Mermaid Musings, or: "There is Not Enough Woman to Make Love to, and Too Much Fish to Fry"
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MERMAID

MUSINGS

or

"THERE IS NOT ENOUGH WOMAN TO MAKE LOVE TO, AND TOO MUCH FISH TO FRY"[i]

Robbie Voss[*]

Earlier this year, I finally had the opportunity to watch Walt Disney Pictures' 2009 animated feature "The Princess and the Frog". While I believe the attempt to modernize this classic tale should be recognized and lauded, it is at the same time apparent that this movie still stands in the long tradition of Walt Disney animated pictures that tell the stories of beautiful women that find their purpose in life by committing themselves to strong and charming princes. At their core, these animation classics are very similar stories about women who have nothing more—or is it nothing less?—to offer than their beauty in exchange for their rescue, their salvation, by a man.

Seeing "The Princess and the Frog" reminded me of how intimately familiar I am with these Disney stories. I do not think it a stretch to claim that Disney's depiction of these fairy tales are at the heart of what informs our contemporary culture while at the same time they themselves find their constitution in some of our culture's most persistent tropes. This is to say that these movies are part of what could be called the cultural canon that informs the process of socialization of so many children in the West and other places around the world. At the same time, they are also nothing more than the reproduction, reiteration, or repetition of a specific cultural tradition.

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[i] *The citation in the title of this article is originally from comedian Nipsey Russell.*

In this precise sense, these products of the Walt Disney conglomerate can be understood as examples of what Émile Durkheim called 'collective representations' (Durkheim 1895/1982, p. 40; Nemedi, 1995). Sociologist George Ritzer explains: "Examples of collective representations are religious symbols, myths, and popular legends. All of these are ways in which society reflects on itself. [...] They represent collective beliefs, norms, and values, and they motivate us to conform to these collective claims" (Ritzer 2008: 193-194). Conceptualized as such, I would like to take a closer look at one of these movies and try to elucidate the specific cultural tropes that can be found in it. This short essay is structured around my attempt at a hermeneutical close reading that is grounded in, and at the same time tries to illustrate, French philosopher Jacques Derrida's notion of 'deconstruction'.

When I think of the stock of Walt Disney classics that deal the tried-and-true story of a princess and her love for a prince, one of these tales, or rather one of the princesses, stands out the most to me: Ariel, the female lead character in Disney's "The Little Mermaid". Ariel, the eponymous little mermaid, can be interpreted as the embodiment of what Derrida calls the undecidable (Derrida 1978: 53; cf. Derrida 2004). Allow me to explain. The mermaid is, at least in Disney's imagining of this fairy tale, both woman and fish, human and animal. And yet she is a tragic figure for she is also neither human nor animal—at least not wholly so. Is this not precisely the reason why she sings of wanting "to be where the people are"? It is the desire to be wholly something; in other words, to properly Be. Of course, Ariel has lived under the sea her whole life and, even though there are other mermaids and mermen, she spends most of her time surrounded by fish, lobsters and other such proper sea creatures. Only being half fish it is as if she does not belong there either; she is out of place. The problem, nevertheless, is that there is no proper place for half-beings like this little mermaid. She does not belong with the fish and yet she knows no proper home among the humans.

Understood from the perspective of Derrida's principle of undecidability, then, the story can be interpreted as ultimately one of trying to solve Ariel's intrinsic predicament. According

to Derrida—and clearly following anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss—the Western mode of thought is constituted, in part, by dichotomies or dualisms; darkness/light, black/white, death/life; animal/human et cetera (Collins and Mayblin 2006: 8; cf. Derrida 1968/2008; 1976; 1978; 2003). What matters is the place of the undecidable; it is the occurrence of something being both poles at the same time. The zombie, for example, is one such figure—neither living nor dead (cf. Collins and Mayblin 2006). The mermaid fits the same mold: she is undecided. However, since our (Western) system of thought reduces everything to one of two poles, an undecidable is problematic and needs to be resolved (cf. Derrida, 2004). It is problematic precisely because its existence as such renders visible the fact that the two poles do not exist independent from each other—they are not isolated or 'pure' in any way. Rather, the dichotomy appears to be a continuum on which the opposites contaminate each other (Moran 2000: 451).

The need for a resolution? Okay. But why does Ariel dream to be "up where the people are; up where they run; up where they stay all day in the sun"? Why does she wish for her half-being to be resolved this way instead of that way? Why human instead of animal? There are two answers that come to mind. First, if I understand Derrida, it is because Western thought always prefers one side of the dichotomy over the other (Caputo, 1997: 104). We prefer life over death, good over evil, and human over animal—after all, at least since the enlightenment, Man is understood as the superior being (cf. Derrida 2009). Second—and this requires me to scratch the surface of mermaid mythology—is it not so that mermaids are the seducers of sea men? Of course, in the earliest of mythologies, creatures with this particular make-up were gods.[ii] But the version with which we are most intimately familiar, the incarnation that seems to be the primary source of inspiration for the design of the little mermaid, is the mermaid that through her seductive beauty entices men. In other words, it is intrinsic to the mermaid's being that she gravitates towards the sphere of the human. The problem of this mermaid, however, is the fact that she ends with a tail.[iii] Beautiful beyond compare but

Beautiful beyond compare but a beauty that can never be consummated

[ii] *See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A2766413 (retrieved on October 26, 2009).*

[iii] *The 'mermaid*

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a beauty that can never be consummated. Here, the undecidable comes into play again. A mermaid must seduce but can only do so as a phantasm; a promise. The ultimate fulfillment of seduction can never be achieved. An object of sexual lust - yet forever virgin.

Between these two motivations, Ariel pursues her wish to become human. As is the case with the zombie, the resolution of the undecidable is sought in magic. Zombies cannot be killed for they are already dead (but living); the zombie must be *resolved* through ritual (Collins and Mayblin 2006: 23). A similar *motif* is encountered in Ariel's confrontation with the sea witch Ursula. In order to become fully human and abolish her undecidability, Ariel needs to successfully seduce Prince Eric and—in order to do so—she needs Ursula to temporarily transform her lower fishlike body into that of a human. Here, Disney's imagining of this fairy tale reveals, or so I believe, one of the fundamental inheritances of the Judeo-Christian tradition that continue to inform our Western culture: woman as a function of man. It is only in the embrace by Prince Eric that Ariel can receive her full womanhood and be human, finally. The witch Ursula agrees to grant Ariel her legs, but only in exchange for Ariel's voice—the voice with which she previously sang a song that enticed Prince Eric and made him interested in the one who possessed this voice.

Following Heidegger, Derrida argues that Western metaphysics ultimately conceptualizes being as presence; that is to say, being means to be present or to have presence. Derrida goes on to argue that Western culture prefers speech over writing which is, to a certain extent, the result of the conceptualization of speech as being closest to thought and as such closest to presence (Derrida 1976: 7, 17). This analysis is underscored by Dermot Moran's observation that Aristotle is guilty of this phonocentrism "when he takes a written word to be a sign of a spoken word which itself is a sign of an inner mental experience" (Moran 2000: 449). Understood from this perspective, Ariel's loss of voice as a trade-off for having the appearance of a full human being signifies her non-being. For without voice she lacks presence and, if presence is the essence of being, she cannot be understood as fully a human *being*. As a mermaid she is undecidable; she is at most a half-being. As

the semblance of a woman she is deprived of fully *being* by lacking a voice. This much is evident in "The Little Mermaid" when Prince Eric is sometimes mesmerized by Ariel's beauty but is repeatedly drawn away from her when he hears a familiar voice singing—as the story turns out, it is Ursula that uses Ariel's voice to lure Eric away from her.

CONCLUSION

Disney's "The Little Mermaid" concludes with Prince Eric finally being able to see through the magical façade and recognizes Ariel as the one who had, at the beginning of the tale, sang to him. It is only upon this discovery that Ariel has her voice restored and is able to become fully human which allows her to find her purpose; to be at Prince Eric's side and live happily ever after. Ultimately, or so the story can be interpreted, it is man that gives woman voice. Man, through his embrace of woman, constitutes her being. A persistent trope indeed.

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