Teodora is named after Saint Teodoro, original protector of Venice (136). As mentioned earlier, Saint Teodoro was originally a slayer of dragons (which indicates that Teodora has the potential to become a phallic woman as the dragon slayer wields the phallic spear) He was also purportedly martyred for destroying a temple of the goddess Cybele. Cybele was the great mother and goddess of caverns, venerated in “wild, emotional, bloody, orgiastic, cathartic ceremonies” (Smart 2005). Her male followers also seem to have been the original transsexuals: they ritually castrated themselves, took on female identities and wore women’s clothes (Jahnige 2003). This admittedly obscure allusion represents Teodora as being opposed to castration, through being opposed to Cybele, which shows that females are not necessarily complicit in desiring to harm, castrate or feminize men. The allusion to Cybele is bolstered by Teodora’s lion taming efforts, because, in the iconography of the goddess, her chariot is drawn by lions. If Teodora, by allusion, is disassociated from the *femme castratrice*, the mermaids in the novel sometimes seem to play an almost castrating role. They keep Bajamonte ‘boneless’ and powerless in a way that hints at sexual impotence by keeping his skeleton from him. Eventually, they go even further; as described by the narrator, a “chef-mermaid” uses “a jeweled meat-cleaver to segment the … skeleton of Bajamonte Tiepolo”. This description includes the detail that “the crunch and splinter of bones” echoes through the crowd around the mermaid (353). This graphic description of mutilation certainly calls castration to mind, with “boner” being a slang term for an erection. Nevertheless, it is clear that if Bajamonte were not deprived of his bones he would cause terrible destruction. For example, he boasts at one point:

‘Now, ladies and gentlemen, my gondola and my bones, if you please.’ He hissed to the assembled company …

‘I desire to rouse up my little tame Creature again. With my body restored to me, that should be well within my powers. And then I shall be back to claim my Spell
The words, “rouse up my tame little Creature” again suggests the penis, though Bajamonte is actually referring to the many-tentacled Sea Creature who features as one of this minions. Clearly, instead of claiming that her mermaids in no way represent the *femme castratrice*, Michelle Lovric rather seems to be saying that they sometimes do, but this role is justified in certain instances. That the mermaids can be either protective and kind or aggressive as the need arises destabilizes the dichotomy of good woman/bad woman, showing that women are more complex in character than stereotypes usually allow.

**The Witch**

In folklore, mermaids and witches may have certain qualities in common. Besides having the ability to call forth the forces of nature to wreak havoc, both are supposedly skilled in prophecy and in the use of medicinal herbs for healing (Creed 2007:73-76; Potts 2000 :18-19). Barbara Creed points out that witches in popular culture have not always been portrayed as the epitome of evil, but that “their social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals” (6). Similarly, these aspects of the mermaid figure have mostly been ignored in contemporary cultural products. Michelle Lovric hints at the connection between witches and mermaids but emphasizes their overlooked roles as “seers and healers” rather than focusing on their association with evil. The mermaids in *The Undrowned Child* warn Teodora and Lorenzo, and Venice at large, of impending danger and they are skilled healers, using medicinal chilli jelly on wounds. Via *The Key to the Secret City*, they also give Teodora and Lorenzo access to a magical panacea called Venetian treacle that cures Lorenzo when he contracts the bubonic plague. Ironically, Venetian treacle contains ground-up vipers, an ingredient one would expect to find in witches’ brew, given Shakespeare’s description of the witches’ brew in ‘Macbeth’. The reference to this ingredient reminds readers that witches (and hence mermaids, and by association, women) need not necessarily be harmful in what they do, in spite of their being associated with the abject. Teodora, who is mermaid-like in some respects, becomes witchlike when she uses the toenail spell from the Spell Almanac to escape from Bajamonte and Biasio. The spell inflicts pain on her pursuers, but again, as with the myth of the *femme castratrice*, Michelle Lovric seems to
say that female so-called monstrousness may be justified in some circumstances. What is certain, though, is that there is no female equivalent in this novel of the callous and powerful Sea Witch who appears in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’.

The Bad Mother and the Monstrous Womb

Michelle Lovric uses several techniques to overcome the myths of the bad mother and the monstrous womb. These include: the irony of Lussa’s name combined with characterizing the mermaids as good mother figures; the personification of Venice as a human mother; metaphorically linking the lagoon of Venice with the womb and then describing it as a nurturing environment; ordering the plot of the novel so that Teodora symbolically returns to the womb several times without suffering harm; alluding to the theories of Hannah Arendt and other theorists who have written about birth; and entitling the novel, The Undrowned Child.

Ironically, Lussa’s name alludes to the Greek goddess Lyssa (Lussa is a variant spelling of the name), the goddess of “rage, fury, raging madness, frenzy, and … rabies”; the goddess is also associated with the monstrous Medusa (Atsma 2008). This is completely unlike Lussa, the heroine of the novel, who is self-controlled, patient, forgiving and compassionate. Lussa informs Teodora that mermaids are “fond of children”, and her actions and those of her subjects substantiate this claim throughout the novel (132). Even when Teodora’s disobedience leads to Chissa’s death, Lussa does not lose her temper with her young protégée. While Barbara Creed points out that the monstrous mother may have cannibalistic tendencies (2007:22-23), Lussa and the mermaids are vegetarians. In fact, when Teodora tells them that she does not eat fish, Lussa says, “But Nor do We … What did You think We dined upon – raw Barracuda Hearts and Cod Liver? Nay, We do not eat our fellow Sea Creatures. That would be what You Humanfolk call Cannibalism” (151). Throughout the novel the mermaids are shown protecting Teodora and Renzo, feeding them nourishing food, tending to their wounds and protecting them from harm (as when they rescue them from the sharks). In other words, they behave like good mothers.

The city of Venice, too, is personified as a watery mother, half human and half of the ocean, rather like a mermaid. Teodora notices that “Renzo … clearly felt as if this city was his mother” (90). Besides, Venice is Teodora’s uncanny home. Unknown to her, she was born in Venice and her feelings for the city, her original and forgotten home, are the feelings
that, in Freud’s theory, are associated the womb fantasies of the *unheimlich*; in other words, what she feels for Venice is what the human subject, in Freud’s view, feels for the mother’s womb (Beers 1992: 79; Gray 2009). For example, the first time she sees the House of the Spirits in Venice, the narrator explains, “[Teodora] was quite sure she’d never seen it before. Yet she felt that odd sense of familiarity again, an emptiness in her stomach and a fullness near her heart” (98). Established, then, as a kind of mother to both Lorenzo and Teodora, the city, far from being a source of evil, is in danger of destruction by evil forces and “she” needs protection.

If Venice is a mother then the aquifer beneath the city, specifically, is her womb, and this ‘womb’ is described as something healthful and protective, not harmful. That the body of water protects Venice, is made clear by the narrator: “what held the city up was in fact …*water* … an *aquifer*, a cushion of water that pushed up against the mud, the poles and the buildings and kept Venice afloat. Teo pictured a sky-blue cushion, softly bulging with water, with Venice resting on top of it like a comfortable cat in a basket” (22). This overturns Barbara Creed’s much repeated idea of the womb as abject (2007:49-58).

The plot is ordered so that Teodora symbolically returns to the womb several times. In each case the protective aspects of the uterus are emphasized. Her first metaphorical return to the womb is almost entirely traumatic as Bajamonte’s henchmen cause the gondola accident which tips baby Teodora into the Venetian lagoon. But even in this initial terrifying return protection is provided by fishes and mermaids. The fishes supply the infant Teodora with oxygen and guide her to the mermaids who return her to the world above. This rescue is comparable to the Little Mermaid’s rescue of the Prince in ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’.

The second time that Teodora symbolically returns to the womb is when she is “between the linings” (here “linings” seem to imply the linings of the uterus). In this supernatural halfway house (halfway, that is, between being existing and not existing) the ever-benevolent mermaids protect her from harm, and her intrauterine experience is described as pleasing: “Yet it sounded quite comforting, ‘between-the-linings’. Teo imagined something silky and soft, herself safely tucked up inside, like a chrysalis in a cocoon” (59). The reference to “cocoon” strengthens the association of ‘between-the-linings’ and the uterus.

Teodora’s third return to the womb is when she visits the mermaids’ cavern for the first time, with Lorenzo. The children face this prospect with fear, anticipating something horrific as they imagine being “sucked into some kind of deep pool”, an image that evokes the monstrous mother and her murderous womb (104). But as the door to the mermaids’ passage
opens what they find “instead of darkness” is “light and music”. This path of return that symbolizes the vagina is appealing and beautiful with “frescoes of underwater scenes”, “candles on sconces made of scallop shells that had been dipped in gold” and a “perfumed salt smell” (105). As they go deeper the frescoes are “replaced by gilded shields” and “the scallop sconces by exquisite candelabra”; the “perfumed salt” gives way to something “warm and spicy” (105-106). When they finally reach the womblike cavern, this too is described as being beautiful and it is a place of life, not death. It is a “larger space blazing with light … tiled all over with tiny gold mosaics” in which arches open “in all directions to more golden caverns and canals”; the “golden walls” are “lined with airy shelves hung with garlands of flowering seaweed thick with pearls”. The cavern is also full of “rainbow-coloured parrots” and mermaids (106). Pearls, as noted in the chapter on Tipping the Velvet, are associated with female sexuality.

Teodora’s fourth metaphorical return to the womb is when she must swim underwater through the lagoon to Lussa to give her the Spell Almanac. This time the sharks threaten her and she is afraid to surface for fear that they will attack. When she is starved of air the fishes carry air bubbles to her and rescue her again, as they did when she was an infant. These fish are “the fish of Venice, the delicate branzini, the sparrow-coloured passere and the little anchovies shooting through the water like silver bullets” and they are “careful not to scratch her with their fins: the trail of her blood would lead the sharks straight to where she hid” (349). The fish of Venice serve the city which is a metaphor of the mother and they remind the reader of the internal processes of the womb, processes that keep the submerged embryo or foetus supplied with oxygen and nourishment. Instead of being destructive, the uterus is a place of nurturing new life.

The motif of the return to the womb may suggest Hannah Arendt’s ideas around natality. To my mind Lovric emphasizes Teodora’s natality in her novel – natality, as defined by Hannah Arendt, is “the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth” (1958:61), which makes the mother important rather than insignificant. One of the ghost characters in the novel, Pedro the Crimp, gives a comment that is noteworthy in this regard; he says of the living that, “They don’t know they’s born.”(72). It would be more usual to say ‘they don’t know they’re alive’, but what he says stresses human natality. The focus on birth in the novel invites consideration of the work of Arendt’s successors as well, theorists like Bracha Ettinger with her writing on matrixial ethics and aesthetics (Pollock 2009:1-28). Such thinkers have developed woman-friendly theories of the development of the human subject.
Their theories contest notions of the womb as monstrous and myths of the mother as murderous, ideas often associated with woman as mermaid. They also contest the phallic order promulgated by Freud and Lacan. Finally, the title of the novel *The Undrowned Child*, which is Teodora’s epithet, reminds readers that while infants are submerged in the amniotic fluid of the mother’s womb they remain safe and “undrowned”.

**The Monstrous Masculine**

A special technique used in this novel merits further discussion. Like Sarah Waters in *Tipping the Velvet*, Michelle Lovric employs what can only be described as the monstrous masculine in her novel, as a kind of riposte to patriarchal society’s use of the monstrous-feminine. But she relies much more heavily on this technique than Sarah Waters does. In *Tipping the Velvet* and ‘Mermaids’, the male characters are generally kindly or harmless. In *The Undrowned Child*, however, while some male characters are benign or heroic, others are criticized and even demonized; in comparison, the very few female villains are only minor characters and possibly forgivable.

Lovric’s novel has a male equivalent for nearly every category of Barbara Creed’s taxonomy of the monstrous feminine: vampire, *homme fatale*, monstrous father, male witch, male Medusa, male siren, and abject penis (the male equivalent of the abject womb). The author makes the most of her chief antagonist’s monstrousness in this regard as Bajamonte accounts for most of the categories of the monstrous-masculine himself.

The first time that Teodora encounters Bajamonte he appears as “a giant albino bat”, rather like a vampire (53). It is in this guise that he carries Maria away, later in the novel, in a scene that is also very reminiscent of the vampire genre (248). The way that Bajamonte disguises himself as an attractive boy to seduce Maria in the first place is his manifestation as *homme fatale*. His roles of monstrous father and male witch are evident throughout the novel; in a combination of both roles, he creates monstrous life in the form of Brustolons, dark elves and *folletti*, a kind of monstrous fairy. In Bajamonte Michelle Lovric seems to allude to Mary Shelley’s Dr Frankenstein, who desired to usurp God’s, and perhaps woman’s, ability to create new life.

Connected with the idea of monstrousness in Barbara Creed’s work is the idea of the abject. While it is often females who are cast as provoking abjection in cultural depictions, in Bajamonte Tiepolo readers are presented with a male villain who is much more aligned with the abject than many a female monster. The first time Bajamonte appears his relation to
abjection is evident. As mentioned earlier, he takes the guise of a giant bat and he is described so: “[the bat] was almost human with a long nose, eyes and mouth like a man’s but not quite settled in their shapes. A black spot floated near the nose. The features seemed carved out of a milky jelly that had not set” (54). Here Bajamonte shows qualities associated with the abject because his form destabilizes the border between human and animal. His unsettled, jelly-like shape is also typical of the “abject body” because the abject body “has lost its form and integrity” (Creed 2007:11). When Teodora sees Bajamonte again he is disguised as a young man. But “the collar of his shirt” does not “quite hide a thick growth of white hair, a furry, dirty matting like the hide of a wild animal” (78). So again his association with the abject is emphasized as in him the border between human and animal is disrupted. It is also significant that he is a ghost “in-the-meltings”, the worst type of ghost, as later explained by the mermaids. His being “in-the-meltings” reminds readers of his formlessness and, hence, his relation to the abject (135).

At the same time, Bajamonte’s sidekick, the butcher Biasio, is a kind of male Medusa; but, in his extremes of male monstrousness, he is much worse than Medusa ever was. This is compounded by the fact that this character is based on an historical figure, one who murdered children, cooked them in stews and served them to their relatives (80). In using this historical figure, Lovric reminds readers that men are most often the perpetrators of horrific crimes against women and children, in spite of society’s ubiquitous stereotype of the monstrous-feminine (Romito 2008: 11-26). A beheaded ghost who carries his severed head around with him, Biasio somewhat resembles Medusa in her dismemberment.

Yet other ghosts, although not aligned with Bajamonte, represent male sirens. Most of the ghosts in the garden of the House of the Spirits are men and these ghosts all have bewitching voices, indicating that men, and not only women, may have siren-like qualities (99 –103). This disrupts the binary opposition of bad women/ good men. The ghosts’ voices are described so: “It was as if the voices had fingers and that they pulled at Teo’s shoulders and feet … she was afraid … that they would claim her for their own. ‘Put your hands over your ears,’ whispered Renzo” (103). So the ghosts are very much like the sirens in the Odyssey who tried to seduce and drown Odysseus, or Ulysses to use his Roman name, and his sailors. Teodora has to resist both male and female versions of sirens just as Odysseus and his men had to resist the female sirens in Homer’s Odyssey. The men in Homer’s narrative put wax in their ears so that they would not hear the siren’s seductive singing; while Odysseus had himself tied to the mast of his ship in order to resist them. Teodora’s similarity to Odysseus
could also be read as an ekphrastic allusion to paintings such as Herbert James Draper’s ‘Ulysses and the Sirens’ (See Figure 29). Of course, comparing Teodora to the male hero Odysseus also breaks down the binary opposition of active male/passive female as the usual gender roles are switched around.

Figure 29: Herbert James Draper (1909) ‘Ulysses and the Sirens’.
Available: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Herbert_James_Draper,_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens.jpg

The Sea Creature that serves Bajamonte represents the monstrous penis. We are told that the Creature is neither male nor female but its evil actions suggest the phallus. It has many tentacles which protrude from the lagoon, which the Venetians mistake for the striped poles used to moor their gondolas (83). The scene in which the Sea Creature most represents the monstrous-masculine is when it attacks Renzo and Teodora with two of these pole-like tentacles. Renzo is seized while Teodora tries to fight the creature off. When Teodora deals “one final blow to the striped tentacle” it explodes and releases a “reeking ooze of yellow and black slime” in what is similar to a kind of monstrous ejaculation (164). The metaphorical association with the penis does not end there. The Sea Creature’s secretions, which are toxic and burn Renzo’s skin like acid, also produce what approximates a monstrous insemination. Where the slime touches his skin it leaves three “angry raised blisters, each the size of a small egg” (164). The blisters later cause Renzo to develop the bubonic plague. In an incident reminiscent of monstrous oral sex, a drop of fluid from the Creature also burns Teodora’s
mouth. The narrator says, “[Teodora] could taste its rottenness … she spat repeatedly into the canal” (164). This recalls Nancy’s spitting out of the “spendings” in Tipping the Velvet. Evidently, Michelle Lovric is parodying and subverting patriarchal denigration of female genitalia by describing the penis as horrifying. The vampire eels are another version of the monstrous phallus in The Undrowned Child. They swell up with blood when they feed on innocent flesh, rather like the penis swells with blood when it becomes erect (127).

So Michelle Lovric uses the monstrous-masculine and theories of the abject to rewrite notions of the monstrous feminine. This is completely unlike both Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ and the Disneyfied version of his story in which only the feminine is monstrous. Even Ursula, the octopus-like female villain of Disney’s film version of ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ (see Figure 1) seems to have been reinvented as the monstrous-masculine in The Undrowned Child.

The Aging Woman

Unlike the male monsters, even that ubiquitous female monster, the powerful and evil older woman, is mostly conspicuous by her absence in The Undrowned Child. Michelle Lovric uses the tactic of characterization to redeem the reputation of older women and she includes in her novel two legendary female heroes. Nevertheless, I believe that, for all her efforts, depicting the older woman remains an area of weakness in rewriting patriarchal stereotypes. I will look at the older women in The Undrowned Child in this order: the nuns at the House of the Spirits, Saint Lucy, the legendary Old Woman who saves Venice, and the evil nurse.

In Lovric’s novel the old nuns are shown to be compassionate as well as tolerant and open-minded. Also, the mermaids and the nuns live peacefully together on one island – the nuns above ground and the mermaids in the caverns below – although mermaids are traditionally at odds with the Christianity that the nuns represent. It comes to light, too, that the nuns and mermaids collaborated to save Teodora when she was in danger as an infant. This peculiarity of this arrangement is noted by Lorenzo who says, “So the nuns upstairs in the House of the Spirits know about you? … But you are … forgive me … pagan creatures. There are no mermaids in the bible. Surely the nuns would not even want to believe in you” (133-134). Lussa’s answer to this is, “They understand who we are, and they help us in subtle ways” (134). It reflects well on the nuns that they can accept those who are so different from them. Certainly, they are not evil older women. We are told that the nuns of the House of the
Spirits have spent their lives caring for “the poor, handicapped and deformed” (p.99). Silvia Sara Canetto warns, however, that:

The nice grandmother stereotype may enhance older women’s likability, but may also lead to an expectation of care-giving, and possible disapproval of older women who do not fit the “fuzzy” grandmother type. The view of older women as nurturant may be uniquely problematic for those women who, having been socialized for self-sacrifice, have already spent their adult years caring for others … Older women are perceived as nice, but unattractive and dull. (2001: 184-185)

The nuns in Lovric’s novel certainly fit the “fuzzy grandmother type”; they are also “nice, but unattractive and dull”.

Another holy woman, Saint Lucy, plays a part in the novel. Signor Rioba advises the children to recruit the saints to fight on their side in the battle against Bajamonte. When Teodora and Lorenzo find Saint Lucy she is in mummified form, in a crypt, with her eyes sewn closed. They use magical singing to bring her back to life. This depiction of Saint Lucy makes her monstrous, a source of abjection, because, according to Julia Kristeva, a corpse is the ultimate manifestation of the abject (1982:3). After her dramatic resurrection, the children are surprised to discover that the help Saint Lucy offers to their cause is fervent prayer only. This, in my opinion, once again illustrates the earlier problem with older women in the novel. The nuns and Saint Lucy, while old and good, are not very active or very powerful. What they do – caring for others or praying – remains within the traditional domain of women.

In the history of Venice, in 1310 an old woman, known only as a baker’s wife, reputedly saved the city by dropping a mortar and pestle from a high window onto Bajamonte’s henchman’s head. This was a turning point in the battle of Venice which led to Bajamonte’s defeat. So this old woman was active, decisive, heroic and even violent. But although she appears in Lovric’s novel, she is not shown to have any real power or any particular qualities at all (120). Although Michelle Lovric refers to the baker’s wife and her mortar and pestle throughout the novel, she does not really make the most of depicting this historical figure. Lovric makes no attempt at characterization when she mentions the baker’s wife; she remains a shadowy figure when she could so easily have been brought to life; after all Lovric resurrects and characterizes male historical figures like Signor Rioba, for example. The
author could have made much more of the baker’s wife for the sake of subverting the binary opposition of older women as either powerless and good or powerful and evil.

While she also plays down her role considerably, Michelle Lovric includes an evil older woman in her novel: the sadistic nurse in the children’s hospital who appears briefly near the beginning of the story, and who has the kindly male doctor cowering in submission. So, like Sarah Waters, Michelle Lovric, in spite of her feminist tactics, seems unable to resist the temptation to include an evil and powerful older woman in her plot.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter Four, Michelle Lovric depicts her young female protagonists, Lussa and Teodora, as active and independent, as is evidenced by their bravery and resourcefulness. This dispels stereotypes of females as passive, weak and dependent, and the author does this without compromising the hero Lorenzo’s courage and activity. This, no doubt, makes her book equally appealing and encouraging to young males and females.

Michelle Lovric goes to great lengths to undermine the misogynistic stereotype of the abject and dangerous female body. In my opinion she is unusually successful in this. Using subversive imagery, allusion and complexities of plot she deconstructs Barbara Creed’s formulation of the maternal as essentially monstrous. I would say that of the four works I have analysed in this project Lovric’s work is the most successful in terms of feminism.

It is in its depictions of older women that the Lovric’s novel is most stereotypical, however. Her older women, the nuns, fit too neatly into the kindly, harmless grandmother stereotype, and while she does include old women who behave, or could behave, heroically she does not make much of these characters. In her depiction of Saint Lucy, it is suggested that old women are both aligned with the abject and monstrous; in addition, in the character of the evil nurse, Lovric promotes the patriarchal stereotype that older women are cruel. As in Richard Benjamin’s *Mermaids*, and Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, the idea of the old or older woman as repulsive appears to be difficult to exorcise. While some of her older female characters are kindly, Michelle Lovric does not manage to portray the older women in her novel as both good and powerful.
Conclusion

The feminist revision of certain fairy tales is an attempt to disrupt the transmission of ideas which serve patriarchy; some fairy tales maintain the patriarchal status quo by, for example, encouraging female passivity, submission, and self-immolation. ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is an example of such a fairy tale. As I have tried to demonstrate in this dissertation, Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ continues to be appropriated by companies and independent writers and artists working in various media, including film (like Disney’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ and Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’, for example) and the internet (such as J. Scott Campbell’s digital image ‘The Little Mermaid’ and Karin Miller’s digital images on her own website, KM Visuals). Unfortunately, ‘Den Lille Havfrue’ is a story that subtly promotes several misogynistic ideas, including the binary opposition of passive good woman/powerful bad woman and the demonization of older women. Therefore, Andersen’s story and the works which appropriate it should continue to draw the critical attention of feminists.

The main aim of this project has been to show how stereotypical representations of women endure in spite of the techniques used to undermine them. In keeping with this, I have argued that stereotypical representations of older women, in works that appropriate ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, seem particularly resistant to feminist rewriting.

My study has focused on four works which have striking intertextual relationships with ‘Den Lille Havfrue’: ‘Mermaids’, the film by Richard Benjamin; Tipping the Velvet, the novel by Sarah Waters; ‘The Imagenius Mermaids’, the series of digital images by Karin Miller; and The Undrowned Child, the novel for young adults by Michelle Lovric.

In Chapter One I examined Richard Benjamin’ film ‘Mermaids’ (1990). In particular, I explored how the film engages with stereotypes of the good woman and the bad woman. This film, released soon after Disney’s ‘The Little Mermaid’, subverts many ideas associated with mermaids, such as the mermaid as femme fatale, and it includes subtle allusions to Andersen’s story. True to its milieu, the film exhibits a familiarity with several feminist ideas and tactics but it also denounces female sexual initiative and perpetuates stereotypical thinking about aging women. The depoliticized and adulterated version of feminism that the film shows is typical of many popular Hollywood productions.

Chapter Two introduced Sarah Waters’s lesbian novel, Tipping the Velvet. This story, too, includes allusions to ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, but it goes much further than Richard Benjamin’s
film in its subversion of stereotypes and the Little Mermaid is made ‘queer’. My analysis demonstrated that this novel which deconstructs gender so effectively still includes negative portrayals of older women. It also promotes the myth of the woman as *femme fatale* to some extent.

In Chapter Three, I discussed a series of four digital artworks called ‘The Imagenius Mermaids’, which were created by the South African artist Karin Miller. In these, allusions to ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’ are combined with portrayals of both unknown black women and Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus of colonial postcards. I explored how Karin Miller overturns myths about women and mermaids. I also briefly discussed how depicting race complicates Miller’s images and their interpretation because, while the mermaids are black, the woman portraying them is a white South African artist. I also noted how allusions to the trans-located Caribbean goddess Mammy Water in these images implicate them in the commodification of African mythology.

Chapter Four concerned the second novel in this study, namely *The Undrowned Child* by Michelle Lovric. This novel, a fantasy written for young adults, has mermaids as characters, unlike the more realistic *Tipping the Velvet*. The novel also shows narrative strategies which promote feminism; Michelle Lovric, reinterprets and reconfigures the stereotype of the abject female body effectively, for example. But, although it shows more favourable depictions of older women than are found in ‘Mermaids’ and *Tipping the Velvet*, these are still problematic because most of the old women in Lovric’s novel fit into the stereotype of the sweet but ineffectual grandmother.

Having examined the abovementioned works, I believe I have achieved my aim of showing how stereotypical representations of women endure in spite of the techniques used to undermine them. I have also shown that stereotypical representations of older women, in works that appropriate ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, seem to be the most intractable of all. My project supports the conclusion reached in Rebecca Sullivan’s thesis, that “the traditional fairy tale’s negative portrayal of older women remains largely unchallenged by current popular revisions” (2010:2).

Having shown that some misogynistic ideas are perpetuated in works which appropriate ‘*Den Lille Havfrue*’, even though these works also include parody and other feminist techniques, it is important to consider the reasons for this evident ambivalence. I would suggest that there are at least three likely reasons: one is the influence of capitalism and its economic constraints combined with patriarchal influences; the second is that living in a
patriarchal society could inspire contempt for and hatred of women even in feminists; and the third is that, as Derrida’s work implies, texts in themselves are so complex that their various meanings cannot be kept under authorial control.

The first possible reason for the ambivalent attitude towards women in the works I have examined, the influence of capitalism, is probably most evident in Richard Benjamin’s ‘Mermaids’. Whatever feminist intentions Patty Dan, the author of the novel on which the film was based, may (or may not) have had, they were likely to be distorted by the film company’s beliefs about what makes good economic sense in a capitalist industry. So a mismatch between the original author’s intentions and Hollywood’s pragmatics may partially account for the somewhat disjointed depiction of women in the film. Capitalist influences also seem to have curtailed Karin Miller’s feminist messages in her mermaid images; she too, as an artist relying on selling her work for economic gain, evidently bows down to the demands of the market in depicting only thin, young, attractive women, treating the females in her paintings as commodities. This shows that the freelance artist is as much at the mercy of capitalist forces as the large corporation is – perhaps even more so. Of course, lurking behind capitalism, patriarchy generally dictates, to some extent, what is desirable and therefore what is worth buying and selling. To put it in economic terms, patriarchy influences what society demands and, in response, those who produce supply what is required. The feminist artists or writers who appropriate fairy tales could often distort their feminist intentions to meet market demands.

Another reason for the ambivalence in the works I have examined is that, living in a patriarchal society, one is constantly bombarded with misogynist messages about the monstrous-feminine and the disgusting or dangerous female body. The constant reproduction of images of young, thin attractive women, for example, devalues any woman who deviates from the acceptable standard of beauty. The prejudiced portrayal of the elderly is also exacerbated by such misogyny, with older women being depicted much more unfavourably than older men are. Such immersion in misogyny cannot be without its influences, even on the most resistant feminists. As Marilyn French has pointed out, “Woman-hating nestles deep at the root of patriarchy; all of us, woman and men, are probably infected by it to some degree” (1993:71). This may account for why even highly feminist works like *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Undrowned Child* still show some hatred of women. But why do women hate other women, and even their own bodies, when it is not, ultimately, in their best interests to do so? One possible explanation is the phenomenon called “bargaining with patriarchy”.

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According to Francine Pickup, Suzanne Williams and Caroline Sweetman, “‘bargaining’ with patriarchy refers to the strategies … women use to ensure their own survival and security”. These writers explain that “women who undertake such strategies may sacrifice the long-term interests of women as a category by supporting the status quo” but “as individuals … they gain economic, social or political rewards” (2001:21).

Besides the more obvious messages of misogyny, fairy tales in a patriarchal society promote the idea of heterosexual marriage as the ultimate solution to a female’s problems, maturational or otherwise. Rather than blatantly exhibiting woman-hating, per se, this message may act as a comforting psychological anodyne in a reality that is often painful. Such comfort, if one reads the partially subverted endings of ‘Mermaids’ and Tipping the Velvet, seems very hard to resist. Perhaps the right question to ask is, “Why is reality so painful for women in the first place?”

The third possible reason for the ambivalent depictions of women in the works I have examined may be found in their high degree of intertextuality. Besides their intertextual relationships with ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, they allude to many other cultural products from various genres and media as well. Even texts that do not aim for such complexity are caught in webs of intertextuality, however. As Derrida explains, speaking of texts in general:

> A text is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far … all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference …)

(Derrida in Royle 2003:64)

Derrida wrote these words before twenty-first century electronic media further complicated texts; what he writes about texts here is more accurate than ever before. So with this in mind, I would say that the third reason that the works I have examined show ambivalence about women and feminist issues is simply that they (and Derrida would probably claim that they are all texts), in their polyphony and complexity, escape authorial control. Perhaps, when usurping a text like ‘Den Lille Havfrue’, it is extremely difficult not to absorb and disseminate its intrinsic misogyny as well. As Minette Estevez points out, “The text is always
more (and less) than its author intends it to be … cultural context and codes shape and determine the text as much if not much more than the author’s intention does” (2008:1).

This dissertation has suggested various directions for future research. Firstly, as a spinoff that was not part of my main aims, it suggests the need for interdisciplinary research in fairy tale studies specifically and in literature studies in general. Donald Haase has already suggested the need for interdisciplinarity in fairy tale studies (2004:28). With the influence of postmodernism, so many works of literature now refer to films, paintings, television series and other media, that understanding the contemporary novel often requires an understanding of other genres and media as well. As Margarete Landwehr says, “An intertextual, interdisciplinary study of related domains of knowledge … offers a creative approach to the study of literature and the arts” (2002:13).

Secondly, this project has indicated that it may be very fruitful to study the influence of Western patriarchal fairy tales and popular culture on indigenous African religion and folklore. This is evident in Chapter Three, where I discussed the Imagenius mermaids, Mammy Water and the Balloon Woman. Figures from Western folklore seem to obscure and alter both African gods and goddesses and more secular African mythological beings, as Ifi Amadiume explains (2002: 41-66). It would be interesting to investigate further how African beliefs are being changed by globalization, and how Western myths and iconography have been influenced by African folklore.

Finally, Western patriarchal society’s attitude to older people, especially older women, and aging begs further investigation. The works I have examined indicate this because, despite the fact that they are from various genres and media and even though they have feminist elements, they all show marginalization or demonization of older women. Sylvia Henneberg notes, “Despite the emergence of age studies and literary gerontology, despite the considerable impact of feminist thought on culture and society, an all-too large body of influential children’s literature continues to distort the reality of female old age …” (2009:133). As I have shown, it is not only children’s literature which distorts “the reality of female old age”; Richard Benjamin’s film, and Sarah Waters’s Tipping the Velvet, a novel for adults, also misrepresent aging women. The way older woman are made invisible and erased from consciousness, as in Karin Miller’s work, also invites analysis. Research into ageism is vital, I believe, not only because it is so rife in Western patriarchal society with its youth-worshipping ways, but also because, unlike with misogyny and racism, no one is automatically immune from suffering its malign effects through belonging to a privileged
group. Even the very young – whatever their race, ethnicity, class, sex, sexual orientation or gender – will age eventually, unless they die early. This fact seems to draw a lot of denial, if one looks at the pursuit of eternal youth promoted in women’s magazines and other products of popular culture. But the purpose of research, in my opinion, is to dispel such cherished delusions.
Bibliography


Filmography